

THE EU INFORMATION MACHINE; HIGH TIME FOR REFUELLING

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This contribution critically examines the defining principles of the present EU communication practices.¹ It first analyses how the political coming about of the Union shaped its public appearance and communication efforts, and then relates this theme to a more recent technological change, the emergence of internet and other electronic data networks. A third paragraph focuses on the necessary improvements of the European media and information strategy to bring it more in line with today's political, cultural and media realities, followed by a final section with proposals for concrete measures and novel facilities. In conclusion, the paper urges the EU institutional management to give the communication dimension a higher priority, in view of its impact on public trust in times of crisis and transformation.

¹ This essay should be read as a personal reflection, rather than as an academic discourse on the state of affairs concerning media and information practices in an ever growing European continent. It is based on a variety of observations related to hands-on experiences with the communication of European integration projects and related issues. My views span a period of roughly 25 years, initially as a working reporter and educator of media professionals, later as the director of the Maastricht-based European Journalism Centre, then as a scholar and researcher of new media ventures and finally as an independent consultant. Although applying different perspectives, these outlooks have all contributed to a view on the state of play in European communication policies which is, much to my surprise, remarkably consistent, regardless of time, organisation or subject matter. This overall view I elaborate here, to contribute to the better understanding of the dynamics of the emerging European public sphere and also to take a stance in the debate about its future characteristics.

EVOLUTION AND REVOLUTION

It never ceased to amaze me that European integration is almost automatically defined as a status, rather than as a process. Although European officials constantly refer to the 'European project' and with this term do imply its historical roots and unfinished nature, the public debate is dominated by the connotation of Europe and European integration as the opposite of other statuses such as national or regional. In the public debate, certainly now things are getting rough economically, everyone quickly identifies with one policy level or the other. This framing of European and national interests as mutually excluding alternatives puts the EU immediately in a disadvantaged position. European ideals are no match for deeply rooted national identities.

Over the years, the Brussels management has done little to counter the habit. Virtually all empirical indicators of the last decade and also the Eurobarometer figures show a steady decline in terms of public trust in the Union as an institution, but the trend never led to a coherent response. Why this attitude of complacency, certainly in view of the magnitude of the interests at stake? I can only explain and understand it with a reference to the historical backgrounds of early unification initiatives and the structure of the following Union.

Fast backwards, the growth process of the EU knows three distinct stages. Starting off with the great ideas of elderly statesmen and a handful of visionaries, the European get-together matured through the works of a few elites, political, bureaucratic and commercial. Spanning half a century, it progressed from strategic cooperation on the level of raw materials, thus neutralising formerly antagonistic sentiments by building a cooperation base, to the era of effective superstructures such as the single market and enlarged European Union. So far, only insiders with different backgrounds were at the steering wheel, but with the introduction of the euro a third period started off, requiring (in a number of member states) the endorsement of entire populations. In other words, the European citizenry at large, and not so much the political insiders and corporate lobbies, became the main stakeholder.

All parties turned out to be completely unprepared for this situation. The European electorates had traditionally heard very little about the European dimension of their life. National politicians by and large found that a comfortable situation, allowing them to scapegoat European circles when necessary for things that went wrong at the home front. At the Brussels side of the stick, it was not understood that the European option no longer was a matter of the mind, as in the Schumannic pioneer days, or a matter of the wallet, as in the Delors phase, but above all had

become a matter of the gut, now themes such as constitution, territory and sovereignty were coming to the fore. The EU always blundered a bit in the domain of personal feelings. It's just not their kind of ballgame, and that is playing up now.

Again, exactly why is this so problematic? Because of, I think, the different nature of the three development phases. The launch phase was politically inevitable and therefore, although highly innovative, doable. The peace mandate after the Second World War gave a formidable head start, and only a handful of countries and dossiers were involved. The transition to the maturing phase went relatively smooth, with numerous smaller and bigger steps back and forward, but nevertheless. In hindsight, the moves in the seventies and eighties can be labelled as an evolutionary growth process. It helped that the same kind of people were still at the helm. The Brussels work force has long been, to some extent still is, a true copy of the French civil servant system: authoritative, centralised, top-down oriented and adaptive to political change. No doubt very effective when you have to push things through but problematic when the dynamics come from the other side.

