

2 Communicating Europe: political steps to facilitating a public sphere?

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Abstract : In the EU, the creation of a European public sphere has been confused with distinct goals of political mobilization for electoral purposes. The strategies developed to advance the sense of belonging have been idealistic, insufficient and muddled owing to lack of political vision and resources. The chapter contextualises this with reference to the legacy of invisibility and transparency. It outlines the reasoning behind strategic communication in the shape of Plan D, and concludes with the Lisbon Treaty's citizen initiative. The discussion moves on to explore this within the development of media policy in the polity, a factor that is closely related to the emerging, ambiguous and volatile relationship between the EU and the media in Europe.

Keywords: Commission, transparency, invisibility, media policy, democratic legitimacy, citizens' initiative.

1. Introduction

‘Citizens must be able to understand the system so that they can identify its problems, criticise it, and ultimately control it’ *Final report of the Convention on the Future of Europe's Working Group IX on Simplification*

This chapter discusses the confusion in the EU about the creation of a public sphere. This stems from mixing up distinct goals relating on the one hand to mobilising electoral support, and the assumptions underlying how this can be

done, and prompting the development of a sense of self-identification by citizens as EU citizens attached to the EU. This is sometimes termed emotional support for the deliberately vaguely defined goal of European unity. It is related to the idea of socio-psychological community formation and specifically addresses the Commission's (in)capacity to do so. It is closely related to efforts to encourage – and the ideas behind – a European public sphere through the media in the continent. The mediation of the European project towards the citizens and its function as a communicator of the polity has been seen as a political and cultural goal by the European Parliament and parts of the European Commission for a long time. Nevertheless, the process of creating a mediated public sphere has been unstable and defined by the very role of the polity. Within this, the development of media policy as an instrument of political will has been ridden with conflicts, tensions, and questionable decisions that have compromised the pace of political integration.

This chapter explores two things. First, it traces the attempts by the ill-equipped Commission to capture public attention and encourage people to internalise and identify with the European project. This was not about getting the people to 'love' Europe as Euro-sceptic media sometimes suggested but something more ambiguous and ambitious: to create the kind of affective support for common goals and structures that are taken for granted within states. Second, it discusses the development of European media and communication policy, in order to situate efforts for the political goals of integration through communications within the conflicting, to a great extent, policy frameworks of a predominantly neoliberal understanding of the role of the media. The chapter discusses the contradictions between prioritising the economic character of the media, leading to undesired effects of concentration and populism, and the need for a democratic and engaged media in the construction of a European public sphere. Both goals of a common community and a common symbolic space were especially problematic given the original design and purpose of the EU, and the fact that the European Communities were not supposed to evolve into something approaching a 'state'. The chapter begins by looking at the problematic position of the Commission, how discourse on transparency was captured and a strategy for communicating with citizens developed.

2. Institutional arrangements and the Commission's neutrality

The Commission was originally designed to be a neutral, non-partisan apolitical, invisible 'motor' of integration dissociated from direct contact with citizens. It lacked the expertise and manpower to engage in public relations and was debarred by the EU treaties from the kind of direct engagement with the public that would make it and the EU a visible face of an alternative way of facilitating distributive politics to those of national governments. Its brief was simply to provide neutral information about the EU. Typically this meant providing paper based documents that were translated into some or all of the official languages. Ideology and argument were to be left to MEPs, the voice and champions of 'the people'. The first elections to the European Parliament (EP) in 1979 revealed just how problematic this was. Moreover, mere cooperation between the press and information offices of the Commission and the EP both in Brussels and in the then nine member states was highly sensitive and deeply problematic

The role of the Commission press and information offices in the member states was constrained by a basic bar on them interfering in the domestic affairs of a member state. This meant that they were on the one hand information repositories and on the other, a kind of diplomatic post. [Lodge 1982]. Their number grew as the EU expanded and they also existed outside the EU. Their roles and potential came to be realised much later as the Single European Act expanded the legitimate scope of EU member government cooperation into the political sphere of external relations, and an embryonic EU foreign policy and diplomatic action service began to take shape. That project is outside the remit of this chapter but it tainted the evolution of the Commission's role vis-à-vis citizens at the level closest to them – that is, within their own member state.

2.1 THE LEGACY OF INVISIBILITY

The original intention for the Commission to be apolitical, above national politics, objectively and neutrally determining policy proposals in the name of

the common good to be submitted for approval by the Council of Ministers (and following subsequent treaty revisions also by the European Parliament) coloured its capacity to engender citizen interest in and respect for European integration. It was typically castigated as a distant, monolithic, faceless bureaucracy: invisible, intangible and unintelligible. The core Commissioners were often unknown to national MPs, elites and the public. Their appointment by national governments was opaque, and scape-goating the Commission was a common tactic of governments introducing unpalatable measures at home. The Commission originally did not have the option of being the external citizen-friendly face of the EC: national governments would not have tolerated it being so and constitutionally, it was constructed as a 'faceless' technocratic 'motor of integration'. It was essential for them for the Commission to be absent from public debate, such as there was, over EC/EU policy. Structurally, organisationally, constitutionally and procedurally for many years the Commission and the European Parliament, and their national information offices, suffered ab initio from the lack of a conduit for communicating European matters to people living in the EC/EU [Lodge 1982; 1996; 2005; 2010]. The European Parliament too was seen as a potential threat, a rival to national parliaments and, considering the initial limited scope of integration and the deliberate construction of a parliament qua assembly devoid of legislative power but bent on having influence over policy, a potential nuisance. Its failure to exercise its communication function, as Grand Forum, was especially marked when trying to mobilise voters to participate in Euro elections. Diverse national electoral procedures, rules, funding of political parties, regulations on political advertising, national electoral boundaries, the proscription of cross-border Euro electoral constituencies, election eligibility criteria and the initially trivial 'consultative' role of the European Parliament dampened whatever public awareness of and interest in engaging in EU civil and political society there may have been. What is interesting is that the subsequent strategies of the EU Commission should still hinge on the matter of mobilising voters: albeit to vote in referendums (where constitutionally prescribed) on the future capacity of the EU to act.

