



2009 Essay competition

Communicating Europe: Is the EU getting through to you?

First place: Conor Slowey, Queen's University Belfast

In the wake of the 'No' votes on the Constitutional Treaty in France and the Netherlands, the Commission attempted to improve its communication of the role and value of the European Union in citizen's everyday lives. The creation of a Commission portfolio for communication was intended to generate policy and politically promote a better and more effective communication style, and was headed by Margot Wallström throughout its existence as a separate portfolio in Barroso's first Commission term.

Some good changes and policy initiatives were made, judging from Eurobarometer reports: the Autumn 2004 report detailed that the percentage of people rating their knowledge of the EU as 5 or less out of 10 (10 being the highest level of knowledge) was 73%,¹ whereas in Spring 2009 those who said they did not understand how the EU works was 48%.² However, the change in question and the lack of clarity of the impact of the Commission's policies versus the effect of the European elections and interest over the Lisbon Treaty mean that these figures are only a very rough guide. Having a portfolio dedicated to communication policy has not been a panacea for the problem, as has been recognised by Barroso, who has merged it with the Justice, Fundamental Rights and Citizenship portfolio in his second college.³

As an interested citizen and blogger,⁴ I have only occasionally felt the effects of the Commission's communication strategy. The times at which European issues become important (or at least more visible) in the average citizen's life, the debate is channelled through national mediums, be they political parties or forms of national media. Though this is by no means a 'bad' thing in itself – and it could be argued that the most immediate problem facing the Commission is simply that it does not happen often enough – the focus tends to be reduced to 'member state versus member state' or 'member state versus 'Brussels'' in character, rather than a clash of two or more policy perspectives which would stimulate a real debate.

The task to improve the communication of the EU is tough due to the linguistic diversity of the Union, fractured media market, lack of a strong European-level culture of party politics, and the technical nature of most of the policy issues, but the Commission can do more. European politics must become more engaging if they are to encourage participation by citizens and generate 'column inches' (or centimetres) in newspapers, and to aid this, the Commission must become more political.

European politics during the term of Barroso's first Commission has been nothing if not eventful: referendums on the Constitutional and Lisbon Treaties, the continued rise of climate change on the political agenda (along with high-profile international summits where the EU was expected to lead by example), important reforms of the energy market, and the onset of the economic crisis. These events may have brought the EU greater attention, but it remains important for the Commission to explain its role (and that of the EU's in general) clearly so that citizens are aware of what the EU can and cannot do, and are better equipped to participate more in the politics of the Union.

From the above Eurobarometer statistics (showing the levels of the lack of knowledge about the EU at 73% in 2004 and 48% in 2009), it appears that citizens feel more knowledgeable about the EU, but on closer inspection it becomes more debatable that this is what the figure really indicates. The 2004 question asked people to rate their knowledge out of 10, while the 2009 question simply asked participants if they knew how the EU worked. Those who considered their level of knowledge as being under 5 on the scale (10 being the highest) may, without any increased knowledge of the EU, still have said that they knew how the EU works. At the same time, the big issue for the EU in the period 2004-2009 was institutional reform, so public political debate was mainly focused on that topic.

So while it is hard to say how far the Commission's communication strategy (first laid out in 2005⁵) rather than a combination of referendums, national politics and European summits affected public awareness, there is also a distinction between knowing what the EU is and how it works, and being informed about what the EU does. If the goal of the Commission's communication strategy is increased public awareness of and participation in EU politics, then the turnout figures for the 2004 and 2009 European elections indicate that this has not been achieved, though the decrease in turnout has slowed somewhat, with the fall between 1999 and 2004 being 4.04%, compared to a 2.47% drop between 2004 and 2009.⁶ The Commission needs to focus on creating debate and informing the public of its policies.

In order to do this, the Commission must become more political. When the new president of the European Council, the High Representative of the Common Foreign and Security Policy and the new Commission was nominated last year, the media focus was on national interest and advantage, rather than the policy and political direction of the Commission or the EU as a whole.⁷ Constitutional and diplomatic topics do not engage a large number of people and seem remote to them as issues, and at the same time the Commission does not have the resources to engage the European electorate on so many issues in adequate detail successfully. By becoming more political and promoting policies in a manner similar to member state governments (e.g. articles reproduced in national newspapers), and encouraging a focus on political debate in the European Parliament (Barroso's 'Question Hour' is an example of a good initiative), the Commission can spark debate on policies which would encourage citizen participation, debate and interaction with MEPs on topics of personal interest. Increasing participation will also increase familiarity and knowledge of the EU's institutions and their working.

As a blogger (and before I started blogging), I get most of my information about the EU and EU news from the internet, and this is where I came into contact with aspects of the Commission's communication strategy. As a tool for engaging with and informing people, the internet is a great area for the Commission to focus, as it seems to have done. The internet potentially allows for communication between citizens and the Commission as well as between citizens for debate and campaigning. The Commissioners' blogs, apart perhaps from Margot Wallström's blog⁸, generally do not do a good job of being engaging and informative. This is understandable given the time and level of personal involvement required to make a good blog, and many national ministers face the same problems. On the other hand, the Commission's website⁹ has improved when it comes to navigation and the ease of finding information, though it is still time consuming to track the progression of legislative acts. The Commission's blogging involvement was more effective in backing the Think About It blogging competition for the European elections¹⁰, which encouraged blogging on European issues and stimulated some debate in the run up to the elections. However after the competition ended, the blogging activity largely faded away.

The Commission's strategies towards the internet and the mainstream media need to be complementary. People use the internet to follow up on things that interest them which they have come across through the mainstream media or through friends. Therefore the Commission should be focused on the accessibility of information through its website, and through social networking sites such as Twitter and Facebook. The easier it is to access information from the Commission, the more it will be used in debates and discussions through traditional journalism or by bloggers, and the more likely it will be that such debates are generated. Through the mainstream media, the Commission should aim to create awareness of its policies and to spark debates on them, which would encourage

interest in online resources such as the Commission's own resources as well as newspaper websites, discussion forums and blogs.

Very few people are interested in learning about a system they feel either does not affect them, or that they cannot participate in. Though consensus is an important element in the EU system, it does not encourage participation if it appears that legislation is produced without wide debate, so the Commission must be bold and ensure that its policies and vision are known as they pass through the Council and Parliament when debate matters. Arguing clearly for a policy position in the mainstream media and stressing the role of the Council and Parliament in passing legislation, the Commission opens itself up for more specific criticism and to the possibility of a more public legislative defeat, but it also encourages the image of the EU as an organisation of many parts and views that is worth participating in, whether in the traditional media, online or with MPs and MEPs. It is a tough but necessary task.

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