

Tools for Policy Reformers: abridged research report

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Introduction

The purpose of this research is to inform a workshop being held on 28 October at the Barcelona Free Culture Forum¹. The workshop will bring policy reform advocates together with tool builders and seeks both to inform those advocates of tools already out there, and to draw on their experience, needs and expertise to inform future tool development. The workshop has a particular focus on the EU legislative process.

The research will focus on three areas of policy reform activity and related tools:

1. **facilitating collaboration**
2. **bringing policymakers and their activities closer to citizens**
3. **interpreting legislative documents**

Of these three areas, the researcher has been directed that areas 2) and 3) are of most relevance with regards to further development and future grant-making, and her research reflects this. The research is split into two activities: conducting pre-event interviews to present an initial assessment of the needs of policy reformers; and evaluating existing tools. Pre-event interviews were conducted on the basis that the report would have a limited circulation, thus this abridged report, presented for wider circulation, includes their headline findings only.

Pre-event interviews: summary

The EU-level campaigners interviewed were characterised by their advanced use of tools, and by the impact of their campaigns relative to their resources. Of the three campaigners interviewed for this research, La Quadrature du Net are perhaps at the most visible user of advanced tools to facilitate campaigning. Indeed they communicate strongly around their use of tools (see <http://www.laquadrature.net/en/node/3969>) and openly invite software developers to help them develop their toolbase further (see <http://www.laquadrature.net/wiki/Garage>).

During the interview process, it became apparent that approaches to campaign strategy remain fairly ad-hoc and, further, vary significantly between campaigning organisations. Nonetheless, all three campaigners focussed on **public communication**, and to a lesser extent, **internal communication**, as areas ripe for optimisation, although again each campaigner articulated different approaches to achieving this.

Through interview and through subsequent investigations of the tools space, it appears that many of the tool needs mentioned in initial explorations with policy reformers could be met by targeted further development or integration of existing tools. Tool usability, and information reusability, have both been consistent themes throughout the research.

¹ See <http://2010.fcforum.net/topics/#poli>

Evaluating existing tools

This section is split into three sub-sections, respectively examining [tools to facilitate collaboration](#), [tools to bring policymakers closer to citizens](#) and [tools to help interpret legislative documents](#)

Tools to facilitate collaboration

This section focuses mainly on tools to facilitate text-based collaboration. Other tools to facilitate collaboration were mentioned during pre-event interviews, including communication tools like email lists and irc channels.

Jottit

Jottit is a tool that lets a user create their own website as a sub-domain of the jottit.com website (eg aaronsw.jottit.com, the homepage of the tool's co-founder, Aaron Schwartz). Creating a website using Jottit is simple. After a user has chosen and claimed a sub-domain, they can select privacy settings for the site, then begin editing using a simple textbox interface that also supports basic html. Design options are limited to setting colour schemes and font-sizes (eg for headings). A 2007 review on mashable praises the site's simplicity, but states that:

The drawback is that Jottit's simplicity is limited to those that know what they're doing. Without a WYSIWYG editor, or the options of a typical site creation tool, Jottit isn't the most intuitive service to use. There's no networking involved, so you won't be able to easily find other websites that have been created under Jottit's service.²

EU Policy reformer use case: Creates public and private places on the web to quickly share information.

URL: <https://jottit.com/>

MediaWiki

MediaWiki is a free software wiki package written originally for Wikipedia. Users download the software and run it on their own server supporting Apache, MySQL and PHP. Once running, MediaWiki supports multiple users to edit a complex text-based site using wiki markup (although the software also supports images and other file uploads). Site administrators can chose whether or not to require users to register before editing the site. MediaWiki can be public, password protected, or installed on a private network.

Information and data input to MediaWiki remains broadly unstructured.

EU Policy reformer use case: Facilitates public and private places on the web or on a private network to share and collaborate around text-based information.

URL: <http://www.mediawiki.org/wiki/MediaWiki>

² See: <http://mashable.com/2007/09/17/jottit/>

Co-ment

Co-ment supports text annotation by multiple users. It is offered as a hosted service (a “pro” version at €10/month or €84/year and a “lite” version at no charge) or as a free software package to download and host on your own server.

Co-ment allows administrators to upload texts and invite collaboration from other users in a semi-structured way: users highlight sections of a text and add their own comments. Although the “lite” version has some restrictions, features are broadly as follows: texts can be public or private; user privileges and roles can be administered; user comments can be integrated into the document; version control capabilities are included.

EU Policy reformer use case: Facilitates public and private discussion of texts (eg consultation documents, draft legislation) and collaborative document production.

URL: <http://www.co-ment.com/>

Etherpad

EtherPad is a web-based collaborative real-time text editor, allowing users to edit a text document simultaneously, and see other participants' edits in real-time, in different colours. There is a chat box in the sidebar to allow communication between users while editing.

Etherpad software is available for download and installation on your own servers, and several non-affiliated Etherpad hosted-services are offered to the general public, including piratepad.net (hosted by the Swedish Pirate Party) and pad.telecomix.org (hosted by the Swedish Telecomix Communications Agency).

