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Citizens in 'an ever-closer union'? The long path to a public sphere in the EU[1]

ABSTRACT

As Europe is facing a continuous financial and, for many, political and social crisis, long-standing issues of European identity, solidarity and democracy reappear more pronounced than before. In these times, often, the historical developments that have given rise to questioning the European project, its legitimacy and potential future, as well as the treatment of these questions by its political and executive helm are not adequately understood. The role of a European 'common space' in terms of debate but also in political action and direction is inextricably connected to the question of legitimacy of the EU and, often, conflicting visions about its raison d' etre. Historically, the creation of an EU public sphere has been confused with distinct goals of political mobilization for electoral purposes. The strategies developed to advance a broader – and ultimately deeper – sense of belonging have been idealistic, insufficient and muddled owing to lack of political vision and resources. Contextualizing this historical 'baggage' with reference to the legacy of invisibility and transparency, the article reviews the politics behind strategic communication of the EU towards its citizens in the shape of Plan D, the Lisbon Treaty's citizen initiative and the development of EU media policy constrained by ambiguous and volatile relations between the EU and the media.

KEYWORDS

transparency
invisibility
media policy
democratic legitimacy
citizens' initiative
public sphere

INTRODUCTION

This paper takes stock of the politics of constructing a form of public sphere in the EU, as a necessary step to understand the ways in which the press and the European institutions mediate public spheres today, in times of crises. This article does not address the functioning of current public sphere/s in mediating public debates about the crisis,[2] but instead aims to provide a historically situated analysis of the roots, conflicts and purposes behind today's public sphere/s. The creation of an EU public sphere reflects confusion between distinct goals relating to mobilizing electoral support and the development of a sense of self-identification with the EU by citizens (Kanter 2006). The mediation of the European project has been seen as a political and cultural goal by the European Parliament (EP) and parts of the European Commission for a long time (Koopmans and Statham 2010). The process of creating a mediated pubic sphere has been unstable and defined by the evolving role of the polity vis-à-vis the member states on the one hand, and has been reflected on and impacted by media policy, which, as an instrument of political will has been ridden with conflicts and decisions that have played their role in political integration.

The paper connects this to the development of European media and communication policy, in order to situate the political goals of integration through communications within the conflicting policy frameworks of a predominantly neo-liberal understanding of the role of the media. The paper illustrates how contradictions between prioritizing the economic character of the media lead to undesired effects of concentration and populism to the detriment of 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. The paper begins by looking at the problematic position of the Commission, how discourse on transparency was captured and a strategy for communicating with citizens developed.

FROM THE LEGACY OF INVISIBILITY TO THE TACTIC OF TRANSPARENCY AND THE ROLE OF THE MEDIA

In the current climate of crisis, mediated debates and public protest point to two polarizing and polarized views about Europe and nations: on the one hand, political talk about 'good' and 'bad' Europeans shapes Europe's mainstream media discourses that present the crisis largely in moral terms of 'living beyond one's means' (Mylonas 2012). On the other hand, public protests against austerity as a specific face of European governance show a disconnect of citizens from institutions and their distrust at national and European levels (Sarikakis 2012). Scholarly work is trying to understand what is the state of affairs for European democracies and the European public sphere/s and pan-European campaigns, such as the Citizen Pact and citizen's initiative on Media Pluralism in 2013 is aiming at putting citizens first on the MEPs electoral agendas for the next European Parliament elections.[3] This paper aims to take stock of the historical development of the notion of and the need for a European public sphere and communication to and with citizens and to provide a solid and reflexive basis that demonstrates the conditions under which connections and disconnect with and of the polity have functioned. The central elements in this analysis are the institutional architecture of the EU on the one hand, and the changing media landscape as dominant mediators and facilitators of potential public sphere/s on the other.

For a start, the Commission was originally designed to be an invisible 'motor' of integration and lacked the expertise and resources to engage 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 translated into some or all EU official languages. The role of the Commission press and information offices in the member states was constrained by a 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 and Herman 1982). Their roles and potential developed as the Single European Act (SEA) 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.

