



Green Dossier

LESSONS OF “GREEN PLATFORM”: TEN YEARS AFTER

(Analysis of communication
efficiency in the virtual community
of environmental NGOs)

Information technologies are developing at an unprecedented rate: they are hard to catch up with if you are not following them. Nevertheless, we propose to stop and have a look back at the path that we have made over the past ten years. Perhaps, if we evaluate achievements and become aware about mistakes, the race will be not so indomitable.

Ten years ago, communication platforms for environmental NGOs of Eastern and Southern Europe, Caucasus and Central Asia were created in frames of Milieukontakt projects. It was service organizations for support of communication between groups of like-minded people, thematic working groups and mailing lists. In Ukraine this phenomenon has been named «green platform». More than forty mailing lists and thematic working groups were created during meetings and conferences on the «green platform». The GreenKIT - support system for the platform - was created by analogy and using the experience of successfully operating at that time organizations in Bulgaria, Romania and Moldova.

We decided to analyze existing experience of last decade electronic mailing lists in Ukraine, and then, basing of this analysis and with the help of fellow experts from Moldova develop recommendations on promotion effective network cooperation in today's context. Ukraine is among the top ten countries in Europe by number of Internet users. 15.3 million of Ukrainians have an access to the World Wide Web, that is about one third (33.9%) of the population. The analysis of the Internet audience in Ukraine of March 2012 shows that 48% of the population aged 15 years and above had an access to the Internet. Best possible access to the Internet is in Kiev - 90% of the capital's residents are Internet users.

Electronic mailing lists are a part of communication process between people and organizations. Ten years ago, although, this phenomenon was seen as a social, but it hasn't had the name of «social network» yet. We talked about creating links and cooperation between interested organizations and individuals, and the concept of «network» then was involving direct communication of participants (meetings, joint projects).

«People Making Cooperation Work. Creative resource book for NGOs on democratic organizational structures and cooperation.» — Kyiv, 2006.

«PLATFORM

A platform, as the word implies, is a place for organizations and individuals to meet. It is often based on common interest, ideas, and background. The word platform can refer to a formal structure as well as to an informal network. In practice, the word 'platform' is used when people want to share information and experience, internally orientated, as well as promoting and lobbying their work externally orientated. The level of involvement and participation of the members may vary; the links of the members with the platform can for instance be based on loose and rather open membership or partnership. Examples in Ukraine are the Green Platform meetings; these meetings are organized by a group of NGOs, without a formal structure or registration.»

«MAILING LISTS SERVING VIRTUAL COMMUNITIES

Now and then, people use different words for similar or the same tools. E-mail lists, mailing lists, discussion groups, e-mail groups, electronic mailing lists. In this text, we will use the term «mailing list».

A mailing list is an e-mail address referring to a group of e-mail addresses of people who have subscribed to the list. By sending a message to the mailing list, all members subscribed will receive the message. The advantage is that a sender can send information very quickly to a wide audience; the disadvantage is that abuse can lead to an overflow of e-mails.

Mailing lists can be created by all individuals as well as NGOs. Examples are:

- an individual activist who wants to communicate with similar minded activists.*
- an organization that wants to be able to communicate easily with its members.*
- a small grassroots campaign that wants to build interest on a short term basis with the NGO community and wider public.*

A mailing list can be used in various ways to help people organize their work and create cooperation. Reasons for using mailing lists can be:

- *to continue a dialog unfinished from a face-to-face meeting*
- *to inform people about upcoming events or actions*
- *to share resources related to organizing events (posters, flyers, creative action ideas, etc.)*
- *to seek collaboration on upcoming events*
- *to discuss news or events pertinent to activism*
- *to share thoughts and draft papers for developing new ideas and opinions."*

Thematic working groups in frames of Milieukontakt program were primarily seen by organizers and activists of the projects as an instrument of cooperation, and possibility to come together around ideas important to the community. That is the way it was planned to ensure equal opportunity for everyone to participate in all important processes related to environmental protection. Hence the goals declared by the working groups are:

- cooperation between NGOs,
- informing NGOs,
- informing target groups,
- coordination of targeted NGOs/project/campaign,
- informing the public.

The tasks were identified by the initiators of the working groups and mailing lists, therefore, the groups were working and still are working in different ways. Their life was formed according to their aims and objectives, one way or another. However, their aims and objectives were changing in the course of activity. Many of the mailing lists today are no longer functioning, some never functioned at all, and some are active all the time and even increasing their influence during recent years. There are examples of later formations, which are not linked to specific projects but imposed by the need to communicate and share information (organic, for example).

