



Can official publishers win the trust of citizens?

Rudolf W. Strohmeier

Director-General of the Publications Office
of the European Union



Publications Office

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Speech delivered by
Rudolf W. Strohmeier,
Director-General
of the Publications
Office of the
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Official Gazettes,
on 15 September 2016
in Vienna.

Ladies and gentlemen, dear colleagues from the Austrian *Bundesgesetzblatt* and *Wiener Zeitung*, thank you for inviting me to share with you some thoughts on our role today.

Lack of citizens' trust in the European Union

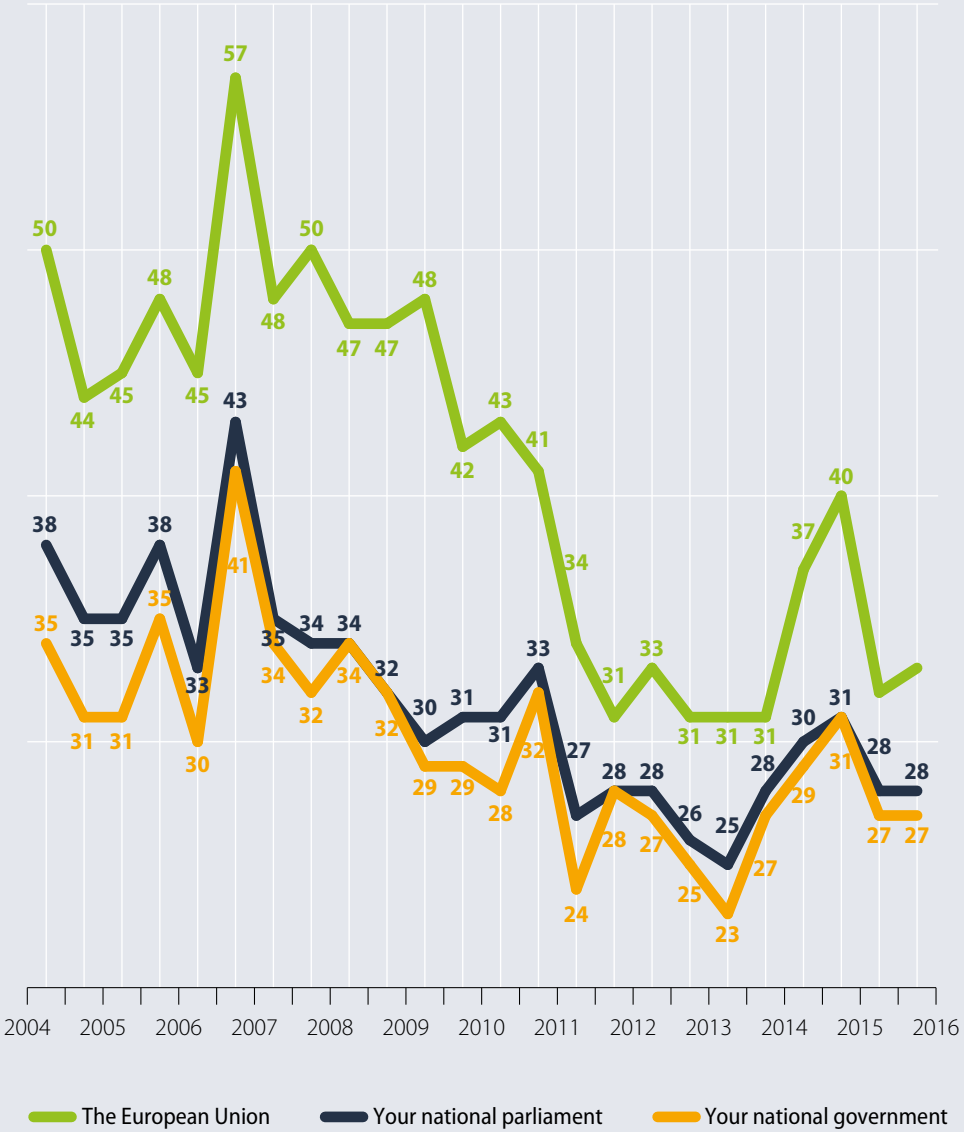
The issue I would like to address today is 'trust': the trust that citizens should be able to have in the governments and public administrations of democratic societies. Politicians and civil servants all over the world have a role in creating this special bond. So what is the role for official publishers in this respect?