The original intention for the Commission to be apolitical and neutrally determining policy proposals to be submitted for approval by the Council of Ministers (and following subsequent treaty revisions also by the EP) coloured its capacity to engender citizen interest in European integration. It was 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 scapegoating the Commission was a common tactic of governments introducing unpalatable measures at home. Structurally, organizationally, constitutionally and procedurally for many years the Commission and the EP, and their national information offices, suffered from the lack of a conduit for communicating European matters to people living in the EC/EU (Lodge 1996, 2005, 2010; Lodge and Herman 1982). The EP too was seen as a potential rival to national parliaments. Its failure to exercise its communication function, as Grand Forum, was especially marked when trying to mobilize voters to participate in Euro elections. Diverse national electoral procedures, rules, funding of political parties, regulations on political advertizing, national electoral boundaries, the proscription of cross-border Euro electoral constituencies, election eligibility criteria and the EP's initially trivial 'consultative' role 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 mobilizing the public: albeit to vote in referendums (where constitutionally prescribed) on the future capacity of the EU to act.

A transparency strategy began to facilitate 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 are 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 constitutionalization in the EU, and with normative values and ideals central to accountable, representative, democratic practice and civil society (REF).

'Transparency' directly challenged inter-institutional relations, demanded a rethink of the degree of accountability and democratic legitimacy that could be inferred from existing practice and legitimized 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 SEA to the various Single European Market campaigns of the 1990s, the Assizes, the Convention on the Future of Europe and all public information and mobilization 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 were so diffuse as to render the goal unattainable in the short to medium term. Thus 'communicating Europe' could not deliver a Europe of sufficiently interested, informed, responsive and mobilized 'citizens' deliberating on and, crucially, supporting integration and EU developments in the face of national governmental recalcitrance Commission 2002, 2005a, 2005b, 2008a, 2008b, 2009, 2010).

After the first EP, the role of the media in shaping the political future of the Community became the object of a long-standing debate. The 1981 Hahn Report was the first document to clearly situate the media in a central position regarding the relationship between the polity and the citizens. Alarmed by the emergence of phenomena of ownership concentration and transborder capacity for broadcasting bypassing national laws, MEPs called for European media policy (Schlesinger 1999). The media were seen as powerful actors in integration, yet their development in the European space was largely left in the hands of private companies or state monopolies. By the early 1980s, the media landscape was changing rapidly: new satellite technology meant that content bypassed official broadcasting standards in many countries; private media companies and the electronics industry interested in new markets, campaigned for the 'liberalization' of the media based not on the right of the citizen to be informed but on the sovereignty of the consumer to choose (Schlesinger 1999). These developments took place in an era characterized by an economic crisis and the suggested failure of Keynesian economics. The most important 'lesson' drawn from the time was the idea that the 'individual' knows how to pursue matters in the marketplace in his/her own interest; the State therefore has no place in intervening through regulation. Communication too was an area from which the 'nanny' state ought to withdraw.

In this climate, the politics of transparency ran in parallel to the economic champions of the benefits of the market and its advantage in turning unaccountable decision-making authorities, states and actors into transparent ones through the power of the changing role of the publics into consumers. The logic was that if something was not popular, then it was not necessary – or in other words, consumers (whether these are 'political' or 'economic', since relations are determined based on their transactional value) determine the market. A conflation of 'transparency' with legitimacy by 'supplying' the political market with what it 'demanded' (information) emerged. The simultaneous rise of private media in the European geopolitical and cultural spaces succeeded precisely because they presented themselves as 'free', providing information demanded by the public (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

transparency functioned as a discourse that informed not only the EU's policy directions vis-à-vis citizens but was claimed to be the guarantee brought about by the existence of nonstate-owned or public media.