These problems deepen in the ongoing sea change to the phase of popular involvement. The general public moves away from Europe and the principles of European solidarity, even from Europe as a well-understood factor of self-interest. Clearly, other things have come into play. There is first of all the issue of emotional involvement. The introduction of the euro already led to heated debates and massive opposition in the nineties, not so much on the basis of rational economic reasoning, but mainly because of the symbolic nature of a national currency as a token of identity, history and self-esteem. The introduction of a joint European constitution triggered an even harder negative response. Now today the battle against the economic crisis provokes intensified European direction and control, many define this policy as a bridge too far, regardless of the consequences for their own lives and domestic welfare. For the time being, it seems, giving up bits of sovereignty remains a no-go area.

The Brussels reaction to this electoral blockage has not been particularly helpful. Lots of explaining is taking place, but with facts you cannot dilute emotions. That requires a totally different approach, a new narrative, to start establish a higher level of source credibility. I come to that later. It certainly requires a different kind of civil servant, oddly enough one who adheres much more to the original concept of public service, read citizen support, and less so to the practice of the average institution-centred official. Only on the basis of a genuine client orientation, one can understand and tackle the problem of popular

resent. In the last paragraph of this chapter, I also address the options for such a transformation.

So, to sum up, while the change from the EU start-up days to the phase of maturation was evolutionary, the present and imminent transition from elite-driven projects to popular consent politics is more of a revolutionary nature. To deal with that asks for other forms of inspiration, a different type of players and, last but not least, an up-to-date set of arms to fight the persuasion battle. The latter brings us to another revolution, a technological this time: the changeover from classical media to the electronic information superstructure the internet in essence is. This technological advance, ill-understood by European politicians, is the focal point of the next paragraph.

A DIGITAL BONANZA

The coming of age of the internet and related information patterns is a complicated matter. For a while, the web has been treated as the arrival of yet another channel to convey the message, in addition to the word of mouth, newspapers and an array of audio-visual media. Only recently, the systemic and gamechanging character of vast electronic data networks is fully understood and recognised. That understanding indicates that it will not do to develop internet-based information services annex to the existing media provisions. Rather, electronic or IP (internet protocol) or digital communication will gradually replace older and less functional communication structures and in fact tends to become the dominant means of expression and information distribution.

If the changeover is indeed so fundamental, it becomes relevant to be well aware of the defining principles of IP communication. Elaborating these principles is not the objective of this publication, but a general understanding of the character traits of the evolving network society is absolutely necessary if the EU wants to devise a modern, more effective communication policy. Hence, an overview of digital highlights, completed with brief specifications for the use by larger organisations.

By far the most important aspects of digital media are its vastness, availability and immediacy. In terms of storage and transmission capacity there are quasi no limits. Furthermore, it is there for everyone, with only marginal limitations in terms of investment or regulation. Digital communication is also characterised by the fact that it establishes a direct contact between information source and end user, with no interference of an intermediary agent or medium. All these qualities are and will remain unavailable for the classical, analogue media and force information providers to design net-specific strategies. Only recently,

after numerous attempts to integrate the net in complicated ‘multimedia’ offerings, this ‘digital leads’-view is gradually becoming practice.

Classical media by nature are distributing from a single, central point to a larger number of destinations and by doing so, determine the moment, form and content of publication. Digital media on the other hand are the very opposite of this push logic: the net is geared towards a pull by numerous users who collect information according to their mood, interest and time availability, at a (for them) suitable moment. Suddenly, the initiative lies at the other end of the communication spectrum. And not only information collection is now user-defined. Because of the availability, openness and immediacy of the digital channels, information users can also begin feeding back to information sources and increasingly do so with tailored requests, comments and other contributions. The former passive end user has advanced to a proactive communication starter. Needless to say that many organisations, including the EU institutions, are facing serious challenges with this paradigm shift. The bulk of their communication provisions is built on a logic that eventually will become obsolete.