The reason why I think we should reflect on this question is that the overall picture is not very encouraging. Across Europe trust in governments has significantly decreased over the last decade. This is true for the European Union. Eurobarometer data from spring 2016 shows that only one third of Europeans actually trust the European Union. In 2004 it was 50 %. And currently more than half of EU citizens do not trust the European Union. This was only 28 % in 2004.



How much trust do you have in these institutions?

%



Source: Eurobarometer spring 2016



The picture doesn't look rosy either for national governments and parliaments, with even lower levels of citizens' trust at around 27-28 % on average in Europe.

With these figures, it is not surprising that only 43 % of voters turned up to vote at the last European Parliament elections in 2014, which also saw a breakthrough for Eurosceptic parties in several EU countries.

Rise of populist movements in the EU Member States

More recently, anti-EU sentiment was partially responsible for the result of the referendum in the United Kingdom, where nearly 52 % of voters voted for their country to leave the Union.

Let me dwell for a few moments on this referendum. What struck me most in the battle of opinions in the months before the vote was how the focus of the discussion shifted from facts to sentiments. As most of you will have seen in the news yourselves, the public debate in the British media was not primarily concerned with facts that can be substantiated and even less with legal information that can be obtained in official journals, legal gazettes or other official sources. Key politicians on the Leave side got many of the basic legal facts wrong. Many things they could have easily found on EUR-Lex with a few clicks.

Reflecting partly the new information ecosystem of our times, a large part of the public debate was carried out on Facebook, Twitter and other social networks. These networks have created fantastic new opportunities for communication, but at the same time I cannot avoid having the impression that they have contributed to spreading simplifications, generalisations or sometimes even outright lies.

The UK referendum is not the only example of where this shift from fact to faith in political communication is taking place. We are witnessing the same developments in other political discussions, like the one about the refugee crisis or the Transatlantic Trade and Investment Partnership. This shift has also played an important role in the rise of populist movements across the EU Member States.

So what does this mean for us, as publishers of official legal information? Can we ignore this trend? Does it matter to us? And if it does matter, how can we as official publishers take this paradigm shift into account — and perhaps use it to our advantage?

Official publishers and citizens: technological advances

To be able to provide answers to these questions, we need to take a step back. I would like to start with a more general reflection about the way in which our relationship with citizens has changed as a result of technological progress. Technology is playing an increasingly important part in our work and we must do everything we can to use it to our advantage.

Paper is no longer the primary medium we rely on to reach citizens. In fact, it is in decline. Citizens' expectations have changed dramatically, with 'digital' being the preferred dissemination format and therefore also the reference format. Moreover, the preferred access to digital content, in particular if it is of a political nature, is now via mobile devices. This represents an additional challenge to official publishers: how can we present our content in a way that is 'digestible' for mobile use?

The official gazettes we publish have traditionally been constrained by legal requirements as to format and shape. But the realities of the publishing industry force us to rethink old ways of working. The need has emerged for comprehensive and easy-to-use access to all legal digital content. For us as official publishers the response was to adapt legislation websites in such a way that legal content is accessible for all users at any time and on any device — whether it is a PC, a smartphone or a tablet.





At the Publications Office we responded to this need by completely revamping our access point to legal information, the EUR-Lex website. New features were developed in order to make it a reliable tool based on robust state-of-the-art technology and able to meet users' requirements. Many useful functionalities were added. As a result, EUR-Lex still remains the most frequently consulted website managed by the Publications Office, with 70 million visits per year.

Another bold reply of the Publications Office to technological advances was the introduction of the authentic electronic edition of the *Official Journal of the European Union* with legal effect on 1 July 2013. This brought over 60 years of paper-based production to an end. To accomplish this change, we put in place new infrastructure and implemented the measures necessary for the publication of the authentic electronic edition of the Official Journal. These measures include the advanced electronic signature, which is based on a qualified certificate that guarantees the authenticity, integrity and inalterability of the Official Journal, in accordance with applicable legislation. In other words, we provide trustworthy information.