It is interesting to see how effective were these or other lists, whether or not we should change them in the current context and what they can be (if needed) replaced with.

THE SPECIFICS OF THE MAILING LISTS THERE WAS ROUGHLY AS FOLLOWS:

1. Closed lists for discussions on specific measures and short-term tasks of the project organizers.
2. Lists, which are designed for individuals / organizations generally involved in certain issue.
3. Mailing lists involving these interested in addressing specific issues (campaigns).
4. Discussion groups.
5. Informing on certain issues.
6. Informing without feedback.

The simplest formation: **closed lists for project organizers to discuss specific activities and short-term objectives.** For example, the administrative group was created for coordination of Milieukontakt projects that was active only during major projects period. Similar formations – working groups for preparation of conferences on the green platform and technical team for creation of GreenKIT. All of them have ceased their activity after having finalized certain administrative tasks. These are examples of internal communication in a project or in organization that can be compared with the popular at «pre-IT» times planning meetings, conference-calls and other working teleconferences of several people responsible for specific work.

Now these functions are successfully picked up by Skype and a variety of electronic conferences tools, but we also continue using such mailing lists. They came into use as a regular way of operative communication. The advantage of such communion is that all the questions and solutions are documented in the correspondence and can always be accessed back. However, there is another example. In Moldova, there was a mailing list, which was created especially for the NGO Forum and suddenly got activated after the event. This is a case when successful forum has become the impetus for discussions and sharing of information.

Mailing lists, which are designed for individuals / organizations generally involved in a certain issue. For example, working group «Environment and Health», mailing lists for mass-media, Nature reserves of Ukraine and the NIS, Carpathian community, organic agriculture. Such mailing lists where majority among created since 2001. The biggest of these today are remaining ukrsmi, eco_ukr, zap_rus, zap_ukr, with the largest number of messages and the respondents. But while such mailing lists as Carpathian one or wg_organic are reserved for messages on relevant topics and discussions around the issue, the others, such as ukrsmi and eco_ukr become exclusively informative, where the moderation doesn't foresee any feedback. At the same time, the working group «Environment and Health» stopped its existence having finalised a number of tasks, stated in projects decade ago.

Many lists have become a purely **informative**, when delivered information is duplicated to multiple lists. Most often these are announcements of events or alarms.

All the countries of Milieukontakt programs have tried to create **news portals** based on service organizations. In case of GreenKIT they failed. However, it is typical for the majority of similar organizations in other countries. This task is successfully coped only by Kyrgyz NGO *Ekois and Bluelink in Bulgaria*.

Apparently, that is because they perform filling of the portal with information and preparation of news professionally, involving journalists. All the others encounter the problem of lack of information providers in the network. In the result – the information is not interesting and not prepared for the consumer. It is advisable to use systematic approach to informing, for this is feasible to share responsibilities between activists. And in ideal – to have a good PR manager (who is also a journalist, copywriter, representative person, content manager, public relations coordinator).

Special role appears for informational mailing lists at a time when traditional media in the region are monopolized or tightly controlled. In such cases the mailing lists become the only source of information free of censorship.

The mailing lists that involve people in addressing specific problems. For example, the Campaign for the Protection of Danube Delta Biosphere Reserve was the mass for several years, but since it failed to change official decision on the issue and the public interest for the subject waned, – the mailing list became almost inactive. The moderator of the list, environmental group The Pechenegs however, has an experience of revival of hushed mailing lists by redirecting them to other issues. For example, there was a list that was created for the participants of one of USAID programs. However, since the interest for environmental issues shortly faded among participants of the program, the mailing list focused on Kharkov citizens, interested in preserving of green spaces.

THE OBSERVED PEAKS OF ACTIVITY IN THE MAILING LISTS ARE USUALLY ASSOCIATED WITH:

- a hot topic that affects many people, but not just members of the list;
- seasonal activity (eg, summer volunteers camps);
- common events, meetings of participants:
 - meetings of the group members, which happen whitening various projects on relevant issues, give much support for activeness of the group. For example, a group Environment and Media organises press tours were participants meet in person and communicate, involving new members to the group.
- a particular project funded.