2.2 THE TACTIC OF TRANSPARENCY AND THE MEDIA QUESTION

The legacy of the 1979 Euro election – campaigning with ‘neutral’ information tarnished the development of tools to engage with citizens. Whereas those national government information offices had a legitimate place in the provision of information to inhabitants, and in some were coupled with an explicit obligation to provide a form of civic, political education and information for their citizens, this was not universally so. The alternative accompanying route was to surface in the push for greater legislative transparency in the EU. This started out as an administrative matter of public access to documents: ICTs made e-access and e-service delivery the norm. eparticipation and egovernance were tagged onto this and to the political debate about the nature and contours of post-parliamentary democratic possibilities in a supranational system where formal and substantive democracy is contested. Advocacy of transparency implied that communication about ‘Europe’, what the EU was ‘doing’ was essential to sustaining democratic governance: the strategic use of transparency conflated it with constitutionalisation in the EU, and with normative values and ideals central to accountable, representative, democratic practice and civil society.

‘Transparency’ therefore challenged inter-institutional relations, demanded a rethink of the degree of accountability and democratic legitimacy that could be inferred from existing practice and legitimised the idea of direct and indirect, open communication with citizens [Lodge 2005:267]. Information provision and making information accessible – by whatever appropriate means – was thereby legitimated. From the time of the referendums on the Single European Act to the various Single European Market campaigns of the 1990s, the Assizes, the Convention on the Future of Europe and all public information and mobilisation campaigns since, the issue of providing information on the premise that an informed citizen is more likely to be positively inclined towards European union has coloured the campaigns to make citizens aware of the EU, its benefits and the desirability of ‘engaging’ in it. It is not surprising that this led to the development of an idealistic ‘communication strategy’ that, in many states, tried to compensate for national governments’ and political elites’ chosen absenteeism on things European. The problem was that its resourcing

and above all its target was so diffuse as to render the goal unattainable in the short to medium term. In short, ‘communicating Europe’ could not be expected to deliver the anticipated short term goal: a Europe of sufficiently interested, informed, responsive and mobilised ‘citizens’ deliberating on and, crucially, supporting integration and EU developments in the face of national governmental recalcitrance.

Around the same time, and starting at the aftermath of the first European Parliament elections in 1981, the role of the media in shaping the political future of the Community became the object of a long standing debate initiated by members of the European Parliament. The 1981 Hahn Report was the first document to clearly situate the media in a central position with regard to the relation between the polity and people within its borders. Alarmed by the emergence of phenomena of ownership concentration and transborder capacity for broadcasting bypassing national laws, the Parliament called for a European media policy. The media were regarded as potentially powerful actors in the process of integration, yet their development in the European space was largely left in the hands of private companies or state monopolies. As early as the beginning of the 1980s, the media landscape in Europe was changing rapidly: new satellite technology meant that content was bypassing official broadcasting standards in many countries; private media companies and the electronics industry were interested in the opening of new markets and were campaigning for the ‘liberalisation’ of the media based not on the right of the citizen to be informed but on the sovereignty of the consumer to choose. These developments took place in an era characterised by the effects of an economic crisis and the suggested failure of Keynesian economics. The most important ‘lesson’ of the time was that the ‘individual’ knows how to pursue matters in the marketplace in his/her own interest: the State therefore had no place in intervening through regulation. Communication was also such an area where the ‘nanny’ state ought to withdraw.

In this climate, the tactic of constitutionalising transparency was one parallel to the echoes of the benefits of the market and its advantage in turning unaccountable decisionmaking authorities, states, actors into transparent ones through the power of changing the role of publics into consumers. The logic was of course that if something is not popular then it is not necessary- or in

other words, consumers (whether these may be actually ‘political’ or economic, since relations are determined based on their transactional value) determine the market. In the political realm, a conflation of ‘transparency’ with legitimacy by ‘supplying’ the political market with what it ‘demanded’ (information) was an almost logical development, at least for MEPs and politicians wanting to see voters go to the polls. For the Commission too, Eurobarometer poll findings that people did not vote because they claimed they had insufficient information, legitimated a change in the role of those responsible for providing public information, whether statements by the Commission ‘Spokesman’ or through information booklets about how the EC functioned. The rise of private media in the European geopolitical and cultural spaces at the same time succeeded precisely because they were presenting themselves as ‘free’ media that provide information as demanded by the publics (now their customers) in contrast to the existing, largely state owned or controlled media, which had a reputation of presenting information with certain degrees of bias. Openness and therefore transparency functioned as a discourse that informed not only the policy directions of the EU in its relation to its people but also was claimed to be the guarantee brought about by the existence of non state owned or public media. Arguably, too, the controversial nature of the idea that people within the EC should have the status of ‘citizens’ worried many national governments who construed this as a subversive idea and as further evidence of an erosion of national sovereignty and authority. When ‘citizenship’ was to be eventually confirmed by subsequent treaty changes, it was to be made dependant on the co-terminous possession of citizenship and nationality of one of the member states: a resident or migrant had to acquire them in order to enjoy European citizenship and the political rights and economic benefits accruing from them under the single market.