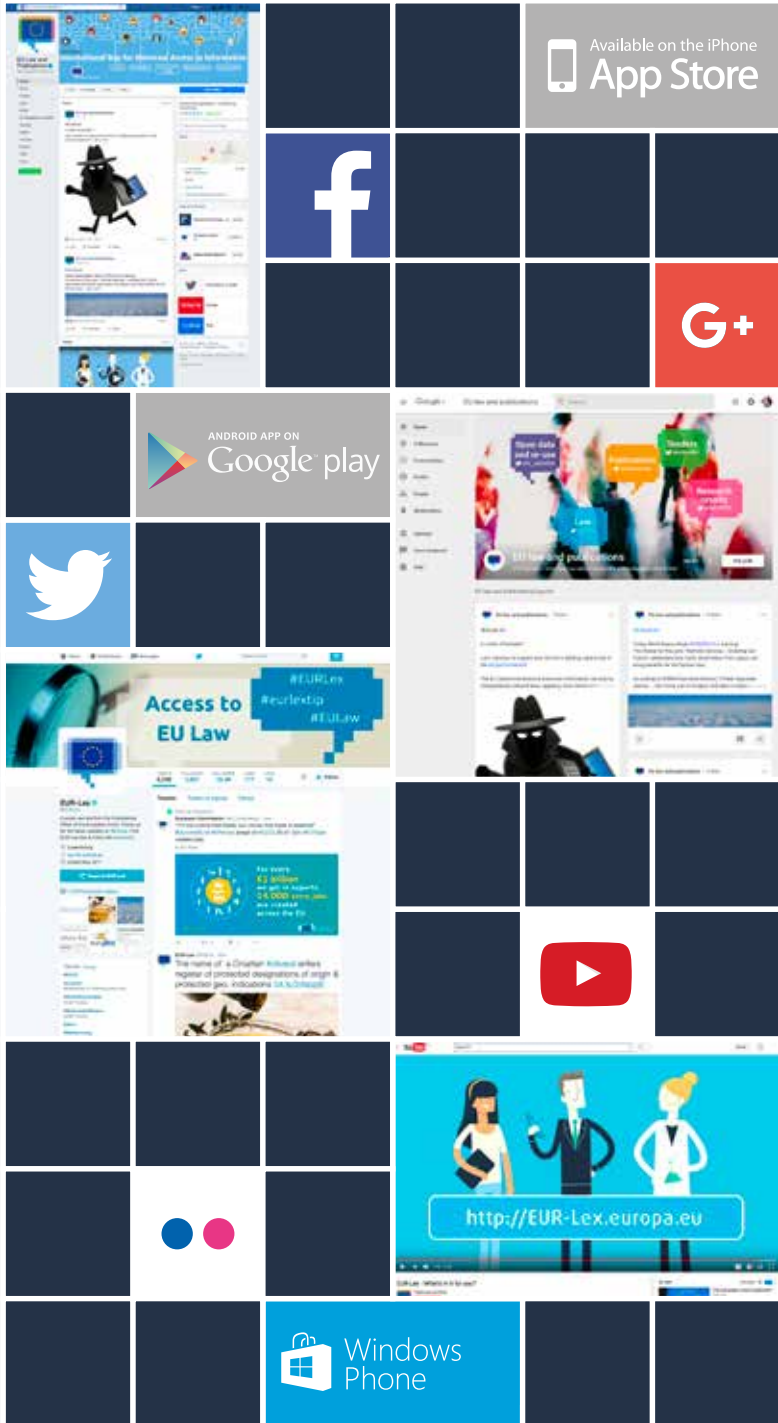
In line with such technological changes, the distinction between a website and a periodical published on that website is vanishing. And it is plausible that, in the long run, our legislation-publishing websites will themselves conceptually become the legal gazettes or official journals they once hosted. They will be fed by a continual, act-by-act production and publication flow.

But technological progress does not end here. There are a number of other digital trends which affect our work. Each of them impacts the way we process or present the information we publish and each of them has huge potential for the future. I am thinking of mobile internet, cloud computing, big data and data mining, linked open data and semantic technologies. In fact, semantic technologies have enormous potential for official publishers, which is why we are already deploying them at the Publications Office.

These new technologies allow us to reach our audiences in completely different ways — in ways that could not have been dreamt of 20 years ago. Just think of automatic legal analysis or new functionalities that allow users to insert comments directly into proposed legislation. These are currently being tested all over the world and they are becoming standard elements of our service offer.



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New ways of engagement

Such massive technological advances mean that we are now engaging with our users in completely new ways.