EU Policy reformer use case: Creates public and private places on the web to collaborate on texts. Facilitates collaborative note-taking.

Redmine

Redmine is a free and open source project management software package.

Redmine includes task trackers and timelines, and enables administrators to communicate to a community of users tasks that need doing across different projects.

EU Policy reformer use case: La Quadrature du Net use a public instance of Redmine to invite volunteers to get involved with their campaign, and to manage volunteer activity.

URL: <http://www.redmine.org/>

Tools to bring policymakers closer to citizens

This section focuses, broadly, on two sets of tool that bring policymakers closer to citizens.

The first set of tools provides information about policymakers' activities in Parliament. In evaluating these tools it is useful to make the distinction between tools which are driven by curation of information by humans, and tools which are driven dynamically by data feeds.

The second set of tools provides channels for citizens to communicate directly with elected representatives, and which additionally allow campaigners and policy reformers to leverage public pressure on a particular issue.

Some of the tools detailed combine both of these characteristics. A few of the tools listed have no use case for EU policy reformers since they concentrate on national theatres of democracy, but are included for illustrative purposes.

Political Memory

Political Memory is a set of tools designed to track the legislative activity of MEPs and to facilitate contact between MEPs and citizens. It is powered by MediaWiki and can be edited by anyone who registers an account. Registering an account is achieved through the website and is open to anyone.

Political Memory is maintained by La Quadrature du Net and is available in French and English. It lists MEPs by country and by political grouping. Each MEP has his or her own page, listing general information, contact information (often in the form of clickable links), Parliamentary roles, CV, and a selected voting record and opinions and positions based on issues of concern to La Quadrature du Net. Voting records are also collated around a series of dossiers of special interest to La Quadrature du Net.

EU Policy reformer use case: information source, tool for leveraging public pressure on MEPs, place to share selected information on MEPs.

URL: http://www.laquadrature.net/wiki/Political_Memory

It's Your Parliament

It's Your Parliament is an English language site launched in February 2010 by a Danish company that specialises in data mining for political analysis. It structures and presents MEP voting data, allowing individual and collective comparisons across political groupings and across categories of issues like "Fisheries", "Budgets", "Development". It also tracks MEP attendance, and media mentions. It's Your Parliament also includes functionality that allows users to register a profile on the site, and rate MEPs and votes. Such opinions are presented in aggregate on respective MEP and vote pages. Users are not visible to each other, and a sampling of MEP and vote pages suggests takeup of this functionality is currently low.

EU Policy reformer use case: information source, potential tool for leveraging public pressure on MEPs (subject to site visibility, ie providing user numbers dramatically increase)

URL: <http://www.itsyourparliament.eu>

Powerbase

Powerbase is “a free encyclopaedia of people, issues, and groups shaping the public agenda that... catalogues descriptions and details of PR firms, activist groups and government agencies as well as the criticisms that are made of these groups from different perspectives.” It is powered by MediaWiki, and it can only be edited by registered users. Since no automatic facility to register as a user is provided by the site, the researcher assumes that registered users of Powerbase are part of some kind of trust network. It has a strict editorial policy, etiquette policy and guidelines for avoiding libel action.

Powerbase is a project of SpinWatch, Lobbywatch, GMWatch, Red Star Research and Corporate Watch. It covers both British politics and the European Parliament, with a separate portal, called “MEPedia”, which catalogues the careers and special interests of MEPs. Beyond elected representatives, it catalogues and critiques lobby groups and experts. Specific issue portals confirm a focus across the website (including MEPedia) on issues to do with genetically modified foods, the environment, “Big Pharma”, nuclear power, natural resources, alcohol and public policy, as well as a left-of-centre take on international conflict and issues in geopolitics.

EU Policy reformer use case: information source, public place to share selected information on MEPs and lobbyists.

URL: <http://www.powerbase.info/>; <http://powerbase.info/index.php/MEPedia>

Citizen Intelligence Agency (Sweden)

Citizen intelligence agency is an open source software package designed to track the voting records of members of the Swedish Parliament (The Riksdag). The demo server is currently down.

URL: <http://cia.sourceforge.net/>

The Public Whip (UK)

The Public Whip is a free website encompassing an application designed to track the votes of members of the two houses of the British Parliament. Users can search by postcode (to serve votes cast by their MP), or name of MP or Lord, or search by subject of interest. The website is mainly dynamic and data-driven (rather than curated) using data scraped and parsed from official sources, although there are curated elements. For example, specific portals on selected policy dossiers including MPs’ expenses, ID cards, recreational drugs, University fees are maintained. Users can register to maintain or create new dossier portals. The website includes a forum.

As well as providing raw voting records, the site highlights “interesting votes”, for example, where an MP has voted against his or her party, and directs users to companion websites where users can read speeches made by their elected representative (TheyWorkForYou.com), or contact them directly (WriteToThem.com). Although commonly perceived as a mySociety project, The Public Whip is in fact a volunteer project administered by a small number of volunteers

URL: <http://www.publicwhip.org.uk/>

WriteToThem (UK and partial EU)

WriteToThem is a free web application that allows UK users to contact their elected representatives at local, regional, national and European level. Users enter their postcode or location into a search box on the home page of the site, and the site returns a list of all their representatives at the various levels. Clicking on the name of a particular representative takes the user to an email form in which the user is invited to voice their concerns. The email eventually ends up in the elected representative's email inbox.