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). 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. Seen as a policy area that even in federal systems remained an exclusive competence of regions and lower levels of government, culture was to remain outside the EU's remit for sometime and came to be legitimized under different frames: unity and diversity, labour mobility and training, and cherishing the retention of individual cultures as the EU enlarged. Therefore, indirect – and cultural (Sarikakis 2004; Sassatelli 2002) – approaches to mobilizing emotive, affective, latent European identification with things European derived from labour mobility projects proliferated. They 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 harmonizing 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, and so on 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 emerged as the EU's policy competence grew and were reflected in the increasing number of EU 'agencies' humanitarian aid (ECHO), border control (Frontex) and Fundamental Rights Organisation, for instance. All these partly 'cosmetic', as sometimes is often seen, partly structural changes in the EU's public persona and relation with its citizens were underlined by the EU's desire to appear more often and in more positive terms in the media and mediated public debates in nation and member states. The relative lack of EU news and transnational focused press coverage regarding the EU's impact on citizens fed a problematic relation between the EU and the citizens.

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 stronger 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 pushing it to greater sharing of legislative authority with the EP: 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 EP's powers, authority and place in the EU as the people's representative (Niedermayer 1995).

The EP's evolution into a co-legislative body paralleled the development of a media and cultural policy (Sarikakis 2004). From the early voices calling for European action in the field of culture and media until today, the debate has been characterized by a constant political battle to bring to the fore citizens' interests. Reactions to the EP's successive reports and resolutions in the years to follow, 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. The discursive battle over the development of a media and communication policy went hand in hand with the institutional question, and with the question about European integration: what kind of integration, 'how much' integration, what direction? By 1989, the EU delivered one major piece of legislation in the field of media and culture to show: *the Television Without Frontiers Directive*, which developed into the *Audiovisual Services Directive* in 2010 (European Parliament and Council 2010). By 2000, the EU had expanded its jurisdiction to the field of culture and media in two directions: in terms of providing a framework for the circulation of cultural and media goods and in terms of promoting cultural priorities (European Parliament 1980a, 1980b, 1982, 1984a, 1984b, 1984c, 1985a, 1985b, 2001, 2003, 2004, 2010). The EU approach on the latter has concentrated on symbolic, albeit of significance, acts of support for media and culture as areas central to the cultural, political and social life. By 2013, the roadmap of media policies has been largely defined by conflicting approaches of market vs. culture, yet leaning towards marketization and monetization. Through funding for educational and training programmes, the EU sought to address concerns that a market approach cannot provide for the needs of democracy and social cohesion. However, for the largest part EU media policy focused on market-centred aims. By the 2000s, the European media landscape had been intensively liberalized and radically transformed, dominated by a few media moguls. Public service broadcasting systems had sustained multiple assaults as to their raison d' etre and the legitimacy of state – public monies – support (Chakravartty and Sarikakis 2006; Iosifidis 2010). The new status quo challenged the notion of 'citizen' associated with public media and their 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. At that point, the priorities and policies of the EU as a polity desiring communication with citizens and a decision-making organization with neo-liberal goals, clash with each other. Successive EP documents extensively referred to that effect.

From 2001 greater efforts were made to create a coherent communication strategy, complete with professionalization 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, it 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* (Commission 2006). 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 conceptualized strategy for communication was present in its absence: on the one hand, suggestions to boost EU-mediated communication with 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 organized in representing their interests. These are not always identical to citizens' or the EU'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 intervened upon. 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 system has enhanced its communication mechanisms impressively. All these efforts have one common denominator, the goal to enhance and cultivate a climate of transparency, absence of which was seen as the root of 'distrust' and misinformation in the communicative relation of the polity with citizens.

COMMUNICATING WITH CITIZENS AND THE CHALLENGE OF RESPONSIVENESS

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 remained one of the inappropriateness of the mission and the tools available to the Commission to act as champion of the EU. The EP 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, ensuring the accountability, transparency and responsiveness of public policy-makers, and boosting citizen proclivities

to trust their European neighbours (Niedermeyer, Risse, Bruter) (Haller 1999; Kanter 2006; Westle 2003). Coming to that point required greater openness about political priorities, frankness about the EU's strengths and weaknesses and recognizing 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.