2.3 MAKING AND COMMUNICATING WITH ‘CITIZENS’

Communicating with EU citizens is associated with the need to boost popular awareness of the existence of the EU and of its personal direct benefits (such as transfrontier mobility and the Four Freedoms of movement of goods, services,

persons and capital of the Single Market). Moreover, so long as the EC/EU's policy competences were severely circumscribed, it was unrealistic to contemplate initiatives that went beyond 'selling' the EU project, however, transitory that might be. Moreover, since culture has typically been seen as a policy area that even in federal systems remains an exclusive competence of regions and lower levels of government, it could not be an obvious target for EU action until European integration had progressed and deepened. Even then, cultural policy was legitimized under different frames: unity and diversity, labour mobility and training, and cherishing the retention of individual cultures as the EU enlarged. Therefore, there is a proliferation of indirect -and cultural [Sarikakis 2004; Sassatelli 2002] - approaches to mobilising emotive, affective, latent European identification with things European derived from labour mobility projects. These paved the way to creating identifiable symbols of European unity for individuals. These ranged from the EEC's adoption of the Council of Europe's blue and yellow starred flag, to harmonising documents (in the legitimate name of operational efficiency gains) such as the single administrative document to simplify and expedite cross border transit of goods, to common documents for citizens, from driving licences to eHealth cards and the adoption of a common colour for an 'EU' passport. Tiers of other cultural artefacts have grown simultaneously with advocacy of a 'human union', socio-economic convergence and affinity, and the shared aspects of history and destiny of EU 'citizens': the European 'anthem' – Beethoven's Ode to Joy, the EU Youth Orchestra, EU sports teams, EU actions to combat poverty, improve health, promote gender equality and awareness for minorities etc manifest in things like the 'years of x, y, z' programmes, exchange programmes, town twinning, joint ventures, European information offices, one stop info shop for citizens, Europe Direct, emergency phone numbers and so on. These have emerged as the EU's policy competence has grown and been reflected too in the increasing number of EU 'agencies' humanitarian aid (ECHO), border control (Frontex), and Fundamental Rights Organisation, for instance. All these partly 'decorative', as sometimes is often seen, partly structural changes in the EU's public persona and relation with its citizens are also underlined by the desire to appear more often and in more positive terms in the media and mediated public debates in nation and member states. The problem of absence of European

Union related news and especially the ‘positive’ side of the EU impact in the lives of citizens has helped promote a problematic relation between the polity and the citizens, at least as far as the communications media are concerned in many member states. This relation is often characterised by a lack of awareness of EU policies or impact of them in everyday lives, the role and functions of institutions or the rights of European citizens, issues that successive versions of Eurobarometer seemed to have pointed to.

Hence, efforts to ‘communicate with citizens’ are rooted in anxiety over the fate of treaty reforms following negative referendum outcomes at the time of the Maastricht treaty negotiations in 1990-91. This led to efforts to address the ‘democratic deficit’ in the EU, which were to become intertwined with initiatives on transparency, democracy and subsidiarity and an inter-institutional declaration on this, with a view to making them closer to citizens, in 1993. Much of this focused on overcoming the secrecy in the Council of Ministers by opening some of its sessions (when it acted in legislative mode), improving its openness to the press, and generally edging it towards greater sharing of legislative authority with the European Parliament: co-decision was still on the horizon. In short, institutional reforms were at the heart of efforts to make the EU visible and transparent. They centred on the body representing the member states’ interests – the Council of Ministers – and the democratic deficiencies arising from its practices. That inevitably linked the issues to the European Parliament’s powers, authority and place in the EU as the people’s representative.

Interestingly, the fate of the European Parliament in its evolution to a co-legislature has paralleled the development of a media and cultural policy in the EU. From the early voices calling for European action in the field of culture and media to the 1990s, the decade was characterised by a constant political battle to bring to the forth citizens’ interests to the polity’s decision making agendas as represented by the European Parliament. Reactions to the EP’s successive reports and resolutions, calling the Commission to design legislative frameworks for culture and media that would deal with the challenges posed by new communication technologies were rejected for many years on the basis that the EU had no jurisdiction in a clearly national matter, and the EP had no power of legislative initiative: ‘own reports’ were no more than that. The discursive

battle over the development of a media policy went hand in hand with the institutional question. It also went hand in hand with the question about European integration: what kind of integration, 'how much' integration, in which direction?