One of the most problematic changes for information providers is the much needed transition from finalised content – newspaper articles, programmes, essays, CD’s etc. – to a type of semimanufactured product, out of which the user (European citizen in this case) distils his or her own information diet. Digital content production differs totally from classical media work: it requires service-oriented professionals who search, retrieve, disclose, organise, find crosslinks, connect facts with opinions, and in short provide the consumer with all the necessary elements for a complete and balanced information act. Within this context, the need for ‘rounded’ stories becomes less prominent. The traditional finalised media product will be replaced by ‘evolving stories’ or ‘information collections’, growing (and being enriched) over time with content parts from not only the media professionals but also contributions from the civil society at large: story protagonists, experts, citizens, officials.

With the de facto monopoly on publicising broken, not only individual information users are entering the media game. Although they were the first to detect and try out the full potential of the net, another media category, the information sources, are now the most energetic initiators of digital communication streams. They differ in size and background – these companies, NGOs, governments and other bodies – but have in common that publishing gradually becomes a by-product of their main objective. Therefore the label ‘embedded publishers’, indicating that media efforts are no longer sourced out or left to third parties (media), but are fully integrated into the organisational structure

and/or product portfolio. Meanwhile, this direct, unmediated communication quickly becomes the norm. Companies run webshops and kickstart viral ad campaigns, local governments open e-counters and transaction sites, NGOs assert pressure through online petitions and universities launch their own science magazines, to mention a few. The EU institutions have remained remarkably silent in this digital bonanza. The question is how long they choose to remain a sideliners.

Not just the content production level is affected by the net logic; also the distribution of content has become a different play. I mention two aspects. First, the vertical one-to-many mode is increasingly replaced by more horizontal interaction patterns. Social media such as Facebook, Twitter and LinkedIn are the best examples of that trend. Individuals, in their capacity of friends, colleagues or followers, orient more towards each other, rather than to rely on official sources. Insofar these still play a role (and they do), it is more through this process of mutual recommendation than by reputation of the source. The implications are manifold. Newscasters and other information agents have to learn to dwell amidst their audiences, not hover above them. They have to compete for attention, instead of taking that for granted. They should 'go with the flow', not only initiate but above all participate. This is a difficult mandate, yes, but an unavoidable one in the digital era.

Then there is the mobility factor. Increasingly, the fixed line websites and other electronic data environments are complemented with (or replaced by) mobile platforms. Initially, this was done with miniature editions of available content, specifically designed for smart phones. With the arrival of light weight laptops or netbooks and certainly with the present wave of tablet computers (iPads and the likes), entire publications can migrate to mobile. Also the trusted outdoor advertising finds a better place inside trains, metros and buses, in the form of mobile signage. So, wherever we are, specific digital information is always at hand and we start using it routinely. The consequence of this permanent online status is that messages can and should become more contextual than they are up till now. Meaning, publications should be customised to personal, time and location-defined information needs.

Again, this is a huge challenge for parties which so far were product out- and organisation-focused. A European citizen, to give an example, perceives the EU differently, whether at work, enjoying his vacation abroad or filing an application. Mobile information can cater for all these contexts. Certainly the Union, so characterised by a wealth of regional accents and a diversity of peoples, should take more advantage of the customisation power of mobile communication.

THE EU MESSAGE REVISITED

Both the political trust crisis and the technological surge of digital media force the EU institutions to critically examine and seriously revise their performance in the communication domain. Conceptually the need for transformation is understood and over the past years, several actions have indeed been taken to implement a more citizen-oriented as well as net-savvy information infrastructure. In practice, one has to admit, with only limited success. There are many reasons for this modest result, three of which I will briefly mention.

A citizen-driven information exchange pattern is almost counter-intuitive to the top-down persuasion machinery the EU has always been. Core priority was and remains getting ‘the right word’ out and the media in. But much to the frustration of officials and politicians, the media by and large didn’t want to serve the information soup the Union was brewing. Within this context of mutual alienation, defensiveness is the standard Brussels response to occurring criticism and diverting views, be it through the countering with factual accounts or with more emotional reproaches of structural misrepresentation. And both weapons prove to be blunt. One notes only rare attempts to understand and address the ‘why’ behind the ‘what’ of opponents, and build institutional feedback on this more fundamental communication layer.

Second, up till now, EU communication is above all a political and much less a professional responsibility. The leadership defines the message and its spokesmen oversee the transportation, directly or indirectly, via the media. That may work for the day-to-day news delivery routine, but hardly so for the creation of a climate of openness for the EU view across the member states and beyond. The various information services may want to nuance that pattern, but convincing the European political powers of the necessity to change tone or to be receptive, rather than just directive, is in the present conditions virtually impossible.