Building sustainable trust in the European project to validate and sustain EU democratic practice 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 compromizes trust building. 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 shows that information giving per se, transparency initiatives, boosting EP power, the well-intentioned 'listening to citizens' advocacy of the Convention on the Future of Europe and subsequent Intergovernmental Conferences have not meant that people see themselves agreeing with this version of European unity or identifying with the EU's political goals.

The period of 'reflection' may have boosted national and Euro self-identity among a growing elite. It had not and did not translate into higher turnout at Euro elections or support on EU treaty reform. This was recognized after the 2004 Euro elections by the Commission creating a portfolio on Institutional Affairs and Communication strategy leading to the Commission's 'Plan D'. The EU's underlying democratic values apparent since the 1950s were reinvigorated, and the potential of e-participation was seen somewhat as a panacea to disinterest, disaffection and disengagement from traditional political processes (Commission 2005b).

MEPs responded by insisting that any strategy complement national activities and be structured through national, local and regional media, align with and complement national public spheres. They argued that 'better communication cannot compensate for inadequate policies' but could contribute to better understanding of the policies implemented (EP 2006). They requested stronger reference to the principles and values enshrined in the Charter of Fundamental Rights, outlining citizens' rights to information; reiterated their prerogative 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).

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

By the time that the Charter of Fundamental Rights becomes central in improved communication with citizens, other parallel and long-standing claims had been put forth with regard to the democratization needs of new, de facto and de juris media status quo in Europe. Especially in the newer member states and accession countries, it quickly became evident that inability to effectively 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;

High Level Group on Media Pluralism and Press Freedom 2013b). In other words, the structural changes in the media landscape brought with them profound qualitative changes that are unfriendly to critical thinking.

In the course of the past 30 years, between 1980s and early 2010s, media landscapes in the world and in Europe were defined by three major intersecting and interdependent structural and discursive changes:

First, the technological developments in electronics and communications in particular were channelled in such ways that encouraged individualization and fragmentation of audience, and cultivated an ideology of inevitability that aimed to confine policy-making to an approving role of emerging changes.

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 re-regulation based on the drastic shrinking of state-driven welfare policies, including those with regard to culture and information as elements of democratic participation. Political attempts to develop adequate and effective anticoncentration policies at the EU level remained fruitless until today despite MEPs pioneering a campaign for pluralism media.[4]

Third, 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 EU, their significance is greater: the EU constitutes a uniquely developed experiment in regional integration without resulting in broadly understood versions of federalism, while at the same time unifying differences across so many levels. Most importantly in the era of neo-liberal policies and the privatization 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 nonmarketable. The Public Service Broadcasting protocol to the Amsterdam Treaty, for example, or the earlier declaration on the importance of culture in the Maastricht Treaty are still unique pieces of international law. In that respect, the global role of the EU is crucial.

Yet, despite EU institutional change, openness and the resources involved in steering integration along cultural and socio-political terrains – and not 'simply' economic ones – the very media that are at the heart of the EU's relation with its citizens are predominantly transnational corporations with great influence on EU decisions. Their effects have been discussed repeatedly in Parliamentary plenaries and their power involves even the highest levels of state governance in some cases (Humphreys 2007; Sarikakis 2010a).

Under such media conditions, it is difficult for the ambitious and contested process of European integration to find worthy advocates, constructive critics or objective mediators. As a result, the EU had to find its own ways to communicate with the European people, as the media in Europe have not managed – or wished – to communicate transnationally.

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'. Accordingly, in 2005, the EU

4. It remains to be seen whether the current – at the time of writing – campaign for media pluralism reaches the one million signatures required to set into motion policy-making.

institutions supported debates about the future of the EU 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, globalization, combating terrorism and organized crime, promoting sustainable development and solidarity, and climate change. Plan D was extended under the title *Debate Europe* in 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). Forty independent European partners, including universities, NGOs, think-tanks co-funded and organized them. It was felt that these would help to supplement low national audiovisual media coverage of the EU when under ten percent of news time focused on the EU.