By the end of the 1980s, in 1989, the European polity had one major piece of legislation in the field of media and culture to show: the Television Without Frontiers Directive, the directive that put the Single European Market for the media in motion. By the new millennium, the EU had expanded its jurisdiction to the field of culture and the media in two directions: in terms of providing a protective and supporting framework for the development of cultural and media goods and in terms of promoting cultural priorities, the EU's approach has concentrated on symbolic, albeit of significance, acts of support for media and culture as areas central to the cultural, political and social life of the union. Through funding support for various educational and training programmes, the EU sought to address the concerns of those who argued that a market approach of the media and culture cannot cover for the needs of democracy and social development. However, the largest part of the EU's approach is focused on market-centred aims. By the 2000s, the European media landscape has been intensively liberalised and radically transformed, dominated by a few media moguls, while the public service broadcasting systems have gone under multiple assaults as to their *raison d'être* and the legitimacy of state -public monies- support [Chakravartty and Sarikakis 2006; Iosifidis 2010]. The new status quo has at its heart the challenging of the meaning of 'citizen' which is associated with certain forms of public media and their special role in providing for comprehensive content, universality of access and innovative programming. Instead, the market logic promoted a different role for the public, that of consumers to replace the political aspects of active citizenship. It is obvious that at this point, the priorities and policies of the EU as a polity desiring communication with citizens and a decisionmaking organisation with neoliberal goals, clash with each other. Various successive European Parliament documents have made extensive references to the effects of that.

From 2001 onwards greater effort was made to create a coherent communication strategy, complete with professionalisation of communication, for the EU. This fed the 2002 plans for *Your Voice in Europe* in the context of

the Commission's *Interactive Policy Making initiative* and its attempts to introduce minimum standards on consultation and better regulation with a view to improving EU governance. Although the role of national governments in making the EU more accessible and visible to citizens was underlined, in part with an eye on the 2004 Euro elections, turnout was not significantly boosted. In October 2005, the Commission embarked on a process to modernize its communication practices and engage with citizens on the EU's future. In February 2006, the Commission adopted its White Paper on a European Communication Policy. This identified five action areas in partnership with other institutions, governments and civil society, and stressed the importance of anchoring the right to freedom of information in the EU and national institutions, and developing a *European Charter or Code of Conduct on Communication*. A special website on Europa elicited citizens' views. It proposed empowering citizens through the provision of tools to improve civic education, create virtual meeting places and strengthen the links between citizens and institutions. While it still called for improving work with the media, principally by exploiting new technologies and the internet, it dropped the idea of an EU news agency found in earlier drafts but referred to 'upgrading Europe by Satellite'. In this period, the role of the media in the newly conceptualised strategy for communication has been present in its absence: on the one hand, suggestions to boost EU mediated communication with its citizens was largely confined to the media the EU itself would set up (the Europa website or Parliament TV for example) while it seemed that efforts to engage in a meaningful shaping of the media in the European space have been abandoned. The reasons are manifold: on the one hand, 'interfering' with the media raises strong and loud reactions by the media industries in the form of coverage in the news media; the media industries, as they are connected to the electronics and culture industries, constitute a significant part of the industrial lobbying in Brussels and are very well organised in representing their interests. These are not always identical to citizens' or the polity's interests. Furthermore, in the Commission, the media are largely seen as market actors and economic factors, which, given the principles of *laissez-faire*, are not to be interfered with. These are some of the difficulties explaining why at the design stage of a communication strategy of the EU, little work has been aimed directly at the

communication with the media, although of course - through the press offices and availability of information to and support of journalists - the EU has enhanced its communication mechanisms impressively. All these efforts have one common denominator - the goal to enhance and cultivate a climate of transparency, which was seen as the root of 'distrust' and misinformation in the communicative relation of the polity with citizens.

3. Communicating with citizens

3.1: THE LEGACY OF TRANSPARENCY

The tactic of transparency rested on two premises (i) that of the democratic need for inter-institutional reform in favour of making the Council publicly accountable for its decisions, primarily through legislative power-sharing with MEPs, and open sessions; and (ii) publicity for the EU about its work. The two directly challenged the supremacy of national governments to determine the pace of integration by requiring them to be more open about their own decisions in the EU and permitting others – over and above MEPs and political parties - to engage directly with member states' citizens. The problem for the EU, however, remained one of the inappropriateness of the mission and the tools available to the Commission to act as champion of the EU. The European Parliament remained constitutionally the voice of the people. What it lacked, and where a strategy of communication could assist it, was in becoming the guardian of public trust in the legitimacy of EU policy outcomes, the accountability, transparency and responsiveness of public policymakers, as well as citizen proclivities to trust their European neighbours [Niedermeyer, Westle, Risse, Bruter, Kanter, Haller]. Coming to that point required greater openness about political decisionmaking and priorities, frankness about the EU's strengths and weaknesses and recognising that greater awareness about the EU among citizens did not necessarily imply commitment to its goals and greater support for it. Trust building required communication and responsiveness.

