



Wilfried
Martens Centre
for European Studies

We Need to Talk about the EU

European Political Advertising
in the Post-Truth Era

Konrad Niklewicz





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Credits

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Table of Contents

About the Author	04
Acknowledgements	06
Introduction	08
Communicating in the era of post-truth politics	12
EU communication strategies, past and present	18
The Commission's communication activities in the past	20
The Parliament's communication activities in the past	21
The Commission's communication activities at present	22
The Parliament's communication activities at present	24
A look at the results: how the EU is losing Europeans' support	26
Seven weaknesses in EU Communication	33
Waning output legitimacy	31
Missing input legitimacy	32
Low visibility	32
Targeting non-existent European public opinion	34
Forgotten values	35
Cacophony and fragmentation	36
Neglected core audiences	36
New ways of communicating the EU inspired by business best practices: recommendations	38
The basics	40
What's the Big Idea?	40
What is in for the people?	41
The message	42
Be persistently visible	42
Target the right audience	42
Embed communication in national contexts	44
Be blunt, be emotional	45
Intensify the use of 'new' media	46
The tools	48
Advertise the Union, not the Institutions	48
Use storytelling	49
Use data	50
Budget effectively	52
The Messengers	54
Find the trusted messenger	54
Get other actors engaged	54
Engage European-level politicians and political parties	55
Conclusion	58
Bibliography	60

About the author



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Introduction



The EU is losing the battle for Europeans' hearts and minds. The long economic crisis and the subsequent immigration crisis have frustrated millions of citizens and angered them against the elites—and, unfortunately, against the EU. Many fear that their material status, the economic security of their families and their ability to fulfil their own expectations and ambitions are slipping out of their hands. Europeans are also suffering from an identity crisis. Many believe that their countries and neighbourhoods are being threatened by mass immigration and that the ruling elites, sealed off in steel and glass towers in their respective countries' capitals, are not listening.¹

One should not underestimate the impact of the contemporary revolution in communication. This is bringing about changes comparable to those triggered by Gutenberg's invention.² The rise of online media, and especially the social media, has triggered a chain reaction. The impact of the 'old' media (the printed press, television and radio) is decreasing, at a great loss to the reliability of the information used in the public debate. This is not to say that these media no longer play an important role. Much of the content on the social media is simply reprocessed news and journalists' opinions.³ Nevertheless, 'old' media clout is really declining; in today's world, facts and opinions based on knowledge seem to count for less than emotions. It is a paradox. In theory, online tools should allow easier access to facts. But instead, the amount of falsehood is growing. Michael Gove, one of leaders of the Leave camp in the UK's pre-referendum campaign of 2016, declared in the midst of a television discussion, 'this country has had enough of experts.'⁴ His comments illustrate the growing distrust in elites, including scientists, and the ever more prevalent feeling that all knowledge could be relativised, because experts don't know better than ordinary citizens. Nowadays, the social media create echo chambers that promote anything that is loud and eye-catching, and stifle any reasoned and balanced exchange of ideas. The revolution in communication is transforming the way our democracies work.

This paper will focus on the communication challenge the EU is facing. There is no single, universal solution to Europe's problems. However, improving the EU's communication policy could help. It is long overdue. The EU urgently needs to adapt to the changing communication environment.

¹ P. Buras, 'Brexit: A Crisis of Politics, Not of Europe', *Narrative of Innovation, Aspen Review Central Europe 3* (2016), 39–43.

² As mentioned by Marek Cichoński at the conference New Contract for Europe, Warsaw, 1 September 2016.

³ C. de Vreese, Department of Communication Science, University of Amsterdam, interview by the author, Amsterdam, 1 April 2017.

⁴ H. Mance, 'Britain Has Had Enough of Experts, Says Gove', *Financial Times*, 3 June 2016.



Because of its complexity, the European project is particularly vulnerable to populist attacks. A vicious cycle has emerged. The new media amplify populists' claims that the EU is no longer viable. This gives rise to widespread emotions, which, in turn, fuel populists' visibility. This is plainly dangerous as the populists' ideology is completely incompatible with European integration.⁵

Many people are beginning to perceive the Union as the symbol of the globalisation that has brought destruction upon the European style of life. A 2014 study revealed that as many as 64% of the citizens in Germany, Poland, Greece, Bulgaria, Spain and the Czech Republic blame the European institutions for the current economic hardship.⁶ This is a misperception. In fact, the EU represents one of the last remaining protections of Europe's economic, social and security model. The problem is that people are not aware of this.