WriteToThem is developed and maintained by mySociety. According to mySociety, WriteToThem sent a total of 183,493 messages to elected representatives (and Lords) in the year 2008. WriteToThem actively discourages "form letter" campaigns and has technical tools in place to detect and delete form letters.

EU Policy reformer use case (UK-only): tool for leveraging public pressure on MEPs

URL: <http://www.writetothem.com/>

iParl, E-Activist, BlueState Digital

Although mySociety encourages campaigning organisations to use WriteToThem for campaigns seeking to leverage public pressure on elected representatives, they do not share data about who uses their site with third parties. This has led some campaigners to use rival, commercial sites that give them more control over user data, and/or provide more vertically integrated e-campaigning tools.

iParl offers a hosted application that builds on the code and information developed and maintained by mySociety and PublicWhip (as well as other resources) to help campaigners create actions that leverage public pressure on elected representatives in the UK and UK MEPs, with the added benefit of providing campaigners with statistics and metrics for each campaign. The cost to the campaigner starts at £20/month. **URL:** <http://www.iparl.com/products/lobby-tool.html>

E-Activist is a hosted application created by Advocacy Online which allows campaigners to create graduated campaigns (eg, sign a petition > write a letter > help fund a campaign) which leverage public pressure on elected representatives. Although the E-Activist website claims to be able to target campaigns not only at British MEPs but at all MEPs, campaigners who have used the software report that Europe-wide lobbying functionality is poor. The cost to the campaigner is reported as being around £6,000/year. **URL:** <http://www.advocacyonline.net/software/e-activist>

The researcher was unable to ascertain whether BlueState Digital, the US e-advocacy agency credited with running Barack Obama's Presidential campaign, offers products which cater to the European market, but includes them in this research to note that they are reported to charge campaign groups upwards of £20,000/year. **URL:** <http://www.bsdttools.com/>

EU Policy reformer use case: tool for leveraging public pressure on MEPs, fundraising tool

Tools to help interpret legislative documents

Tratten

Tratten is a project “dedicated to following the legislative work of the European Parliament as closely as possible”. The project uses modest crowdsourcing combined with a set of scripts that mash the European Parliament’s Legislative Observatory website with a freely available web page change detection tool. In addition to receiving an email alert whenever the Legislative Observatory page for their chosen dossier changes, users of Tratten can browse a MediaWiki instance by dossier to get information about what stage it is at in the European legislative process and view recent changes.

Although the Tratten system is very clever, and provides a good, free method for monitoring a lot of changing information, the Tratten wiki is particularly difficult to navigate, and is probably only of use to those with a deep understanding of European procedure.

EU Policy reformer use case: can monitor changes in dossiers of interest.

URL: <http://euwiki.org/Tratten>

LawTracks

LawTracks is a visualisation tool that allows campaigners to communicate changes to the text of draft legislation as it travels through the legislative process. Once campaigners have reformatted Commission-supplied texts by hand and entered them into LawTracks, users can select from a list of versions to compare and LawTracks then displays the result, highlighting the additions to the original text and striking what was removed.

EU Policy reformer use case: can help show citizens (and MEPs!) how a law has changed between drafts/votes.

URL: http://www.laquadrature.net/lawtracks/telecoms_package/ (eg)

Pippi Longstrings

Pippi Longstrings is a text analysis project that seeks to identify common strings of legal text across lobbying documents, reports, draft and enacted national, regional and supra-national laws, and bilateral and multilateral treaties and trade agreements. It is currently in development.

EU Policy reformer use case: can detect “forum shopping”, can detect lobbyist influence, can help advocates prevent law they have campaigned against in democratic fora from entering through the “back door” of bilateral trade agreements.

URL: <http://euwiki.org/Pippilongstrings>;
http://www.erikjosefsson.eu/sites/default/files/pippi_CETA_beta.html (demo)

Concluding Remarks

This research has produced a fairly coherent picture of a subset of policy reformer activity at the European level, as well as initial suggestions – mainly around public and internal communications - for points of intervention from a tools perspective. Through interview and through subsequent investigations of the tools space, it appears that many of the tool needs mentioned in initial explorations with policy reformers could be met by targeted further development or integration of existing tools. Tool usability, and information reusability, have both been consistent themes throughout the research.

The researcher spoke briefly with several interviewees about their hopes, fears and expectations for the event in Barcelona, and she also had two briefings with event facilitator Allen Gunn of Aspiration Tech. The most dominant theme from all pre-event discussion was the need to stay off technical topics for as long as possible. The consensus from interviewees and the expert steer were similarly to **focus on users not tools**; to “focus on the problem space not the solution space”.

Another theme was the importance of specifying tools that could be used by ordinary humans, and not just technically literate “geeks”. Finally, the need to focus seriously on data protection and data custodianship was heavily emphasized.