3.2 COMMUNICATING WITH CITIZENS: THE CHALLENGE OF RESPONSIVENESS

Building sustainable trust in the European project to validate and sustain EU democratic practice (and the European Parliament's quest to become a genuine legislature) required something more than opening consultative channels with civic society and developing programmes to retain and celebrate cultural and linguistic diversity. The EU's constitutional complexity inhibited and still compromises trust building. It is doubtful that governments want to empower citizens (very) much where EU policymaking is concerned. However, 'empowering citizens' and overcoming a trust deficit grew in importance following the rejection of the draft EU constitution by French and Dutch voters and subsequent rejection of the Lisbon Treaty by the Irish. Further EU enlargement adds to the underlying problem. The negative votes and falling turnout at Euro elections illustrates that information giving per se, transparency initiatives, boosting the European Parliament's legislative power, the well-intentioned 'listening to citizens' advocacy of the Convention on the Future of Europe, the promotion of the idea of netizens online and subsequent Intergovernmental Conferences have not (yet) resulted in people seeing themselves as active EU citizens and identifying with the EU's political goals.

The period of 'reflection' may have boosted national and Euro self-identity among growing elite. It had not and does not necessarily translate into political action in the form of higher turnout at Euro elections or support in referendums on EU treaty reform in specific member states. This was recognised after the 2004 Euro elections by the Commission. The attempt to address this was outlined in the creation of a Commission portfolio on Institutional Affairs and Communication strategy. This supplemented the Commission's 'Spokesman' role. It led to the Commission's 'Plan D'. Making the EU responsive and encouraging citizens to think and act as such informed this. The underlying democratic values of European Union apparent since the 1950s were reinvigorated and the potential tools of e-participation seen somewhat overoptimistically as a panacea to disinterest, disaffection and disengagement from traditional political processes.

The European Parliament responded to the Commission initiatives and interestingly insisted that any strategy complement national activities and be structured through national, local and regional media, align with and complement national public spheres rather than seek to create a competing one. It argued that ‘better communication cannot compensate for inadequate policies’ but could contribute to better understanding of the policies implemented [EP 2006]. It asked for stronger reference to the principles and values enshrined in the Charter of Fundamental Rights, which outlines citizens’ rights to information. It reiterated MEPs’ prerogatives freely to address citizens, and noted the importance of a Constitution for Europe to make the Union more political and democratic ‘and capable of attracting citizens’. For MEPs, this implied that the Council, too, had a political responsibility to do so – something that many national governments and MPs had singularly failed to do in the past [EP 2006 pt 13]. For them, a communication strategy based primarily on managing public affairs and administering them in partnership with ‘stakeholders’ served them well. Moreover, communication that was as anodyne as possible and smoothed over division, facilitated bargain-striking, de-political technocratic language and processes (such as comitology and Coreper’s ‘A’ and ‘B’ points) cooperation and progress and averted public, as opposed to niche market ‘spheres’, mobilisation of opposition that could challenge goals the member governments sought to realise. Media coverage of the EU remained primarily event driven. The tools and spaces of communication lacked a dynamic civic or cultural underpinning.

3.3 MEDIATED PUBLIC SPHERES IN NEW MEDIA LANDSCAPES: A LOST CAUSE?

By the time the EP began to persistently ask that that communication links with the European citizen be improved, and effectively that the Charter of Fundamental Rights become central in this communication, other parallel and longstanding claims had been put forth with regard to the democratisation needs of a new, de facto and de jure media status quo in Europe. Especially in

the newer member states and accession countries, it quickly became evident that inability effectively to control the market resulted in high degrees of ownership concentration of the media, excessive populism, regressive content based on misogyny, nationalism and ethnocentrism [European Federation of Journalists 2003]. In other words, the structural changes in the media landscape brought with them profound qualitative changes that are generally unfriendly to critical thinking. How is this relevant to the EU's attempts to construct its own communicative process and change the conditions of its existing communicative practices with the peoples of the continent? How did media changes come about and are media really so bad?

In the course of the last 30 years, at the turn of the new millennium and between the 1980s and 2010, the communication media landscapes in the world and in particular in Europe were characterised by three major intersecting and interdependent structural and discursive changes:

- a. First, the technological developments in electronics and communications in particular were channelled in such ways that encouraged individualisation of content, fragmentation of the audience, and cultivated an ideology of inevitability that aimed to confine policymaking to an approving process of emerging changes.
- b. Second, media landscapes were restructured to be based on private ownership of previously public and of common ownership assets, such as the airwaves and later the digital spectrum. The regulatory expression of these changes was the wave of de-and reregulation based on the drastic shrinking of state driven welfare policies, including those with regard to culture and information as elements of democratic participation. In this vein, political attempts to develop adequate and effective anti-concentration policies at the EU level have been fruitless. At the supranational level, the EP has been the pioneer in its campaign for better media and more pluralistic media in Europe.
- c. Thirdly, these structural changes had a consequent effect that those public owned media (themselves suffering from a 'bad' reputation of being under state control) began to lose their normative justification on the grounds of enhanced 'choice' and consumer sovereignty.

These changes took place on a global scale [Chakravartty and Sarikakis 2006; Galperin 1999]. However, in the case of the European Union, they obtain a greater significance: the EU constitutes a uniquely developed experiment in regional integration without resulting into broadly understood versions of federalism, while at the same time unifying differences across so many levels. And most importantly in the era of neoliberal policies and the privatisation of public spaces and assets, the EU ‘shines’ as a pioneer for social welfare in its broadest sense, which includes care for and support of the arts, culture, media and the protection of all things non marketable. The Public Service Broadcasting protocol to the Amsterdam Treaty for example or the declaration on the importance of culture in the Maastricht Treaty earlier are unique pieces of international law.

