Building Electronic Communities: Implementing electronic communication within the European Law Students' Association ELSA.

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Abstract

The European Law Students' Association ELSA is the first students' organisation that attempts to shift to electronic communication on a large scale. This paper explains why this step is undertaken. It states the achievements in the process of restructuring communication so far, and which projects are planned for the future: ELSA intends to benefit from all Internet facilities. A major part is contributed to how the electronic community is built within the association, and which difficulties are encountered.

I. Introducing ELSA

ELSA, the European Law Students' Association, spans over 34 European countries, and has more than 10,000 individual members. ELSA's aims include the fostering of a better understanding and co-operation between Europeans who work and study to become members of the legal profession, as well as the promotion of knowledge of the domestic laws of ELSA member and observer states, European Community law, international and comparative law. Through a wide range of activities, ELSA aims to add a further dimension to academic study to help produce well-rounded lawyers with a practical and international outlook. Some examples of these activities: Organising seminars and conferences on legal issues all over Europe, a Student Trainee Exchange Programme, the publication of a law review.

One word on ELSA's structure: ELSA functions on three levels: local, national and international. Local groups are established in more than 150 cities and universities, forming the backbone of ELSA. Each member state has a National Board which co-ordinates local group activities and represents the member state at international Council meetings. The Council is ELSA's main governing body; it elects the International Board which executes Council decisions and co-ordinates activities across Europe.

II. ELSA and electronic communication - an overview

II.A. The history.

In the late 80ies first attempts in one member country were made to shift to electronic communication. These attempts failed completely, due to a lack of awareness of the size of this effort. Only very few officers continued to work with e-mail, but as a general result many members became frustrated and opposed to electronic communication. This psychological barrier proved to be a great obstacle when efforts were undertaken again only a few years later in early 93 to implement electronic communication on a larger scale.

II.B. The situation now.

Mostly due to a lucky coincidence of having the right people at the right place at the right moment, the second attempt took of. The acronym ELCOM stands for a project supposed to change not only the means but also the structure of communication completely. A distribution list was created in order to have a meeting point and to channel information flow. Two member states took up the example, as well as some international working groups, in order to ensure optimal addressing. At the moment this paper is written there are some 40 local and national groups on-line, as well as some 30 officers. Also, a gopher subject tree has been set up, to enable on-line access to information. A ftp-server has proven invaluable by enabling the quick distribution and exchange of format-sensitive files like the ELSA Address Database and internal documents.

II.C. The plans for tomorrow.

Beside further expansion of the electronic community, with the goal to have all groups on all levels on-line in the end, different projects aim to improve the network service of ELSA like expanding the gopher trees and contributing to the discussion of legal issues on an international scale by way of a bulletin board.

III. Building the electronic community

III.A. The reason why

European law students' as such are not the type of students you would find behind a computer from the very first day of their studies onwards. On the contrary, they most certainly belong to the group of people who only very reluctantly get used to working with a computer. Considering that only very few systems in the network can claim to be user-friendly, at least speaking of those accessible for students, these two points taken together show on which adventurous quest ELSA has embarked when it wants to implement ELCOM. Still, there are strong incentives to overcome these obstacles. To explain them, one first has to take a short look on ELSA's needs of communication

III.A.1 Outline of needs of communication

- in internal administration: It is sufficient to mention that there are two International Council Meetings a year, as well as two council meetings in each member state, plus the national and regional working group meetings of the local board members responsible for different activities, to make it obvious that already the organisation of so many meetings requires a highly sophisticated communication structure, even more if one considers that students' meetings tend to be held very "flexible", to say the least.

- in key areas: the three main activities are: Seminars & Conferences, the Student Trainee Exchange Programme and the third pillar, Academic Activities. From the very beginning of a seminar, its announcement, until the moment the last participant has arrived, ELSA desperately needs fast means of communication. The Trainee Exchange Programme knows a complex procedure of announcing available traineeships to the International Board and forwarding the list of offered jobs via the national boards back to the local groups: it therefore requires communication with high frequency on all three levels. The Academic Activities started with a Legal Research Programme, that offers students the possibility to obtain needed material for papers if it cannot be found at the own library, leading to a race against the clock to furnish the requested information sufficiently ahead of the paper's deadline.