A separate 'Communicating Europe through audiovisual media strategy' was launched to encourage professionals to pool resources and create common programmes. A consortium of 23 radio networks formed an (expanding) EURANET consortium, while the EP launched europarl.tv. This complemented an Internet strategy 'Communicating about Europe via the Internet – engaging the citizens' launched in 2007. It was part of the realization 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 interactivity. 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's *Corporate Communication Statement* referred to the goal of realizing a European public sphere. It stressed that

> [C]ommunicating about the European Union 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 citizens 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 30 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 finalized at the end of 2010.

THE CITIZENS' INITIATIVE

The principle of a Citizens' Initiative was approved in principle in time for the Lisbon treaty to be ratified. Details were elaborated after a consultation 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 organizer can formally submit the initiative to the Commission.

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 signatures.[5] The Commission is allowed three 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 EP. At the request of the Council, legislation on the European Citizens' Initiative applied a year after its publication in the Official Journal, so the first ECIs could be considered from early 2012. Maroš Šefčovič, Vice-President for Inter-institutional Relations and Administration, saw the ECI as introducing a new form of participatory democracy: '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 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'. By 2013, the ECI process was caught in interminable wrangles.

The ECI 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 EPs. 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 institutionalized 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 formalized 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 publicizing activity. (http://ec.europa.eu/civil_society/accueil_en.htm). The EP rejected a common approach to this 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

5. 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 EP 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 online. To facilitate and secure online collection, the Commission will develop technical standards and set up and maintain open source software, http://ec.europa.eu/dgs/secretariat_general/citizens_initiative/index_en.htm.

on communication to develop a more coherent and overarching communication strategy and make it as local and flexible as possible. The associated interinstitutional agreement encouraged member governments to act accordingly.

CONCLUSION

The implicit agenda of the EU strategy was one of a-political persuasion, of engaging the Commission in communicating positive messages about European governance in an anodyne, nonprescriptive, nonpartisan a-political way. 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 Europeanize the public (Lodge and 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. Attempts were made to counter the Commission's poor image by proving that it was 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 United Kingdom until 1997. However, any such self-censorship ultimately conflicted with goals of transparency and responsiveness.

An important underlying, and rarely recognized issue in this complexity, is the fact that to a great extent, Europe's media landscape has antagonized 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 liberalization of the media between 1980s and 2000, whereby a set of new discursive challenges was employed to destabilize 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 characterized by the constant threat against forms of public media and noncommercial communications, because of policies with neo-liberal 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 audiovisual works is offered, and on the other hand the taking over of communicative spaces by a few media owners and the aims of marketization clash with social agendas of communication.

The difficulties faced by the Commission in trying to make information available and counterbalance misinformation clashes with commercialized 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 form a genuine pan-European public debate.

At the same time, Council secrecy still contrasts with the Commission's attempts to fulfil its obligations as guardian of the treaties and promoter of an ever-closer union. The EU Commission began to speak directly to citizens and then to show them that it was listening to their views through Commissioner Oreja's letters to citizens 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 democratization 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 recognized 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 conceptualization of democracy but this is outside the scope of the paper (see Mamadouh 2002). 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 reconfiguring the inter-institutional balance of authority, accountability and responsibility, and crucially for reassessing the place of engaging citizens in a supranational organization 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 e-participation 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 preconditions deemed necessary for assisting the development of a public sphere are political projects, inspired by political ideals and idealism. They depend on political mobilization by whatever means, using whatever tools, programmes and initiatives are available at the time. The seductiveness of the tools of e-participation and e-networking should not obscure the need for political vision.

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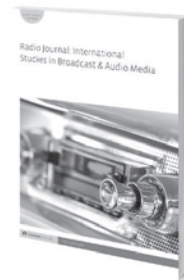
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