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## AskTheEU: Spreading The Word On Freedom of Information

Antonella Napolitano | October 12, 2011 - 11:21am | [Email This!](#)

Today about 89 countries in the world have laws allowing for freedom of information. But in many of them, even Western countries, citizens are often entitled to know more than they think they do about the public administration's impact on everyday life.

The human rights organization Access Info works for the international recognition of the right to know as a fundamental human right, saying that there is a strong link between freedom of information and freedom of expression. To create more awareness in Europe, [Access Info](#) recently launched an initiative called [Ask The Eu](#), aimed at spreading the word on the right to ask EU institutions for information and helping citizens in the process.

The right to access EU documents applies to the European Commission, the European Parliament, the Council of the European Union and most other EU offices, bodies and agencies.

Ask The Eu is supposed to work in a pretty simple way: requesters will have to sign up and then will be able to send a request for information directly to the European body responsible for the topic of their inquiry. The request will arrive via email to the institution, and when the institution responds, the answer will go back to the requester's own inbox but also on the AsktheEUwebsite, where it will be made public. AskTheEU will guide citizens in [addressing their request to the right EU body](#).

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The project staff will also help people who don't get a timely answer. EU authorities have in fact 15 working days to answer these requests. AsktheEU.org will automatically send the public authority a message after 12 working days in order to remind them of the deadlines for answering. If there is no response to this, citizens can submit an appeal (called “confirmatory application”) that Access Info staffers will help to write, if they're asked.

Citizens have a right to ask in any of the 23 official and working languages of the EU. All the requests will form a database that citizens will be able to browse. Monthly statistics will be also provided.

The process is similar to that of other projects (like mySociety's [WhatDoTheyKnow](#) for example) but it may be argued that European citizens have different degrees of knowledge about laws on freedom of information and sometimes even about their existence. Did you know, for instance, that Spain does not have one?

And there's more: in many countries people do not even know what EU institutions are for, so it would be hard to understand how such an initiative may prove useful. How can Ask The EU work for them? As declared by the founders, the initiative will work on two tracks, the process and the awareness campaign: Access Info is in fact conducting extensive promotional activities to make the public aware of both the right to ask the EU and the simple way of filing requests.

The right to access EU documents is guaranteed by [Regulation 1049/2001](#); the basis can be found on the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union (Article 15) and by the Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union (Article 42).

“But laws are never the whole story, it is also a question of practice, of institutional culture.“ says Pam Bartlett Quintanilla, Researcher at Access Info and in charge of the project. “Officials and civil servants have to realize that citizens asking questions is not an extra work burden, it is a fundamental avenue to gaining legitimacy in the eyes of the people and as such is an essential part of the job.“

A key effort will then be also to make sure that the existing laws live up to the standards set by the Council of Europe Convention on Access to Official Documents.

“This right is not only about the right of access to information but also to information in a reusable



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format which means it needs to be free from charges, copyright or other restrictions or access or reuse. It also means that raw data needs to be made available in an open source and machine-readable format, allowing others to use it in innovative ways for social or entrepreneurial purposes. “ explains Quintanilla.

It is hard to tell what kind of requests will come from among the more than 500 million European citizens, but Ernesto Belisario, an Italian lawyer and open data expert, says there are areas that may be likely to draw interest.

“I believe there are two areas where the initiative can prove particularly successful: public spending and environment (water and air pollution for example).” says Belisario, who also spoke at Personal Democracy Forum Europe. “Those are information that citizens particularly care about; also, there are no privacy issues involved.”

The whole process is far from being easy: many institutions have created freedom of information laws very recently, with different degrees of recognition of the right (in Italy you can file a request only if the information is directly related to you, for instance).

“Some of them try to lower standards and citizens expectations because they are afraid of empowering them” argues Belisario.

But this may prove an important step in the right direction, he says.

“There are many hurdles to be overcome,” says Belisario, “but this kind of 'institution hacking' might actually work better than ever.”

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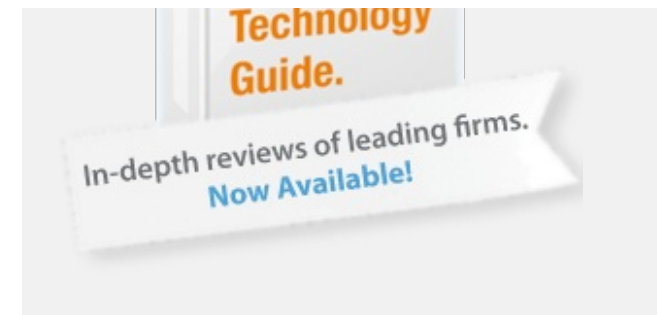
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