

Brussels is losing the public opinion battle

The EU institutions' approach to communicating with Europe's citizens has been a failure, says **Philippe Cayla**, the pioneering head of the Euronews TV channel. He sets out the policy revolution needed for Brussels to re-connect with the media and with public opinion

The problems of communication rather than of decision-making are the most striking feature of today's European crisis. Whereas decision-making is at the heart of politics, it is communication, particularly through the media, that determines popular support in a democracy. To put it bluntly, Europe has failed in terms both of its communication methods and their content.

The European Commission has a yearly communications budget of some €500m at its disposal. Each commissioner, or to be more precise each Directorate-General (DG), is allocated a proportion of that budget irrespective of the Commission's priorities. DG Communication, which is responsible for coordinating the overall communication budget, is allocated a higher proportion amounting to 20% of the total.

The Commission's approach has four fundamental weaknesses: a lack of strategy, excessive centralisation, the predominant use of English, and its focus on print.

The Commission at times communicates on unimportant directives, a good example being the recent directive on toilet flushing mechanisms. That casts doubts in the minds of media and political commentators that are quickly relayed to the general public.

The EU commissioners themselves rarely give press conferences in person, which suggests that they must be unaware of the political importance of communication. The reforms that followed the humiliating resignation of the Santer Commission in 1999 over allegations of corruption have resulted in a system under which Directorates-General sign contracts which are binding on the



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Commission, and thus hold the real power. The commissioners themselves sometimes appear to be relegated to the role of spokespersons for the DG they are responsible for.

The president of the Commission occasionally provides summary communications on the “State of the Union”, but these overviews are often hijacked by EU heads of government, whose perspective on the issues is purely national. At the same time, co-operation between the EU’s institutions leaves much to be desired. The faces of Europe – the presidents of the Commission, the Council and the Parliament – often express diverging and even contradictory views.

The Commission’s communication efforts in the member states are aimed at the general public, but are based on a double fallacy: first, that the EU’s member governments are best placed to explain European policy to their own citizens, and secondly that commissioners, who have been nominated by their own member state are also able to make a substantial contribution to promoting the EU at home.

On the first point, it’s clear that member states are generally unwilling to play the game; every meeting of the European Council sees EU national leaders giving their own versions of events. They put their own policies forward in a positive light and blame Brussels for whatever they failed to negotiate successfully or for outcomes that don’t suit their interests.

The second one is that on the whole commissioners simply cannot live up to a national communications role. Quite apart from having limited abilities in this area, they can’t be in Brussels and in their own country at the same time.

The Commission’s communications in the member states clearly leaves much to be desired. The Commission has information offices in the national capitals, but its delegates lack the resources they need, and are not given much air-time in national public debates. The result is that debate on European policy stays for the most part in Brussels.

The majority of European citizens are in no position to debate in a foreign language. Research suggests that only 5% of non-English speakers are capable of debating issues in English, and that’s particularly true when English native speakers are part of the discussion. In other words, English-only communication will fail to reach 95% of non-native English-speakers, and is likely to irritate the majority.

English has secured a place as the ‘lingua franca’ in European business circles, in university studies and for research. But political communication should not be limited to a single language. Politics affects all of Europe’s citizens, not just the cosmopolitan elite that speaks English. Worse, perhaps, is the fact that English is the medium for a British political culture that is hostile to European integration. The use of English cannot fail to fuel the fires of euroscepticism, and the long-term rejection of European integration. Commentaries written in English tend to be coloured with the bias inherent in the Anglo-Saxon culture. In my view, the rise of euroscepticism is directly correlated to the increased use of English in communications from the Commission. There needs to be a return to multilingualism, and in the words of Umberto Eco, “translation is the language of Europe.”

Visitors to one of the Commission’s “Europe Direct” centres in a national capital will notice well-located, large and well-appointed offices, substantial numbers of staff with little to occupy them, tons of documents, and few if any visitors.