Last, full knowledge of the impact of digital media and the translation of this expertise in novel working structures is not an easy task, especially in larger organisations such as the Union. As has been the case with the introduction of other so called general purpose technologies (railways, electricity), it will take decades before the digital infrastructure matures, its potential is translated into new ways of living and doing business, and a widespread acceptance of these innovations has set in. Our understanding of this process is inevitably in hindsight, growing while diligently working away. So logically, the first impulse has been everywhere to integrate digital media into the existing communication channels and practices. Only recently, more appropriate

initiatives valuing the unique nature and game changing character of the web are being undertaken, and the EU is no exception to this rule.

Now, what could be done to trigger a more coherent response to the imminent European communication challenges? In the remainder of this paragraph, I line up some alternative guiding principles, followed by a number of concrete measures in the final section of this chapter.

Target groups

The addressee of most EU information is usually defined as the European citizen, the ultimate beneficiary of all integration efforts. Of course there are other, more targeted communications for particular, well-defined interest groups, but they fall beyond the scope of this analysis since they do not matter so much for the overall, popular image of the EU and its organisational structure. The problem with the European citizen as information recipient is twofold: its role is too politically defined and the concept is too general. None of us identifies him- or herself with the notion of being a citizen; we develop and cherish much more tangible identities: sex, profession, location (nationality) to mention a few obvious ones. At this level we connect and do organise our likes and dislikes. The EU has never dug deep enough to reach that level, and should make a beginning with that effort.

Parallel to that, the Union must not focus on our, rather abstract responsibilities as a participant of a cross-border entity but should address the concrete needs we have in that frame: societal (the issue of safety), economic (consumer matters) or cultural (the language we speak and feel comfortable in). Emphasising the role the EU plays or can assume in this respect, will be more effective than repeated reminders that we ought to be one, some day. We are different and change regularly; a good communication policy takes that as a point of departure.

Channels

One of the first actions on the basis of the understanding that the entire news infrastructure will rapidly become IP-driven is the definition of a digital-first strategy. That will not be simple, because the present EU-services are almost exclusively based on the presence and use of classical media. Policies one can replace, but routines and organisations, that's another thing. Still, there is no other option and many organisations, media in the first place but also companies or national and regional governments are learning that lesson now the hard way.

They lose ground (regional authorities), shrink (newspapers) or even disappear (travel agencies) because of their lacking capacity to adapt to the new rules of the game. Of course it will not be a matter of total overhaul; both old and new information provisions have their strong points. What does matter is the question who (what) is leading and sets the conditions, and now our societies are changing to digital it should be this type of direct communication, no longer the indirect (mediated) information transportation system we grew up with.

A subset of this strategic choice is the required attention for horizontal, rather than vertical communication patterns. Traditional media are distribution-oriented: a single, fixed message trickling down from a central point to numerous receivers. Digital media on the other hand, are essentially exchange environments, bringing together a multitude of users with no predefined role as sender or receiver, but taking these positions reciprocally. These 'social media' are also opener, more informal, more fluid and less defined by status or hierarchy. Increasingly the societal agenda and public opinion takes shape in these virtual circles. Stakeholders such as the Union must see how they can fit in in a natural way. That will take time and is far more demanding than the incidental and rather opportunistic try outs of social media by European leaders and institutions we have witnessed so far.

Ultimately, the EU should consider creating its own information outlets. Again, that is a bold step to take. The Brussels-based media conglomerate is generally perceived (and acts) as a substantial power factor, you better don't fool around with. Establishing direct contact lines with the European electorates can easily be seen as a form of disloyalty and treated accordingly. Yet, in a disintermediating world, it is the right move to make. When commercial firms resort to direct sales and open webshops, national governments ask us to file our tax forms via the net, their local counterparts issue digital permits and hospitals cure us with online surgery, guided by electronic patient dossiers, it is only logical for a supranational organisation to operate in a similar vein of directness.