DECLINES OF ACTIVITY ARE ASSOCIATED:

- with the end of the project;
 - the activeness of the group often dies down after the completion of the project and funding. However, organizations are raising new projects and funding using working mailing list...
- with finalization of assigned tasks;
- loss of interest to specific subject (or, perhaps, appearance of other channels, which reveal the subject in more interesting way);
- loss of motivation and interest for communication.

THE TRENDS THAT WE HAVE NOTED:

- The overall decline in discussions activeness in environmental movement. There is a shift from discussions to simply informing. This is due to the participants unwillingness or disinterest to conduct discussions (lack of motivation), the inability to debate because of the complicated political and administrative situation (the staff members of nature reserves, for example, are often afraid to express openly their opinion).
- Mailing lists as a way of dissemination of information – are not very effective.
- Use of other communication tools. The discussions and informing are transferred to more powerful social networks and service structures (Facebook, Google) - they offer more convenient service.
- Reorientation to tasks: people start communicating in virtual communities because they want to do / change something.

The essence of communication did not get changed over ten years. But the forms of virtual communication got changed and developed so much over past years, that they often replacing the need for any real communication.

Mailing lists as an instrument of communication are still in demand at the present stage of social development and an analysis of previous experience enables us to use them more efficiently combining with other modern facilities.

Mailing list is clear tool. We understand that this is a convenient way of targeted communication with known, at least virtually, people, educating them on specific issues. The motivation to participate is important in a community of like-minded people. Participation happens only if an issue or event is uniting, touching every one.

Mailing list is a common position of the network / association / group of people. It is also an opportunity to speak on behalf of the community, represent the views and ideas of a group of people or organizations. Unless, of course, this does not contradict with general rules of the community regarding the principles of representative democracy and participatory democracy. The need to communicate through the list is the social dimension of a community.

Perhaps the main conclusion of our study is that our mailing lists, as well as any other means of communication do not exist by themselves. Mailing lists is a kind of mirror for what is happening; they show how we generally communicate with each other. They are connected to the general trends of environmental movement development, society's interest to the movement, to acuteness and relevance of the issues discussed and our desire to do or to change anything and to communicate with each other. And we should treat them just as a working tool (for the sake of harmony between human being and nature), and not as a permanent place of our virtual residence. We should try to find a balance between its reasonable use or shift to virtual world.

INTERACTION WITH CURRENT SOCIAL NETWORKS AND NEW MEDIA

There is initial fundamental difference between our mailing lists and modern social networks and technical platforms. It consists of the fact that our system is designed by ourselves, guided by the aims of environmental movement and objectives of our thematic groups. Facebook, Google, Twitter, and other were designed by other people, with other goals and objectives. Coming into the territory of Google or Facebook, we have to follow someone else's rules, playing others games, perhaps not being fully aware of their true sense.

WHY DO WE COME TO THESE FOREIGN VIRTUAL TERRITORIES WITH OUR TASKS AND NEEDS?

First, because they provide us with more effective and convenient service. However, many of technical facilities we are looking for could be provided by our service organizations with the same success. We just need to define the tasks correctly upon them. Of course, the financial power of Google cannot be compared to the capabilities of the volunteer organization of GreenKIT. But (see above) their goals are initially different.

Second, we want to attract like-minded participants to our events and activities using social networks potential. That is, speaking business language, promotion of our product to the huge Internet market. It is clear that our product is different from

regular market products range, but it is worth to have closer look at general advices of marketologists. For instance, a quote from one of the lessons on the DV-Reclama.ru:

«Before you start to evaluate each entry on Twitter, photo or comment on Facebook, set a clear goals that you striving for through social media. What do you want to achieve through these channels of communication, what is the result to be obtained? What methods of communication with the consumer are best suited for your goals? Social media can serve multiple purposes, from news broadcasts to answering customer's questions and interacting with communities. Create a list of goals that you want to achieve with the use of social networks.

Then you should consider what the audience is supposed to do with the content on your pages in social networks. Do you want them to read the information, shared it, reply to it, follow a link, make a purchase or your simply pursue the goal of engagement growth?»

Why do not we answer these questions before starting a campaign in social networks?

The answers would help us to plan campaigns better. For example, certainly it is effective to use social media to gather people to actions, which touch the interests of many ordinary people. Kharkov environmentalists, for example, successfully used this tool when to protect favourite park for all citizens. Kiev campaign To protect old Kiev gather mass demonstrations and public meetings in support of historical and natural monuments of the city. Global campaign «Clean up the World!» attracts millions of people worldwide for simple garbage collection through social networks and interactive maps. Although, you have to realize that not everyone who have clicked «I am attending», in fact, will come to action. The likelihood to receive real support from the participants of the target distribution list, who promised to give it, is much higher..