However, the EU has not managed to produce regulation to safeguard pluralism (save in the recognition of political parties and NGOs) and protect journalists in Europe, neither has it managed to protect public communication channels and its public service broadcasting systems from the expansion of market driven imperatives. The result is that today, despite a profound change in the institutional codes and processes, the openness and the resources involved in the steering of integration alongside cultural and political and social terrains - and not simply on economic ones - the very media that are at the heart of the polity’s relation with its citizens are predominantly media that are transnational corporations with great influence on the polity’s decisions. They are, like successful transnational corporations are, locally and nationally bound whose market success is largely based on easy to digest content. Their effects have been discussed in Parliamentary plenaries again and again and their power involves even the highest levels of state governance in some cases [Sarikakis 2010; Wheeler 2007; Humphreys 2007].

Within an environment of such media conditions, it is very difficult for any ambitious and even contested process such as the European integration is, to find worthy advocates, constructive critics or objective mediators. To a great extent, as this chapter argues, the EU had to find its own ways to communicate with the European people, as the media around Europe have not shown much real interest in genuinely forming a European public sphere.

4. Strategic communication: Plan D for democracy, dialogue and debate

Plan D was the result of consultation on the action plan on ‘improving communicating Europe’. It was designed to make the EU ‘listen better... explain better and ... engage citizens at a local level’ in discussing the EU. Accordingly, in 2005, the EU institutions supported debates about the future of the European Union with all sectors of society. The Commission felt that the debates showed an appetite among the public for more information on topics that successive Eurobarometer public opinion polls had identified as central to people’s interests, including EU level action (even where the EU per se lacked legal competence) on job creation, globalisation, combating terrorism and organised crime, promoting sustainable development and solidarity, and climate change. Plan D was extended under the title *Debate Europe* in spring 2008. Pan-European public consultations, online networks, exhibitions and seminars were supported. An online forum was set up on specific policy issues, from financial issues to climate change, women, and security and a pan-European Citizens’ Consultation was launched in December 2008 on the EU’s future, as a prelude to the Euro elections in June 2009 [<http://www.european-citizens-consultations.eu>] and as an attempt to sway Irish voters due to vote in a second referendum in October 2009. Forty independent European partners, including universities, NGOs, think-tanks co-funded and organised them. It was felt that these would help to supplement low national audio-visual media coverage of the EU when under ten percent of news time focused on the EU. Industry specific actions were developed.

A separate ‘Communicating Europe through audio-visual media strategy’ was launched to encourage professionals to pool resources and create common programmes and items. A consortium of 23 radio networks formed an (expanding) EURANET consortium, which was expected to be matched by a televisual one in 2011. Meanwhile, the European Parliament launched europarl.tv. This complemented an internet strategy ‘Communicating about Europe via the Internet –engaging the citizens’ launched in 2007. It was in effect part of the realisation of the transparency and access to documents and

information actions around improving the user-friendliness of the Europa web portal as a one-stop shop for information and boosting its potential interactivity. The Commissioner anticipated this facilitating communication among people, and creating a sense of community. Outreach activities were fostered along with links to other websites, including YouTube to create EUTube with clips of EU issues, initially subject to much lampooning.

In 2009, the Commission produced its *Corporate Communication Statement* which referred to the goal of realising a European public sphere. It stressed that '[C]ommunicating about the European and its policies is a priority of the European Commission, fully embedded into all of its operational activities. It reflects the Commission's commitment to democracy, dialogue and debate. Communication is part of the political thrust to create ownership of EU policies amongst citizens for the creation of a European public sphere.' This was to be achieved by 'informing the media and communicating with stakeholders and citizens' to: raise awareness of the EU; build support for its policies and objectives; 'ensure the coherence of the narrative and the visual identity of its communication activities (corporate image)'; engage in debate with citizens; promote active European citizenship; contribute to the development of a European public sphere; deploy public diplomacy and communication activities in third countries.

Well-intentioned and idealistic as these initiatives were, they could not overcome the need for a political interlocuteur and mediator between the EU and the citizen during the Euro election campaigns. Blogs provided the semblance of participation but too often resembled publicity puffs. Tweeting - *Europatweet* - [http://europa.eu/take-part/social-media/index_en.htm] and social networking similarly grew but did not provide the swell of support for the EU that blog enthusiasts craved: ICT social exclusion was not surmounted. However, mobiles and net activity inevitably grew and reinforced a much older call for the transfer to EU citizens of a practice in Austria, and at the heart of civil engagement in Germany thirty years earlier: *Bürgerinitiative* - the citizen initiative. The principle had taken hold following the European Convention and was to be incorporated into the Lisbon treaty. Its finer details were finalised at the end of 2010.