- in key support areas (Communication, Marketing and Fund-raising, Training): especially the distribution of marketing and training materials proves to be difficult.

III.A.2 The situation for a students' organisation

Analysing the possible solutions to the needs of communication, one has to keep in mind that ELSA is a students' organisation. That is, an organisation which on the one hand carries out high standard projects and therefore needs precise co-operation, on the other hand has to work with a very low budget and a high fluctuation of its officers: a student can seldom contribute more than one year to ELSA. Thus, projects have to be carried out within this time. To sum it up: ELSA has no money to spend and no time to spare.

A quick survey of traditional means of communications shows that they all have major drawbacks for ELSA: Long distance calling is barely affordable, ordinary mail is simply to slow, if it arrives at all - a real problem when working with eastern countries. Fax requires a first investment and information obtained has to be reprocessed when needed in Bits and Bytes. It is obvious that electronic communication solves many of this problems.

III.A.3 The services of the net useful for ELSA in internal administration and distributing ELSA related and legal information

Of course, the most important service is e-mail, including distribution lists - the synergetic effect of day to day communication has already shown results unknown before. Not only it overcomes the financial obstacles to international communication, but also and most important it tackles the problem of students lacking office hours - answering machines could not solve that problem. Closely connected to e-mail is the remote login facility, as it guarantees that the officer can obtain his mail no matter where he actually is. The ftp service does already help distributing the address database and the exchange of large formatted documents, especially for marketing and training. The gopher is the interface to the world, announcing seminars, presenting examples of ELSA's publications. ELSA is working on the setting up of bulletin-boards dealing with legal subjects. Also, ELSA aims to play an important role in introducing law students to the resources of legal information already available (and assumed to increase in the future) in the net.

III.B. The way to success

III.B.1 Publicity and awareness

Whereas students in natural sciences encounter networks sooner or later, many European law students never heard the word e-mail before. Neither is the use of electronic communication widely spread within the staff of law faculties. Of course this varies from country to country and from faculty to faculty. Still, implementing electronic communication within ELSA equals to selling a nearly unknown product. There are some ways of marketing ELCOM:

At each meeting, especially on international level, it is tried to perform a demonstration: There is no easier way to convince people of the advantages of for example e-mail than to show them a short send and reply, preferably between far distanced cities. This sounds naive, but then that is how the attitude of most members towards modern communication must be described.

Then, success sells itself: The more often ELCOM is mentioned in reports on successful activities, the more previously doubting members are attracted to it.

Finally, at the moment this paper is written, ELSA is changing priorities in marketing ELCOM: 18 member countries being on-line already, it has been proved that the technical challenges can be met. Now, ELSA wants to focus on the L in its name: internal communication shall still be an incentive for ELCOM, but accessing legal information via discussion lists, gopher and bulletin boards will be a gratification for taking the trouble of learning how to use it.

III.B.2. Setting up the network

It is true that ELCOM can improve ELSA's communication - if ELSA can use the universities' network. And both theory and practice show that this is the way of access ELSA should use: ELSA is a faculty based organisation, which closely co-operates with the academic institutions and contributes to the work of the academic community. And although already the handling of rights of access throughout the universities gives an example of European diversity, it can be said in general that even in those cases where students normally do not receive accounts, there is always an exception for ELSA as a students' association. Granting access to the net means little to the universities (as all the infrastructure already exists), but a lot to the local group. To set up the network it is therefore necessary that the respective ELSA Board approaches either the computer centre or the faculty, if network facilities are already available there. Especially if the faculty is not connected yet, the Board often meets difficulties convincing the responsible person that an account should be made available by the computer centre to a students' association which is located at another faculty. That is why approaches on national and international level are equally important, asking for example the national network organisation for help - or presenting ELSA at INET/JENC-conferences.