The digital revolution has already led to the interesting phenomenon that in most cases there are no more intermediaries between us as content publishers and content consumers. We engage in a dynamic relationship with them and interact directly, for example via social media. At the Publications Office, we currently have well over 100 000 fans on Facebook and one of our Twitter feeds, @EUR-Lex, has nearly 20 000 followers.

This is important for two reasons. First, we address the users in their own environment, which significantly reduces the distance that may exist between us and them and makes communication much more personal. And second, we ensure an online presence that allows us to respond to the needs, requirements, suggestions and grievances in a much more dynamic and efficient fashion than before.

I will give you another example of this engagement with our users. At the Publications Office we have developed an app called *Curia*, which provides easy access to the judgments and opinions of the Court of Justice of the European Union. This app gets very good ratings from users. User ratings allow two things: we get feedback on user satisfaction or dissatisfaction with our information products and users express and share their appreciation with others.

It is precisely such ways of engagement that give us the opportunity for building meaningful relationships in real time with our users and entering in a dialogue with them — something which was unimaginable a decade ago.

Interestingly, nowadays we make our content available not only to humans but also to machines, which retrieve it automatically from our intelligent repositories powered by semantic technologies. And what these machines do is disseminate our data further, often by means of innovative information management services designed to meet the ever-changing requirements of our end consumers.





Partners and multipliers

Apart from engaging directly with our users, the digital environment also has created fantastic opportunities to team up with partners who can help organisations like ours to reach their audiences. At the Publications Office our partners include EU institutions, agencies and bodies that have their own publishing and communications strategies, defined by their respective legal frameworks. We are trying to help them maximise the impact of these communication strategies, by seeking further synergies with them that go beyond the simple model of content provider and content publisher. And then there are the other organisations that act as our multipliers, such as libraries, information aggregators, information and documentation centres, to name just a few. Our cooperation with them is extremely valuable, since multipliers have significant power to further disseminate the correct factual information about our work.

We should also mention a special subcategory of multipliers. These are professional reusers, including commercial ones. They can be publishers, developers of apps, data journalists and so on. Such professional reusers make an increasingly significant contribution to disseminating legal information and to linking this legal information with other relevant data. These reusers build new applications and services, which combine data from different sources. At the Publications Office we facilitate their work by means of semantic technologies. In this way reuse generates innovative products and services and at the same time increases the amount of correct facts about the EU in the information ecosystem. In this context it is also important to mention that by promoting reuse of our information we contribute to the creation of jobs and growth in a sector that represents EUR 600 million in France alone.



Between publishing, information management and communication

This evolving relationship with different stakeholders that I have been talking about naturally has an impact on the role that we as official publishers are carving out for ourselves today.

You will probably agree that we are all moving on from our traditional role as publishers to specialised information management bodies. We transform information, facilitate its discovery and exchange and we ensure that it is preserved for future generations. We ensure legal clarity and certainty. We give access to legislation as open data.

This also inspires completely new tasks that we are undertaking, such as creating audio-visual material, web preservation and others.

But this is not all. As I have already mentioned, more and more we interact directly with our stakeholders — and they interact directly with us. We are becoming communicators. And this creates a wide range of new and exciting challenges for us to engage in on a more meaningful and deeper level with the citizens.