5. The Citizens' Initiative

The principle of a Citizens' Initiative was approved in time for the Lisbon treaty to be ratified. Finer details had to be elaborated following a consultation process over percentage and minimum number of states from whom the signatories had to be drawn. National authorities are responsible for validating signatures, after which the organiser can formally submit the initiative to the Commission. The European Parliament's bid for deadline by which the Commission had to respond, possibly with a formal recommendation or proposal for legislation, failed on operational and logistical grounds. Moreover, there is no deadline for the European Parliament to examine petitions submitted to it. Differences exist in the member states and deadlines range from a few weeks to indefinitely, with an intuitive approach to a reasonable time being taken. In the consultation on this that ended on 31 January 2010 [ECI-Consultation@ec.europa.eu], questions were put regarding duration of the deadline (was six months adequate for example for the Commission to assess and record its opinion online)? Rules on initiatives on the same issue had to be clarified to avert duplication, successive presentations of the same request, undue administrative burdens and which might therefore undermine the credibility of the citizens' initiative as an expression of democratic engagement.

On 15 December 2010 agreement over implementing details was reached. Using the ECI, citizens (i.e. at least one million from at least a quarter of EU member states) can invite the Commission to put forward proposals in those policy areas where the treaties allow it to do so. ECI organizers - a committee of at least seven citizens who are residents of at least seven different member states - will have a year to collect signatures¹. The Commission is allowed three

¹ In each of these Member States, the minimum number of signatures will be calculated by multiplying the number of MEPs from that state by 750 (the current total number of MEPs). The minimum age for signatories is the age of voting entitlement in European Parliament elections. Proposed initiatives must be registered on an online register made available by the Commission. Registration can be refused if the initiative is against the EU's fundamental values or beyond the scope of the Commission's powers. Supporting statements can be collected on paper or on-line. To facilitate and secure online collection, the Commission will

months to examine an initiative, make its decision about it public and explain the reasoning behind any action it takes. The organizers are to gain access to the Commission and be given the opportunity to present the ECI at a public hearing of the European Parliament. On request of the Council, the legislation on the European Citizens' Initiative will apply a year after its publication in the Official Journal. This means that the first ECIs can be considered from early 2012. Maroš Šefčovič, Vice-President for Inter-institutional Relations and Administration, sees the ECI as introducing a new form of participatory democracy to the EU. 'It is a major step forward in the democratic life of the Union. It's a concrete example of bringing Europe closer to its citizens. And it will foster a cross border debate about what we are doing in Brussels and thus contribute, we hope, to the development of a real European public space.' The ECI is seen by the Commission as providing 'a singular opportunity to bring the Union closer to the citizens'. This is a rather telling step towards the Rome Treaty (1957) goal of an ever closer Union.

The citizens' initiative supplements the Commission's practice of consultation with civil society, industry and agencies that began life as green and white papers after pressure from successive directly elected European Parliaments [http://ec.europa.eu/yourvoice/consultations/index_en.htm]. Interestingly, the development of a consolidated Commission approach to consultation saw this as a means of fostering interaction by the EU institutions with 'society' through MEPs, the institutionalised advisory bodies of the EU (Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions), based on their role according to the Treaties; and through less formalised direct contacts with interested parties.

The Commission's *White Paper on European Governance* sought to reinforce a culture of consultation and communication. The communication on consultation was geared to improving them as part of the 'Action Plan for Better Regulation' and a new approach to impact assessment and publicising activity. [http://ec.europa.eu/civil_society/accueil_en.htm]. The European Parliament accepted much of the report but rejected a common approach to this

develop technical standards and set up and maintain open source software, http://ec.europa.eu/dgs/secretariat_general/citizens_initiative/index_en.htm

in 2006 [Herrero report]. The Commission then held two stakeholder debates on using public opinion research and on empowering citizens in January 2007. In October, it adopted its communication on *Communicating Europe in Partnership* followed by a joint declaration by all three EU institutions in 2008 on coordinated communication, notably via the inter-institutional group for information framework for sharing information on communication to develop a more coherent and overarching communication strategy and make it as local and flexible as possible. The associated inter-institutional agreement encouraged member governments to act accordingly.

6. Conclusion

Getting EU citizens to notice and believe that the EU was open and listening has been especially difficult given existing information deficits and disinterest over what the EU was for, what its institutions did, or what policies were in prospect and how they could be justified. The implicit agenda was one of a-political persuasion, of engaging the Commission in communicating positive messages about European governance in an anodyne, non-prescriptive, non-partisan a-political way. Ideological advocacy of political options was seen to be the essential preserve of political parties engaging in political mobilisation for the purposes of electing the European Parliament. This overly simplistic view overlooked the role of national parties (at all levels) and that of social movements. It reflected the extreme sensitivity surrounding the idea of the Commission having a role to play at all vis-à-vis people living within the territorial boundaries of the EEC/EU at a time when the concept of EU citizen was political dynamite, people in the EU were expected to hierarchically order their loyalties with loyalty to the nation state at the apex as their primary political attachment. Any challenge to that was exceptionally controversial and seen as interference to Europeanise the public [Lodge & Herman 1982: 63]

A second element to this implicit agenda stemmed from the bad press that EU institutions received in many member states. They became the easy scapegoat for decisions taken by their governments' in the Council of Ministers which were likely to be contested or unpopular domestically. Attempts were

made to counter the EU Commission's image as a marauding, antiquated, closed bureaucracy by proving that it was, on the contrary, open, transparent and accessible. Documents not readily available domestically were there for the asking at EU level, in theory if not always in practice. If the Commission was denied a right (and personnel) to communicate with the people directly, it could at least show that it was accessible and would provide paper documentation. Its porte parole (official spokesman) on the other hand would give briefings that were factual, not prescriptive, rarely defensive, and rarely rebutted disinformation. The latter function was seen as political and sensitive and open to the charge of interference in the domestic affairs of a sovereign member states if the head (of what were until the late 1990s called Commission Press and Information Offices in the member states) of Commission offices in the member states publicly rebutted misinformation or presented an EU view. This was a particular problem in the UK until 1997. However, any such self-censorship ultimately conflicts the goal of showing that the Commission was open and listening attentively, and responsively encouraging the emergence of a genuine European public space or civic sphere.