III.B.3 Training, support and continuity

Unluckily, it is not enough for a Board to receive an account on a server - the members must also know how to use it. Here, ELSA still encounters the largest problems: Even those universities (or especially those?) that grant a liberal access to the net to students seldom have apt documentation of and manuals for the offered services. And it is not much help referring someone to on-line help when the person never has entered a UNIX, VMS or what-so-ever command before ("Excuse me, Sir, could you explain me how e-mail works?" - "Sorry, no time, send me an e-mail!")

That is why such drastic measures as sit-ins have been proposed to obtain the necessary information - unluckily ELSA lacks the ressources to send experts round Europe, introducing the members to their local system. Luckily, it has not come that far - there is always a helpful person who introduces ELSA members into the very first steps.

Still, ELSA internal training at national or international meetings (most likely on a different than the local system) does make sense: First of all to show the facilities offered by the net. As goes for most questions: If you know what you are looking for, you increase the chance to find it. Also, there are many questions concerning the use of ELCOM like the abstract structure of communication, netiquette, strategies, evaluations that can be dealt with even without a terminal. Summing up: The responsible officer for ELCOM can train his members generally in the services offered by the net, and can supply the theoretical background, but cannot train in technical details.

That is why ELSA seeks co-operation with the "knowing people" on all levels, hoping that each group will get to know a person of the networking profession willing to answer technical questions from time to time.

IV. Evaluation

Analysing the impact ELCOM has on ELSA and will have in the future, one can clearly see advantages compared to the situation when it was not used, but also some risk that cannot be underestimated.

IV.A. Advantages

The use of ELCOM results in highly intensified communication. People that rarely communicated before (independently whether they should have or did not need to) now exchange information on a regular basis, sometimes even daily. Projects that formerly had to be conceived by one person as the possible communication-partners where only difficult to reach now can easily be discussed in a group. In this way, ELCOM is a step to real time co-operation when people are located at different places. This, and communication access independently from the present location contributes to make the "mobile student" come true - sort of the scholar of the "nomad scientist".

IV.B. Risks

One risk that ELSA faces in ELCOM could be described best with "the world on the return-key" - the danger of communication overflow. Not only could it be a frustrating experience to detect what huge amounts of information are available in the net and not having the slightest chance to ever get at least the overview. Worse is the problem of exceeding communication - although at the moment it is still a positive effect that ELSA members work more for the Association when working with ELCOM, this could change when they cannot cope with incoming communication anymore.

And there is another problem with regard to the continuity of ELCOM in ELSA: As long as computers sanction the least spelling mistake in command lines, ELSA members have to know the technical procedures of ELCOM perfectly to obtain results - unlike to the requirements to their skills in other ELSA areas, where projects can be carried out already with close to perfect skills. Thus, they not only have to learn a 100% how to use the system, but also how to transfer this knowledge to their successors.

IV.C. Outlook

The risks will not prevent ELSA from continuing the quest for ELCOM, the advantages are too impressing, and to the problems there seem to be solutions. The most important steps to be taken in the very next future will be first the process of creating an awareness of the new approach to communication among all members, and second the establishing of contacts to those responsible for the network. This concerted action results in ELSA playing to some extend the role of a pioneer, as so far no European students' organisation has set up programmes of shifting to electronic communication. Still, the underlying problems are the same for many other groups, students' or not, especially in the humanities, which normally do not need computing power and therefore have only little to no budgets for computers: They have comparable needs of communication and comparable difficulties in getting access to computers. Already the International Boards of other students' organisation have shown interest in our project; as they can learn from ELSA's experience. This is where the academic principle comes in again: To learn and acquire knowledge which will one day be passed on to others.

Author Information

Christian Fulda is a lawstudent spending one year abroad at the moment in Geneva, studying law and economics at the University of Geneva and the Graduate Institute for International Studies. He studied previously two years in Tübingen at the Leibniz Kolleg and at the University of Tübingen. He contributed to the set-up of the project ELCOM, first as an advisor to the national board of ELSA Germany, then as Director for Computerised Information ELSA International. He is now President of ELSA Geneva and still holds a leading position in the development of the new communication structure within ELSA. He is presenting ELSA's activities in the net at INET '94 / JENC5 on behalf of ELSA International.

The European Law Students' Association