Not only is this technically possible, it is also in terms of message effectiveness becoming a superior alternative to mediated communication. With the web-instigated proliferation of information suppliers and content producers, major parts of the sense-making process can and are migrating from the media to the information users. In former times, the media acted as the principal gatekeepers for the public at large. Nowadays, individual information users can assume this role themselves. With the internet as a sheer limitless resort, their choice of sources has widened enormously, and this leads to a more diversified collection pattern including personal decisions on what matters and what

not, and how to weigh one view or stake against another. Within this frame, there is nothing against the appearance of the Union as an autonomous stakeholder, directly addressing its citizenry. Media consumers have no difficulty with that, and will evaluate the EU offerings on intrinsic value for their lives and positions. It will also free the professional media from their information transportation chores and offer new chances for the provision of overview, context and insight.

Message

This all brings us to the central theme of the message the Union should communicate. I will tackle this question from three different angles: the most appropriate issues, the chosen focus and the preferred tone of voice. These three aspects can only be separated artificially of course, but for arguments' sake it is done here nevertheless.

EU themes equal Brussels bureaucracy; that is the popular understanding of the European integration remit. To a large extent, the institutions have contributed to that image by organising their publicity almost entirely around the European meeting and action agenda. Evidently, this agenda, any institutional agenda, is headquarters-instigated and policy-oriented. But this type of information requires a basic understanding of the need for, nature, background and practicalities of European collaboration, in order to be placed in proper perspective. Exactly the latter part of the total communication effort has largely been neglected (or left to the national bureaus to deal with). And precisely that reduction to the decision-taking dimension (with the unavoidable highlighting of diverting values and interests and the spelling out of conflicting positions) makes the EU vulnerable for stereotyping and misrepresentation. A second tier of communication actions, aiming at the underpinning opinion basis, should get more prominence. This implies a higher level of priority for concrete issues and existing bottlenecks at the ground (as opposed to agenda items) and for practical, proven solutions (as opposed to project parameters).

Also the focus of EU communications should broaden. Now, information offerings are embedded in a sort of natural governor-to-governed setting, proclaiming the priorities, telling what is best, explaining which services are available and when, outlining what is legally acceptable and what not. Be it unintentionally, it puts the European citizen in a servant role. Yes, there are (online) consultations, but at the very fringe of the communication spectrum. They are a playground for vested interests and lobby groups, meticulously watched over by officials and it remains in the dark how and how much they impact formal decisions. The way to the top of the European framework

needs to be better paved and opened up to the larger public, and it should become an easy and accessible road to travel, with assistance where necessary and serious feedback upon arrival. That would be a formidable confidence building measure.

With the appropriate tone of voice, we arrive at the very heart of the matter. EU messages radiate authority; like it or not, it is the superstate speaking. In most cases (even when Commissioners are quoted – with few exceptions they remain shadows for the vast majority of Europeans) anonymous officials initiate the news. With unknown senders and abstract messages, the Union looks more like a distant universe in one of Spielberg's science fiction sagas, than what it actually is: the additional organisational layer that helps us stick together as a continent. That, at least, is the impression of the accidental by-passer most of us are.

The way out is becoming less authoritarian and more authentic. Instead of accepting the image of a huge and inhospitable bureaucracy, energy needs to be put in the gradual building up of a more human face, a standard precondition for regaining public trust. Well, that is easier said than done and will take a variety of measures and initiatives at all levels. Commissioners can invest less in publicising their policy speeches and more in bringing across their sources of inspiration. Officials should have more manoeuvring space and room to identify with dossiers and viewpoints. More communications can be made public on-site, meaning outside European capitals, and linked to regional dimensions. And insofar there is a shortage of travel time for key players, modern technologies come to the rescue. Social media allow for virtual contact and instant mingling with audiences. What counts is that EU spokespersons and other representatives leave their trusted positions and start to arrive at the comfort zones of the ones they want to connect to, physically or virtually. In short, the EU communication services have to transform from a 'crier', the proverbial shouting bellman at the street corner, into a 'cradle', a place worthwhile to dwell in the knowledge that you can be at ease and will be taken seriously.

