# Bringing the Arab Revolutions into the Classroom:
## *Using Blogs in the MA European Studies at Maastricht University*

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# Structure and background

- Experience of using a WorldPress Blog (with integrated Twitter function) in my MA course on 'European Integration and Civil Society'

- Academic years 2010/11 and 2011/12

- Part of SURF- funded project on: 'Social Media for Academic Purposes'

# Why using a Blog?

- Course focus: Civil Society;

- Popular uprisings in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) early in 2011;

- Focus on role and use of social media in the protest movements;

- Create a learning and debating platform for my students, to allow them to quickly exchange the 'latest news' and facts on the Arab uprisings;

- Allow students to communicate and discuss beyond the time/place constraints of the course schedule;

- Enable students to acquire new and increasingly important skills.

# The challenge:

Neither the students nor I were entirely sure how the Blog would function in the traditional curriculum!

1. Students (and tutors) received extensive training in 'How to write a Blog';

2. Students chose three main themes they wanted to discuss on the Blog;

3. Students had to contribute a minimum of 1500 words to the Blog;

4. Students were also asked to integrate multimedia into their Blog, as well as Twitter messages;

5. Students' contributions to the Blog were graded based on their relevance, quality, factual/stylistic clarity and originality (30% of the overall grade for the course).

# Getting on with it: How Osama Bin Laden took over the Student Blog

- 20-26 MA students participated in the course;

- Students initially made careful (and timid) contributions to the Blog;

- Students stuck to the 'official' requirement to produce a Blog post here and there, twitter the odd message to the Blog and complete the 1500 words;

- News appeared that Osama Bin Laden had been killed in Pakistan: Blog posts quadrupled over night!

We all started to feel overwhelmed by the Blog…

# Help? The Student Blog was growing out of proportion

I ensured students that:

- it was not necessary to follow all the Blog posts,
- a few excellent contributions to some of the discussion threads would be sufficient for a good grade.

Further I moved the deadline for the end of the discussions on the Blog forward (ensure that students focus on final assignment during the last week of the course)

BUT some students just could not stop: the discussions continued for several months after the end of my course!

# Civil Society and European Integration 2010/2011

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**May 09**

## Seemed appropriated to sh…

By Raul on May 9th, 2011 at 20:16
Posted In: Twitter

Seemed appropriated to share in our blog:
The Middle East Awakening by Joschka Fischer – Project Syndicate http://t.co/0X598vS via @ProSyn

└ Tags: Tweet

## Discussion (2) ¬

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### Leonie
May 9, 2011 at 21:22 | # | Reply

http://www.consilium.europa.eu/showPage.aspx?id=2079&lang=en

At least EUFOR is getting involved in Libya now, specifically to support humanitarian agencies. Maybe it's the first sign of Europe taking responsibility, even though that's probably just wishful thinking. Do you guys think Europe will diverge from its Realpolitik as Fischer demands?

### Corina
May 10, 2011 at 16:39 | # | Reply

Well, maybe the EU will no longer stick to its Realpolitik in the future, as J. Fisher mentions in his article. Nevertheless, EU's current involvement in Lybia shows nothing but Realpolitik. In foreign policy the EU usually acts very pragmatic . Basically member states had no other choice but to support the Lybian people as the EU committed itself to support democratic values by means of the Neighbourhood

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# The Statistics

During three weeks students generated:

|                         | Posts | Comments | Twitter posts | Reads |
|-------------------------|-------|----------|---------------|-------|
| **2010/11 (20 students)** | 100   | 120      | 70            | 1500  |
| **2011/12 (26 students)** | 117   | 206      | 81            | 835   |

# Student Evaluations

| Questions | Did the Blog contribute to students' individual learning? | Did the Blog contribute to the student group's collective learning? | Was the Blog an effective means to meeting the course objectives? | Was it clear to students how to work with the Blog after the skills training? | Was it clear to students how to use Twitter after the skills training? | How do students rate the availability of technical support for using the Blog/Twitter? | Do students think they will benefit from the blogging and twitter skills in the future? |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Score out of 5 | 4.3 | <u>**4.3**</u> | 4.2 | 4.8 | 4.0 | 4.2 | 4.2 |

- Confirmation that the Blog significantly enhanced the learning experience of our students;
- Confirmation that the training format was effective.

# Reflections: Another Blog next academic year?

1. The blog as a place of instant exchange and spontaneous discussion:
   - MA students usually come from many different countries and access different media
   - Blog enabled them to share these immediately

2. The blog as a means to make the course more interesting & students more enthusiastic about their course work

3. The blog as alternative tool to assess the students' knowledge and skills:
   - students asked to process vast amounts of online information, relate that information to the broader academic literature, write precise and targeted Blog posts weaving together web-content and academic literature in a very short amount of time

# Meeting the skills challenge:

**More information ≠ More knowledge**

Traditional task of university: equip our students with the knowledge and skills to process information and place it into a broader (and critical) context

New challenge: Today's generation of students exposed to vaster and vaster amounts of information and need to teach how information is selected, verified, processed and placed into context!

Solution: Integration of Blogs into the course work!

# Links to the Blogs:

- 2010/11:

http://www.fasos.org/civilsociety1011/

- 2011/12:

http://www.fasos.org/civilsociety1112/



**Link to the SURF project:**

**http://www.innovatieregeling.nl/category/leren-op-afstandonline-samenwerken/social-media-for-academic-purposes/**