



## 2009 Essay competition

### Communicating Europe: Is the EU getting through to you?

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#### **Introduction**

Three basic principles are at the forefront of the Commission's communication strategy; summarised as 'to listen better, to explain better and to engage citizens at a local level.'<sup>1</sup> These principles were first stated in the 2005 Communication Action Plan<sup>2</sup>, hereafter 'the Action Plan', of the Barroso Commission and became the foundation of the current communication strategy. The Action Plan aimed to make communication 'a policy in its own right'.<sup>3</sup> It was followed by a Communication White Paper<sup>4</sup> and a joint declaration entitled 'Communicating Europe in Partnership'.<sup>5</sup>

Due to restraints only the mediums of the internet, the press and television will be examined in the discussion below. For each of these mediums the principles stated above shall be contrasted to context of the UK. Then proposals for future communication priorities shall be made.

#### **The Commission's approach**

##### *The Internet*

The EU website<sup>6</sup>, hereafter 'Europa', was intended to have 'a key role in the Commission's communication efforts'.<sup>7</sup> This reflects Eurobarometer analysis which found an increase in the use of the internet as a source of information on EU matters. In 2002 only 30% of citizens used the internet as a source of information about the EU;<sup>8</sup> this figure rose considerably to 68% by 2006.<sup>9</sup> This was recognised in the Commission's current Internet Strategy<sup>10</sup> where it concluded that „the Internet has come to play an increasingly important role in the daily lives of EU citizens“.<sup>11</sup>

The awareness of Europa amongst the UK population is small considering the potential of this resource. In 2006 only 21% of citizens had heard of Europa.<sup>12</sup> This proportion decreased in 2007 to merely 14%.<sup>13</sup> This reflects the situation in other Member States, as the Commission admitted the 'Europa site is not yet sufficiently well known to the majority of EU citizens'.<sup>14</sup> This consequently hinders Europa as a source of information, as many are unaware of the easily accessible resource. As an EU citizen, I was only made aware of Europa through my studies.

Therefore under the principle of explaining EU policy, the Commission's strategy is failing as people across Europe remain unaware of Europa. Despite the fact that Europa can be found easily if 'the EU' is searched on the internet this lack of awareness remains a problem, as citizens would have to take positive action in searching for information on the EU, rather than searching for policy areas in general terms.

In December 2007 Europa was made subject to a new Internet Strategy which described the internet as a 'cost-effective means of communicating with citizens across Europe'.<sup>15</sup> One aim of the Strategy was to 'restructure and improve' Europa so that people could participate in discussions and easily browse for information.<sup>16</sup> This restructuring, from an institutional to a user-friendly approach, is a

significant improvement to Europa. Once a language is selected the citizen is taken to the homepage which lays out topics logically. An example of a topic is the interactive section of Europa under the heading 'Take part!' which features prominently on the screen.<sup>17</sup>

The EU has its own YouTube channel, hereafter 'EUTube',<sup>18</sup> which was described as successful 'in giving the Commission a higher profile in the Internet environment'.<sup>19</sup> EUTube has a range of videos for laypersons that explain EU policies. On the 2nd January 2010 EUTube had 10,794 subscribers which is quite substantial for a YouTube account. Therefore, EUTube has brought the Commission closer to realising the three principles by providing a source of information on a popular site and the amount of videos are well organised under policy areas. However, one issue is that EUTube is only available in three of the 23 official languages of the EU; namely English, French and German. The number of videos available between these three languages also varies; with 247 videos in English, 119 videos in French, and 77 videos in German. This goes against the principle of engaging citizens at a local level as only three languages have access to this information source.