An important underlying, and rarely recognised issue in this complexity, is the fact that to a great extent, Europe's media landscape has antagonised the need for impartial, factual information about the EU as well as Europe's more social and cultural integration goals, or at least the debate about those. This has been the case in the formative years of liberalisation of the media between 1980s and 2000 whereby a set of new discursive challenges was employed to destabilise existing understandings of the role of the media in society in general, in economy and in politics. The rise of private corporations in the European territories, their domination of the media markets and significant impact on the national politics of member states undermined the efforts for peer understanding among member states as well as top down initiatives to make the polity easier to navigate informationally.

However, the very making of the polity is equally responsible for the creation of a media landscape characterised by the constant threat against forms of public media and non commercial communications, because of policies with neoliberal rather than social priorities. Hence, the aims of the EU to protect cultural diversity and the development of European communication spaces,

clearly a goal that aims to encourage the development of a public sphere - or public spheres - around people's common past present and future as EU citizens, are ill-served by small budgets and contradicting policies. On the one hand, support for European cinematic and other audiovisual works is offered, on the other hand, the taking over of communicative spaces by a few media owners and the aims of marketisation clash with social agendas of communication.

The difficulties faced by the Commission in trying to make information available and counterbalance misinformation about specific policies but also even about the role of member states in decision making processes in the EU clashes with commercialised and easily marketable proliferation of stereotypes, inaccuracies and commentary about the EU or about member states. Where coexistence of difference in the EU space has become the object of phlegmatic caricaturing of whatever or whomever national media consider 'the Other', the still fragile social and political integration project cannot benefit from a genuine pan-European public debate.

At the same time, Council secrecy contrasts sharply with the Commission's attempts to fulfil its obligations as guardian of the treaties and promoting an ever-closer union. The EU Commission developed plans to speak directly to citizens and then to show them that it was listening to their views. These began with Commissioner Oreja's letters to citizens, through to the increasingly common but relatively novel e-chats with Commissioners, and the Commission's Europe Direct and *Your Voice in Europe* programmes. While communication and the creation of a common EU identity may be linked, the Commission's approach has been based on communicating that commonality through common messages translated into EU languages and communicated on the same footing across the member states (and in practice globally), regardless of the biases incurred by self-selecting respondents anywhere in the world. This is not the place to enter the cultural theory debates about whether and how linguistic plurality might inhibit the emergence of an EU-wide public sphere, or whether a common language might hasten EU-wide communication between social and political actors. Rather it is to stress that measures to promote procedural transparency have had far-reaching structural implications that even go beyond their impact on inter-institutional communication and information

sharing. However, the diffuse democratisation of responsibility remains indirect and has to be mediated via different channels if a mature and trusted democratic space of contention is to be sustained.

That ‘communication’ has far more significant constitutional implications than the transparency reforms suggested has been either not recognised or obscured by preoccupation with the bigger problems for EU institutional capacity raised by prospective, rapid enlargement to states whose democratic credentials were contested and changing. Cultural theorists offer a particular (and important) gloss on this in advocating a two or three dimensional conceptualisation of democracy but this is outside the scope of the chapter [Mamadouh]. For our purposes, it is enough to stress that any inter-institutional procedural changes undertaken under the guise of promoting the cause of legitimacy through the quest for openness and transparency in practice had important consequences for re-configuring the inter-institutional balance of authority, accountability and responsibility, and crucially for re-assessing the place of engaging citizens in a supranational organisation founded on ideas where citizens were the consumers of technocratic policy outputs, without a role in shaping them.

Accompanying the ‘public eye’ agenda for communicating Europe to the often quiescent, disinterested, distrustful public and sometimes equally quiescent media was a constitutional one whose logic emanated from politicians anxious to entrench a balance of political power in their favour among the EU institutions. Communicating Europe was seen as necessary primarily because declining citizen participation in a traditional political process (voting in Euro elections, and EU referendums) potentially undermined the legitimacy of their decisions. It was a device to validate their decisions. If now the Citizen’s Initiative and eparticipation do not impel responsive agendas and accountable policy outcomes, the public sphere may remain an illusion, aspirational and susceptible to manipulation by those who do not share the EU’s values.

Communicating Europe and strategic interventions to facilitate some of the pre-conditions deemed necessary for assisting the development of a ‘European’ (by which is meant EU) public sphere are political projects, inspired by political ideals and idealism. They depend on political mobilisation by

whatever means, using whatever tools, programmes and initiatives are available at the time. Jean Monnet famously said that every generation had to make Europe afresh: 'We are starting a process of continuous reform which can shape tomorrow's world more lastingly than the principles of revolution so widespread outside the West'. The seductiveness of the tools of e-participation and e-networking should not obscure the need for political vision.

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