APPEALING ACTIONS

The new communication paradigm sketched above is useful in terms of general understanding of the altered conditions and opportunities, but it needs to be translated into concrete actions to gain momentum and achieve practical relevance. The professional units responsible for EU communication have the expertise and are the first in line to realise this venture. It will however take a considerable amount of creative thinking from both inside and outside the institutional framework to dream up an

appealing action plan. As a first move, this chapter will conclude with five suggestions for renewal here and offer three ‘quick fixes’ in the concluding paragraph.

1. Draft a visionary communication charter.

Just another memorandum, white paper or research report will not do to attract the widespread high-level interest that is required to set a ground-breaking redefinition of EU communication policies in motion. These documents are needed but should remain in the background, and condensed in a relatively short but inspiring mission statement that summarises the leading principles and core message. It must indicate the direction, not the details of the revised policy. It might well take a politically engaged copywriter to do the job. A charter listing the main considerations for a new approach is one of the formats that can be considered. In other cases, complex subject matters have been simplified in the form of a canon, referring to a body of rules generally established as valid and fundamental in a given field, in this case the way the Union interacts through communication means.

2. Initiate informal lunch briefings

The communication apparatus of the institutions and its position vis-à-vis the political leadership have evolved over time but in essence did not change the last 50 years. In fact, the joint institutions never bothered to work out an overall communication strategy at all. As argued before, that should start to happen. It will however take a lot of effort to make everyone involved aware of the form and content of the new approach. The best possible way to introduce a novel strategy, convey the message and explain its background or future status, is personal contact. If set up as a series of relatively small-scaled events, the method will also allow for feedback, debate and adjustment to specific conditions. What works in and between larger organisations (and, by the way, is already practiced occasionally inside the Commission structure) are informal lunch meetings. This format adjusts to the existing daily working routines, doesn’t require preparation or travel time and keeps existing teams intact. Given its low profile and cost-effective character, the method can be maintained over a longer period of time and deployed for introductory sessions, fill-in exercises by various departments, assessment of first results and so on.

The informal briefing format is also a useful tool for cross-institutional talks about the EU public appearance. Because of the

identity and profiling dimensions of communications, the various institutions (Commission, DGs, Parliament, Council and Committee) have always chosen for their own take and separate publicity campaigns. But at the recipient side, the position European citizens happen to be in, this silo tactic created the impression of a fragmented and hesitant body, incapable of speaking with one mouth and not coherent enough to produce a consistent view or action line. Once the notion sinks in that for future digital communications, the dynamics lie pretty much at the user/consumer/citizen side, it should become self-evident that also the Union needs to come up with a unified voice, regardless of the different institutional roles/responsibilities and regional affiliations.

3. Install an EU narrative team

Invariably, when talking with media people about the EU as an object of news, one senses an atmosphere of despair. The verdict is that the Union is an impossible beat to cover: too complicated in structure and operations, no drama around, too abstract in its messages, impossible to personalise, too distant from the day-to-day life and so on. There is a lot to say about this qualification; it is true and not true at the same time. On face value, the EU is indeed a complicated, inaccessible superstructure, and there is little that can be done about it, given its scale, nature and mandate. But that doesn't mean that its communications should be a direct reflection of that profile. So far, a lot of effort has been put in making things as transparent and understandable as possible. However, that might work for a minority of motivated citizens, but the larger audiences (remember, these are the entire populations who at intervals have to visit the ballot box for European issues) are not affected.

The way forward, in my opinion, is the creation of a special unit with the sole task to produce the stories behind the dossiers. The EU is in bad need of an appealing narrative. And if it doesn't rise from the files, it should be created. One only has to be prepared to go beyond the factual level and unleash the force of imagination to capture the heart of the matter, make the abstract concrete and the general situational. That is a skill, one that is quasi absent in the Brussels headquarters but should be given a proper place. The story of European integration is worth being told in a more authentic manner, with all its pros and cons, successes and failures, regional differences and historical turning points. Branded as a human quest, rather than depicted as the plot of a raving bureaucracy. In a type of narrative people can easily identify with. It would be a token of self-confidence if for this crucial task, political insiders would mix with prominent cultural outsiders, people who have

a genuine ‘feel’ for Europe, a basic commitment that can be translated in an appealing and convincing message.