### *The Press*

The UK public obtains the majority of their information about the EU from the press and television.<sup>20</sup> The public perceive the press as being too negative towards the EU. In 2009, 48% of the public felt that the press are 'unnecessarily negative' in its reports on the EU.<sup>21</sup> This arguably reflects the fact that only 18% of the public trust the press.<sup>22</sup> Some academics have suggested that the press is unnecessarily critical of the European project. In the final lecture of the EURECO lecture series, organised by the University of Copenhagen, Professor Chantal Mouffe of the University of Westminster, a scholar of political theory, criticized the 'Murdoch press' in particular for being overly anti-European and abusing its position whilst responding to a question by the audience.

As a short pilot study, I examined three newspapers in order to determine the extent of press bias and the types of EU-related stories reported. I chose the Times, the Guardian and the Daily Telegraph as I felt these newspapers provide an adequate range on the political spectrum. The three newspapers were collected between the 16th December 2009 until the 29th December 2009 and followed similar issues. The climate talks in Copenhagen was a major story in this period, but there were little mention of the EU's role or what the Union proposed. Where the EU's proposals were mentioned, it was brief and at times written negatively. Another topic in the press was the Lisbon Treaty changes to the pay of MEPs and the increase in their staff allowance. On the 16th December 2009, the Times reported that MEPs 'awarded themselves' which is not factually true.<sup>23</sup> The Daily Telegraph also reported that 'at least 17 British MEPs' use the staff salary allowances to pay 'close family members' with no further details given.<sup>24</sup> Other stories with covertly biased elements are the stories reported by the Sunday Times<sup>25</sup> and the Daily Telegraph<sup>26</sup>, which respectively stated that EU regulations costs the UK £18billion a year and will cost £184billion by 2020. Such reporting is intended to create negative inferences towards the EU and in none of these examples did the journalist ask the Commission to comment.

Reasons behind such negative reporting are political and so it would be unlikely that the Commission would be able to do anything about this. The Commission has provided more information to the press on policies and high profile cases as part of its attempts to increase publicity of EU actions.<sup>27</sup> There is part of Europa dedicated to providing information to the press.<sup>28</sup> One such story was the competition law breaches of Microsoft relating to Windows Explorer which was covered numerous times by the newspapers in the sample. However, this negative reporting affects the principle of providing information as a false impression of the Union is being put forward by a significant information provider.

### *Television*

Television is perceived to be more objective in its coverage of EU matters when compared to the press.<sup>29</sup> However, after undertaking a short pilot study of BBC and ITV news coverage of EU matters in the same period above,<sup>30</sup> it is concluded that coverage remains sparse and vague. The EU's

involvement in the Copenhagen talks, a major story in this period, was again mentioned briefly in the reporting. Therefore, the two largest providers of information on the EU<sup>31</sup> do not adequately cover EU related news; merely concentrating on national, rather than supranational, issues.

### **Future communication priorities and Conclusions**

From the discussion above it is proposed that Europa and the internet should be the future focus of the Commission's communication policy. If people knew of these dedicated and accessible resources they would be more likely to use them. This could be accomplished by encouraging Europa and EUTube as educational tools for schools across the EU. The 'Teacher's corner' section of Europa is divided into different age groups and has potential in informing the next generation of EU citizens.<sup>32</sup> EUTube's significance should not be underestimated in increasing public involvement in EU policy discussions. However, the videos on the channel should become available in more official languages so that all EU citizens have access to them. Advertisements and presence on popular websites, such as social networking sites like Facebook and Twitter, could also provide more scope for people to discover Europa.

In order for communication policy to be effective it must be citizen-centred. Proposed strategies such as staff writing blogs<sup>33</sup> will not interest many unless they are relevant to citizens' everyday life. Not many will read such blogs if they are written with 'Eurojargon'. Human rights protection and EU citizenship should be priorities of future communication campaigns as the Lisbon Treaty has led to numerous changes that effect citizens. The Charter of Fundamental Rights is legally binding<sup>34</sup> and citizens are now able to bring Initiatives.<sup>35</sup> The limitations of the Charter should be communicated so that it does not bring misguided hope to some sections of the public. The Citizen's Initiative must be brought to the attention of the public so that it becomes a practical part of European democracy.

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