Third, we hope for wide dissemination of information through social media. Statistics shows that 90% of information in social networks is secondary information. In other words, if the message is interesting, it will be «re-posted» by your numerous «friends» and it will go circling around the networks. That is good. But what is if the information is related to human health exposure to asbestos and its use in construction? It will unlikely be interesting to permanent residents of Facebook. Therefore, the Eco-Pravo Kharkov, for instance, prefers to disseminate such information through thematic networks - among the people who for sure needs to know that.

And the last – debates and discussions in social networks.

It is convenient to discuss, for instance, extended contest works (drawings, posters, etc) in closed groups in Facebook. You can organise an unprejudiced close voting among jury or do it in public. But such technical instruments could also be provided by our service system.

Discussions on acute problems could meet wide response in social networks. But whether, for instance, nature reserves staff could openly participate there, while they afraid to express their opinion in our mailing lists? Perhaps not. Do not forget that it is foreign territory, which is monitored not only by its members. Many employers monitor network and behaviour of their employees or job candidates there - the people themselves bring the information about themselves, often unnecessary.

As for expert discussions, people are getting involved or not, guided by the existence or lack of interest, the channel of communication does not make difference in these cases.

Generally speaking, you should not rush headlong into social networks. If you have a clear goal, we must first think carefully, what channels and tools are the best to be used to achieve it.

THE EFFECTIVENESS OF THE MAILING LISTS

We have identified the main types of mailing lists, depending on the goals and have tried to determine how to enhance their effectiveness.

TYPES OF MAILING LISTS

- Informational
- Discussing
- Joint actions

In our opinion, the mailing lists can be considered to be effective if the result of its operations meet initial expectations. However, if the list is functioning during ten years and is able to sustain itself - it is also an indicator of efficiency.

We have identified general performance criteria and indicators for their achievement.

EFFICIENCY CRITERIA:

1. The number of addresses in the list.
2. Number of messages.
3. The number of active participants.
4. The content (number of consultations, developed documents, issues etc.)
5. Achievement of the objectives that are set by the group.
6. Feedback from the target audience.
7. Operational efficiency.
8. Relevance.

CRITERIA	INDICATORS
The number of addresses in the list	Items
Number of messages	Items per unit of time
The number of active participants	Number of persons
The content (number of consultations, developed documents, issues etc.)	Items per time
Achievement of the objectives that are set by the group	The availability of the final product
Feedback from the target audience	Number of members involved, signs of changes in behaviour of the target audience
Operational efficiency	The time interval between the event and the information on it
Relevance	Number of responses on a given topic

Using these indicators and criteria can help to determine the effectiveness of mailing lists. However, not all the criteria are applicable to every type of mailing lists. Therefore, we examined the criteria that apply to each type.

1. The effectiveness of a **informational** mailing list could be defined by the following criteria:

- The number of addresses in the list.
 - For this category, the indicator is simple – counted number of addresses.
- The number of messages.
 - Similar calculation. However, the quantitative indicators of addresses and messages themselves cannot be evaluative. We must take into consideration the qualitative categories, otherwise, spam will be the most effective way of mailing lists.
- Feedback from the target audience.
 - Evaluation of an extent at which the information reached the end user is possible using such indicators as changes in behaviour of the target audience (eg, after an informational campaign on the dangers of plastic bags their sales at a supermarket are decreased, but paper or re-usable bags appeared), public requests for consultations on the issues, a decrease of dolphinarium visitors number.
- Operational efficiency.
 - to be considered depending on the subject of information and the need for action. Upcoming events should be announced in advance and information about the results should come immediately after it. An announcement about action in Kiev, sent out, for instance, an hour before its start does not meet this criterion. Report from an event, that came over a week after does not make sense. A communication on strategic intentions and decisions, such as shale gas, remains relevant throughout the entire discussion process. Additional information, expert opinions and analysis do not contradict with the operational efficiency principle.
- Relevance.
 - The importance of the issue raised for this moment will be shown by the number of responses in the newsletter, as well as by reaction of target the group.

