



User-generated content and weblogs - a new challenge

As weblogs represent an important new contribution to media pluralism, there is a need to clarify their status, and to create legal safeguards for use in the event of lawsuits as well as to establish a right to reply, says a recent own initiative report drafted by Estonian Socialist Marianne Mikko. Own initiative reports are drafted by individual MEPs and are not proposals for EU laws. The report was later adopted by Parliament's Culture Committee

This article has been corrected to reflect amendments by Parliament's Culture Committee, which affected some of the positions in the draft report that we had previously reported.

The report - adopted by MEPs on the Culture Committee on 3 June - also says there is "considerable risk" that the private media's pursuit of profit could compromise its ability to act as a watchdog for democracy. It goes on to suggest "implies a need to establish legal safeguards providing for the assignment of liability in the event of lawsuits, and establishing the right to reply".

"The cases of unrestricted ownership concentration or of scarce content pluralism in the media are endangering cultural diversity and freedom of expression not only within national markets but also at European level. We need therefore strong European commitment to overcome those challenges especially in view of the new technologies and services in the media sector", said Committee chair Greek Socialist Katarina Batzeli (PES).

Weblogs and other new on-line media pose new challenges, say MEPs. The growth of commercial media outlets for user-generated content, such as photos and videos, used without paying a fee, raises problems of ethics and privacy, and puts journalists and other media professionals under pressure, they say.

The report "on concentration and pluralism in the media in the European Union" - drafted by Estonian Socialist Marianne Mikko - also warns against the concentration of the media in the hands of a few companies because the media is vital to safeguarding democracy. "The media remains a powerful tool, which should not be treated solely in economic terms," she said. The report calls for social and legal guarantees to journalists and editors. It will be put to the vote in the full plenary in the future.

Ms Mikko told us "the blogosphere has so far been a haven of good intentions and relatively honest dealing. However, with blogs becoming commonplace, less principled people will want to use them".

Asked if she considered bloggers to be "a threat", she said "we do not see bloggers as a threat. They are in position, however, to considerably pollute cyberspace. We already have too much spam, misinformation and malicious intent in cyberspace". She added, "I think the public is still very trusting towards blogs, it is still seen as sincere. And it should remain sincere. For that we need a quality mark, a disclosure of who is really writing and why. "

Belgian MEP Ivo Belet (who acted as an advisor on the report for the Industry committee) said "weblogs and user generated content contribute in a lively and fresh way to a colourful and many-sided media landscape. They should not be restrained". The centre right EPP-ED member did concede however that some legal issues such as privacy and the right of reply need to be addressed.

German Liberal Jorgo Chatzimarkakis acted as advisor for the Economic and Monetary committee. He told us that "bloggers cannot automatically be considered a threat, but imagine pressure groups, professional interests or any other groups using blogs to pass on their message. Blogs are powerful tools, they can represent an advance form of lobbyism, which in turn can be seen as a threat". He said "any blogger representing or expressing more than their personal view should be affected by this report."

Thank you for your many comments on this subject. It has engendered lively debate and we will return to the subject once the report is voted in the plenary and the European Parliament has agreed its final position.