Once in place, a narrative team can also be called in for assistance during ongoing debates, to demonstrate more honesty, wit and self-confidence. Union representatives will be better perceived as straightforward when they also candidly address their weaknesses. Usually these are forcefully swept from the table. But the Union has failed and will inevitably not be successful in many instances, and it contributes to the stature of the EU workforce if this fact of life is readily admitted. Talking freely about your weak side is a token of strength, not a signal of surrender. It would bring back the EU in the domain of normality. Presently, the very opposite is happening. ‘Eurospeak’ has become a household name for the range of concealing phrases which are routinely used to mask differences of opinion, agreements which fail to occur or other mishaps. We hear, for example, constant regretful references to the ‘European democratic deficit’, where a simple ‘sorry, we failed you’ would be more appropriate and powerful. It is a signal of deep-rooted estrangement that nobody in the institutional management seems to understand and weigh the devastating effect of these euphemisms in terms of public trust.

4. Appoint roving officials, support roving reporters

If stories become more prominent, there should be information wells to tap from. Sources of inspiration are manifold across Europe, but scarce in the institutional office blocks. Developing the right kind of perspective goes better if one is confronted with the local realities of supranational ambitions. For that reason it makes sense to turn residential officials into roving inspectors, to help them become more inquisitive, and eager to monitor the real-life effects of their measures and guidelines. There is already a standing EU practice of job rotation, but just in between departments and offices. This horizontal mobility can be complemented with a vertical alternative, with regular excursions from the top to the base and back again. Adding this dimension will certainly enrich the Brussels workforce and will allow officials to become a feeding line and check point for the European narrative team.

A parallel shift in emphasis must take place at the media front. Over time, the Brussels-based press corps grew in numbers and importance. This group of journalists has become the main linking pin between the Union and the general public. If, as is argued here, the institutions have failed in their mission to engage the European peoples, this backfires also at the accredited correspondents and their home newsrooms. The details of this symbiotic relationship should be worked out elsewhere;

here it suffices to note that political and technological changes cannot leave the concerned media unaffected. Factual information transfer of the EU can be dealt with in direct exchange between institutional source and home-based foreign editors. An exclusive Brussels-based intermediary, while vital in former days, is quickly becoming more of an anachronism. Internet is busy axing the middlemen in virtually all societal and commercial sectors, and there is no reason to expect the media, especially the media, to be immune for this trend.

A reduced press corps, collaborating more intensely by sharing input, facilities as well as output, can take care of the unfolding agenda, meeting programme and official releases. A more important position, by contrast, should be given to roving reporters who go on-site to discover and disclose the complicated, unexpected, sometimes painful reality behind the European decision-taking procedures. Media are already moving in that direction. A Dutch TV-news programme successfully assigned a former correspondent to translate the European hot topics agenda into witness accounts from the most affected regions. It offers a revealing view on the daily practice of policy-making, it personalises the subject matter and is good, intriguing television on top of that.

5. Promote softborder journalism

The present financial crisis highlights the crucial role of regional, cultural differences, and the high price that has to be paid – literally- for the neglect of historical and cultural backgrounds. More than ever, this insight relates the uniformity of megaprojects such as the single currency and enlargement to the diversity of European nation states and regions. In order to succeed, trade-offs between central ambitions and decentred capacities are key. This understanding automatically leads to a plea for a media attention shift from the high-level gatherings to the on-the-ground practicalities. That is the arena where great ideas are really put to the test. The geographical locations where this change process can be best observed are the European borderlines. It is here that visions, traditions and political cultures meet, merge, co-exist or collide. Europe managed to remove the physical barriers but mental blockages are still alive and kicking at either side of former borders and far more difficult to do away with. Consequently, we learn a lot about the fate of European unification when we observe and follow these transition regions, with their wealth of daily cross-border activities and other forms of joint initiative.

I coin this form of journalism softborder, because it focuses on the blurring borderlines and all the echoes stemming from these regions. My regional newspaper, to give an example, runs a project called ‘Limburg

XXL', in which they exchange editors and produce joint copy with a neighbouring Flemish paper. Well edited and producing information that else never would have made the pages. Comparable experiences were gathered in a yearlong collaboration between German and French-speaking Belgian regional TV-programmes. No doubt there are or have been many similar media experiments in other parts of Europe. It would be worthwhile to devise a special EU support programme to make more of this type of reporting possible. The ad hoc try-outs demonstrated the potential and relevance, now these media efforts should receive an impulse of a more structural character.