When it comes to TV, the Commission uses the EbS (Europe by Satellite) system launched almost 20 years ago to provide television networks with content, but has no television presence apart from Euronews, the only European news channel, and which it has to be said is funded in dribs and drabs. The official websites of the Commission and the Parliament certainly lack vitality, and the Commission’s website lacks uniformity and leaves far too great an autonomy to each DG, which leads to widely varying levels of quality. The use of social networking sites is a recent development, but still occurs only sporadically.

Desirable as it is, a move to a less technocratic and more political EU communications strategy would be nothing short of a mini-revolution. First, the strategic nature of communication should be affirmed by centralising the communications budget under the authority of the president of the Commission. Only the president has the overview needed to determine the themes and timing of Commission communications. Spokespersons, currently reporting to both their own commissioner and to the president, should report to the president only. Such a change would show Brussels that communication policy should reflect the political priorities of the day, not the administrative concerns of the civil servants.

Second, the role of the Commission’s delegations in the member states should be reinforced. National delegates of the Commission should have greater power and more resources placed at their

disposal, and they should report directly to the Commission president and the College of commissioners. They should set out for them the current state of public opinion in each country.

As much as €250m yearly, half of the total communications budget, should be allocated to the EU's communication effort in each member state, adjusted to population, to give delegates the resources they need to make an impact on the local media. And the Commission should base its communications policies on statistics that measure the state of public opinion in each country to help ensure they get the most important messages out.

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The principle of multilingualism should be fully respected. At present, the European Parliament is the only EU institution that offers fully multilingual debates and communications. It may well be acceptable for the Commission to use the three working languages of English, French and German for its day-to-day work, but all documents should be published simultaneously in all 24 official languages to ensure that the media in each country are on an equal footing. Commissioners should express themselves in their native language only, with simultaneous interpretation into all the other EU languages.

Another key point is that the EU's communications should move away from printed media into radio, television and social networks. The EU institutions' own publications, which tend to be cast aside and left in the dustbins, should be kept to a minimum and in many cases made available via download only.

As to the content of the EU's communication materials, a revolutionary approach to the reform of EU communication policy is now needed. At present, the European Union's communications are dominated by discussion of macroeconomic issues. And although these issues are important in terms of the health of the European economy, the Commission leaves itself open to two forms of criticism. First, only a fairly small minority of citizens have a real understanding of macroeconomic policy – the majority view the discussion as bureaucratic gibberish. Secondly, the real solutions to macroeconomic problems are mainly in the hands of EU member

governments, either individually or collectively, so communication by the Commission tends either to reflect decisions taken by the Council, or to express its frustration with its own limitations.

The complex nature of EU-level problems, and the difficulties of finding solutions which often need the unanimity of member states, makes communication particularly problematic. Either European citizens don't understand the issues, or they can't understand why governments are unable to reach agreement. Instead of targeting the self-seeking and even mercenary attitudes of the member states, the Commission which is itself so often made a scapegoat, stands accused of incompetence and mismanagement.

The Commission therefore needs to go back to the drawing board on the content of its communication material, and focus on developing a feeling of belonging to the European community that gives people a greater sense of European citizenship. Twenty years on from the Maastricht treaty, European citizenship is still a vague and little-known concept for Europeans, and has instead come under fire from nationalist and populist politicians of every shade. Yet European citizenship is important, and Europe's citizens benefit from a significant number of rights of growing importance. That is demonstrated in reports published regularly but which are nevertheless little-known.

The Commission's policy is to strengthen the rights of all Europeans when travelling or living abroad in the EU. But its current approach is too focused on economic issues, with political rights falling by the wayside. Promoting awareness of the importance of European citizenship is an important way of ensuring popular commitment to the European ideal – something that's lacking in so many ways today. Working on the political aspects of European citizenship is undoubtedly the best way Brussels can do justice to the EU's communications and to its power to attract and get people involved.

In the days of the Roman Empire, all hoped to be granted the honour of becoming *civis romanus*. Today, we are all *civis europeus*, but we don't have the same awareness or pride as did the Romans. The Commission must foster that same feeling of pride, and should encourage us to wear, if not purple and gold, then the blue of a great empire of peace. ■

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