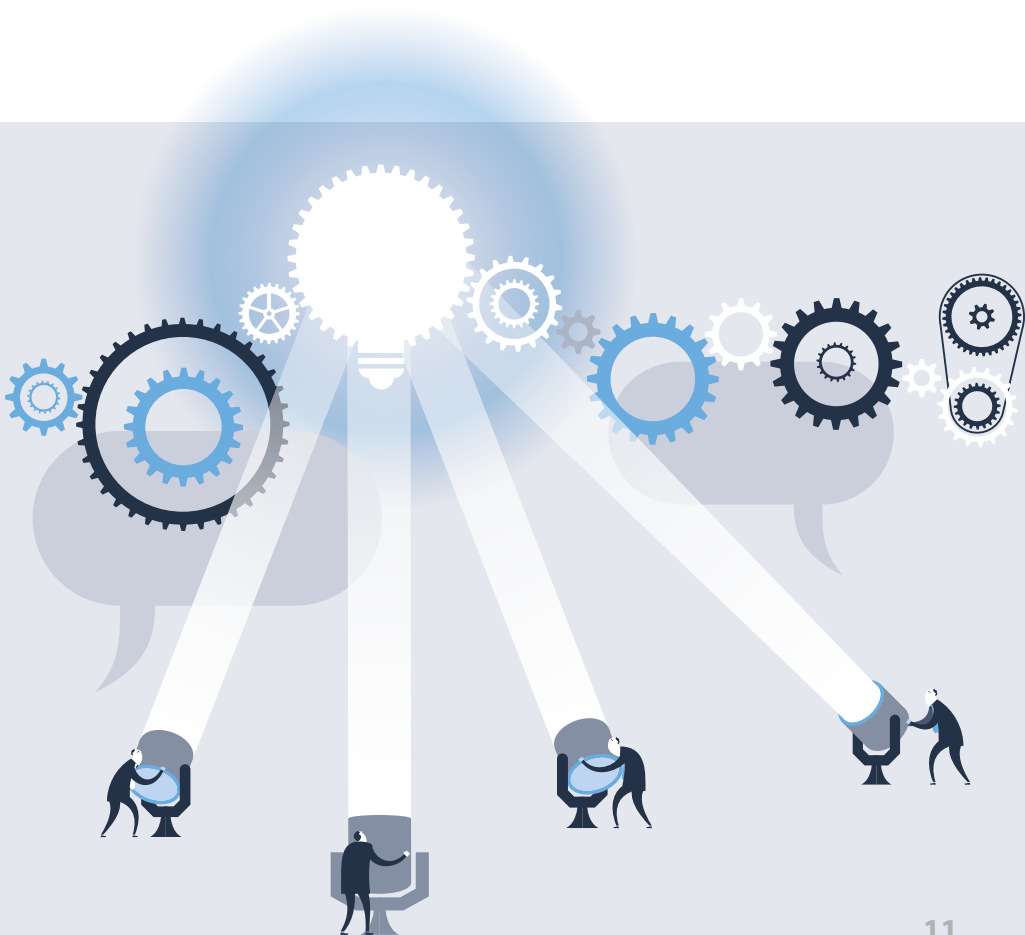


Two guiding principles: transparency and innovation

So, to come back to the issue of trust that I spoke about at the beginning. What do these new developments mean for us? What I hope I have managed to illustrate with my examples is that by responding to these new demands in terms of content consumption, official publishers can reach more citizens and ensure that the information that circulates is based on fact — and not only on faith.

This requires that we combine transparency with innovation. These should be the two guiding principles for our work.

I see high potential in particular in linked open data and in the reuse of public sector information. Instead of providing fully-formatted content for passive consumption — as we did in the past — we are increasingly making our raw content available for processing and reuse in new standardised formats.





Conclusion: delivering 'good law' and 'good services' for the citizens

Ladies and gentlemen, we as official publishers must strive to deliver 'good law' and 'good services' in the best possible ways. I will wrap up my arguments in three points.

- Firstly, we have to focus on **winning trust**. As official publishers we have to continuously strive to interact in the 'natural environment' of users. By making legislation more accessible and digestible, we help citizens to be better informed. Better-informed citizens will find it easier to trust the work done by governments. Transparency guarantees greater legitimacy and accountability of our democratic systems. I believe that we have the knowledge and technical capacity to reach further than we have reached up to now. That we have the expertise for offering citizens and reusers the means of accessing the legal information that exactly meets their needs. We can reach out through our websites but we also have to take into account the power of interacting with the users in their 'natural' environment, for example Facebook or Twitter.
- Secondly, we must be more attentive as to how we can contribute to creating growth and jobs. As official publishers we can **create business opportunities** for professional reusers by opening up the rich information that we have at our disposal. Our collections and public information are still largely unexploited resources.
- Thirdly, we have to **tackle the organisational challenges** that this entails. We will have to internally shift resources, develop new competencies and skills and reassess the relationship between ourselves and content owners or authors — because it is very important that we strive for coherence in public communication.

I believe that this paradigm shift also requires a change in our heads. We must open up for innovation and change and embed them in our vision for the future developments of our services.

Thank you for your attention.

The Publications Office also manages a range of websites providing EU citizens, governments and businesses with digital access to official information and data from the EU, including EUR-Lex, the EU Open Data Portal, EU Bookshop, TED (Tenders Electronic Daily), EU Whoiswho and CORDIS, and it ensures long-term preservation of content produced by EU institutions and bodies.



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