2. Successful **discussion** mailing list could be characterized by the following criteria:

- Content – is the main criterion. The indicators of desired content are consultations, developed documents, ideas and suggestions.
- The number of active participants.

- Achievement of the objectives set by the group. The product, which was defined in expectations, is produced in result of discussions.
- Feedback from the target audience.
- Relevance.

3. A mailing list, aimed at the organization / performance of **joint actions** is effective if it is meaningful and achieving its goals. For example, success to restrain the ambitious plans of the authorities or to change the route of the future road. Campaign against the construction of the Bystroye Channel through Danube Delta can be considered effective.

Despite the fact that the channel is still built, the campaign brought together different people, attracted the attention of the whole country and the international community and demonstrated the power of joint actions of many organizations as well as the realities of the business and government attitude to nature values. When the public sees injustice and the problem that is not solved - it is also positive result. It is quite possible that the campaign is not lost ultimately and the society will later get back to the subject. Surely we can say that the prestige of the organizers of the campaign got strengthened, their credibility has increased, people are more likely to refer to these environmental organizations for help or advices.

PRESTIGE AND RECOGNITION

It is clear that active living position, integrity, commitment to protect the natural values and environmental rights is the basis of environmental organization's prestige. But do not forget about the promotion, visualization of its activity: does it make much sense that no one will know about your integrity?

In its work process, the group produces a product (real, virtual) which needs to be told about it to as much people as possible. The working group results should be publicized widely. People need to know what questions could be addressed to which group or which newsletter. Of course, it is possible when there is credibility and trust to the experts involved in the groups. To ensure that such information is available, mutual visual support for different lists should be used. These could be an exchange of banners, links to websites of participating organizations, promotion in social networks, even through personal contacts and, of course, visualization of service organization that maintains the mailing list. The group must be recognizable: memorable name, giving associations with specific subjects or experts, and at least the minimal attributes of what business world calls corporate style.

TECHNICAL SUPPORT

Foundation of GreenKIT was created as part of Milieukontakt in 2003 as a service organization for the «physical, financial and other charitable assistance for programs, projects, initiatives and actions aimed at strengthening of environmental NGOs and their communities with the use of information and communication technology as a tool for the development of cooperation. Ten years ago GreenKIT was seen as an analogy of social networks, to be more precise, – a prototype, because they did not yet exist, but it could not grow to become Facebook for obvious reasons.

After ending of the financial support (in 2005) GreenKIT continues to serve existing and newly created mailing lists on its own resources. Volunteer organization that consist of IT experts, who live in different parts of Ukraine, today is serving as a base for a variety of projects and organizations.

Of course, that technical support needs to be improved. Mailing list moderators suggests that we need their automation, more convenient format for reading, for example, from phone, conference services, the ability to organize photos and video, electronic registration and voting systems. The list can be very long, and it will get updated with new wishes with every passing moment of IT rapid development. Moreover, users do not have time to keep track of IT news, they need permanent support and expert advices on communications improvement. All this is quite feasible in case there is a real need in thematic groups, expressed in clear terms of reference, if there is demand from participants in the system and the interest in development of their technical resource

CONCLUSIONS

Generally, the system for mailing lists has played a significant role in development of Ukrainian NGOs and environmental movement. This is the first appearance of virtual thematic groups in our countries. They contributed to the growth of communication culture between different people and organizations. Thanks to the mailing lists, the communication and information exchange were set up among people who live far away from each other. Some of the conflicts were resolved: the virtual debates are more tolerant than twosome ones, there is always a possibility to re-read and re-think the arguments and attacks of opponent, and therefore, more chances to move conflicts from closed to open mode, use its positive aspects for creative purposes. Internal (closed) lists have contributed to the development of joint decision-making skills, helped to systemise working communication within organizations and projects.

The communication tasks, as well as the overall objectives of environmental movement, remain unchanged in the current context. If we realise the purpose of communication, if the people have a motivation to communicate, they will find an adequate technical tools for that. What is the most effective – mailing lists, or social networks - it depends on the purpose of communication and the tools are just complementing each other. Therefore, we need to develop and use the information channels, that are available and the most appropriate for our goals.

There are similar systems operating today in 10 Europe and Central Asia countries, adjusted to national contests. Milieukontakt International (MKI) network is developed on their basis, which now serves as a good background for international co-operation on implementation of joint projects on environmental protection and environmental rights. Our objective is to develop priorities for activities that are based on common interests and to support service systems in our countries.

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