A MATTER OF THE HEART

The present combat zone around the future of the single currency illustrates the multidimensional character of the European public sphere. Member states and non-member states, europhiles as well as eurosceptics, southerners and northerners, bankers, entrepreneurs, NGOs and consumers, they all have specific stakes, interests and consequently totally different views on what should be done as of now. There may be common elements, but certainly no common ground on which political decision-takers can bank.

There is however one comparable element in all these diverting views: its radical character in terms of consequences for the EU as a whole. That is a breach with tradition. In the past decades, one was in favour of a given measure or against its implementation, satisfied or unhappy with the Brussels way of handling dossiers, quarrelling over the size and pace of the steps taken. But now, the arguments move on to the issues of solidarity versus solidity, breaking or saving the Union, boosting or bursting the budget. In short, Europe and its fate have finally become a matter of the heart, with all the emotional undertones.

As a consequence, communications from the central apparatus, between institutions and with the European public at large become much more strategic than they have been before. All the sudden, sending out the right message turns out to be a pivotal part of the survival tactics of an endangered supranational structure. This development requires that communication, information and media are treated as such, and should receive targeted attention from the EU management as well as the operational means required for full blown, immediate action. There is no need for lengthy deliberations or preparations. To underline this point I will, in addition to the structural changes suggested in the previous paragraphs, outline three quick fixes which can be implemented directly.

1. Hijack the issue

I mentioned already the difficulty of communication policies belonging to everybody and at the same time to nobody in particular. All DGs, institutions and political leaders want to sing their own song but simply refuse to orchestrate their music properly. This choir badly needs a conductor. My guess is that the newly created European presidency, more than a single department or unit, is best suited for this role. It lacks operational decision power but can boost substantial status and attention. Nobody will feel threatened by an initiative from the chair, whose mandate it is anyway to oversee, foster and coordinate the European project. And the package of actions outlined here is clearly in the interest of all European citizens, whose keeper the president is supposed to be. In other words, the European president, together with a few other core players, has the right position to initiate a modernized communication practice which will be in line with today's realities, priorities and possibilities.

2. Tell the story

More than anything else, Europe needs a new and credible narrative. If the institutional framework cannot produce the right stories, why not resort to the professional wordsmiths? Representatives of the cultural elites across Europe regularly emphasize the pivotal role of an inspiring leading idea, but their plea is practically unheard. This type of neglect of your most prominent reviewers and trendsetters is risky. It is at the same time remarkably curable. Over the last months, I heard such diverse people as Umberto Eco, the famous Italian scholar and author, Rem Koolhaas, the renowned Dutch architect and Günther Wallraff, the German top writer, almost volunteer to become involved in a form of European publicity initiative. It would be relatively easy to bring them together and merge their talents. Such a prestigious group will not be overlooked and can unleash more, similar creative effort in favour of European togetherness as the most civilized alternative.

3. Challenge the media

Although 'Europe' should and can take the initiative, not everything has to be done by institutional parties. Preferably not, I would argue. The media can play their part and should be asked directly to contribute, on their own terms of course. Again, this process can start small-scale. To give one example: the newsroom of the Dutch current affairs TV-programme 'Nieuwsuur' is working on an interactive map that should

serve as an online interface to their archived reports about today's hotspots in virtually all member states. What it still takes is translation of the story lines into English, to make it viewable for a European audience. Once online, contributions from other TV-stations can enrich this database. For a pittance (financially speaking), Europe would get an up-to-date account of the concerns and solutions of European citizens. Made by independent media and made accessible by European institutions. With the right frame of mind, this concrete initiative can be followed by a variety of similar information actions, also in the audio and print domain.

This strategy to boost the communication dimension is above all a mentality issue. Financially, taking appropriate action for improved information is cheap, compared to the costs of upholding, for instance, a usurious banking system. If not decided for, that policy line could easily be understood as a forewarning of resignation, a signal to the international mind markets that a unified European response to the challenges of our times is not going to happen, and the speculation on its demise can begin. That would be a Greek tragedy indeed.

As a guideline, some recommended reading on European integration, new media characteristics and EU communication policies follows.

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