The EU institutions need to take up the gauntlet and start defending the European project. They need to learn to speak loud and clear, to cut through the clamour and clatter being generated online. The genuine benefits of the EU must be made known again—and quickly. Public institutions across the world regularly launch public awareness and advertising campaigns focused on issues such as clean air and fighting poverty. Indeed, one such campaign—UNICEF's Tap Project, launched in the US in 2007—received an award for being the fifteenth best advertising campaign in the twenty-first century.⁷ The EU needs comparable promotional campaigns to build public support and trust. There is no time to waste as Eurobarometer data show that the declared level of trust in the EU has generally been falling over the last years.

The purpose of this paper is to analyse potential new ways of 'advertising the EU'. The key assumption of the paper is that, whenever possible, EU institutions should follow best practices from the business sector since these have proved to be more effective in the current communication environment.

The discussion is divided into three parts. Part 1 deals with new patterns of political communication in the context of global social anxieties. In Part 2, past and present EU communication strategies will

⁵ H. Grabbe and S. Lehne, 'Can the EU Survive Populism?' *Carnegie Europe* (online), 14 June 2016.

⁶ K. Dethlefsen, J. A. Emmanouilidis, A. Mitsos, A. Primatarova, R. Špok, P. Świeboda (eds.), *Social Cohesion in Europe after the Crisis* (Warsaw: demosEUROPA, 2014), 10.

⁷ *Advertising Age* (online), 'Top Ad Campaigns of the 21st century'.



be analysed. Then in Part 3, finally, on the third level, concrete steps inspired by business practices will be proposed. All three parts complement each other and lead to a better understanding of the communication dilemmas facing Europe. This year we celebrate the sixtieth anniversary of the Treaty of Rome. There cannot be a better opportunity to reconnect with citizens.

Communicating in the era of post-truth politics



The patterns of communication have changed immensely over the last two decades. This concerns the speed at which information spreads, the channels of distribution and the abundance of data. Overload is becoming evident. Already in 2009 a typical white-collar worker was spending 20 hours a week managing email.⁸ On an average day, users worldwide post a mind-boggling 340 million Tweets and well over 55 million Facebook updates.⁹ The Internet, especially the social media, is the leading driver of disruption.

One finds these trends in all Western countries. Still, they are most obvious in the US, which was one of the first countries to adopt online media. According to a Pew Research Centre report published in July 2016, as many as 50% of Americans aged 18–29 use online platforms (social media, websites and mobile applications) as their primary source of information.¹⁰ Of this same age group, only 27% often get news from local, cable or network television, and a mere 5% opt for printed newspapers. Television remains the main source of information only for older Americans. Generational change being unstoppable, full dominance by online sources is clearly in sight in the US.

Similar trends are in evidence in Europe. In November 2015, EU citizens considered the Internet to be the third most important source of information (just after television and radio), with 59% using it every day.¹¹ The use of online social networks has accelerated most significantly. In the autumn of 2015, half of Europeans used social media at least once a week, which represents an increase of 6% on the autumn of 2013 and 15% on 2011. On average, only a third of EU citizens consider the social media a reliable source of information. But in some member states they are considered trustworthy. Poland tops the list with 53% of its citizens saying that these media are reliable, followed by Romania (46%) and Slovenia (43%).¹² The younger respondents are more likely to find social media trustworthy.

This is not the first time a new medium has revolutionised the communication environment. The arrival of the radio and television did the same. However, the social media have the capacity to distort

⁸ P. Hemp, 'Death by Information Overload', *Harvard Business Review* (online), September 2009.

⁹ C. Gallo, *The Storyteller's Secret: From TED Speakers to Business Legends, Why Some Ideas Catch on And Others Don't* (London: Macmillan, 2016), 221.

¹⁰ A. Mitchell et al., *The Modern News Consumer*, *Pew Research Center* (online), July 2016, 4.

¹¹ European Commission, Standard Eurobarometer 84, *Media Use in the European Union* (Autumn 2015), 16.

¹² European Commission, Special Eurobarometer 452, *Media Pluralism and Democracy* (November 2016), 31.



reality in a way that has never been seen before. This is not only due to the well-known phenomenon of ‘bubble creation’: the way the social media create closed communities or even ‘echo chambers’ of users who share the same ideas and opinions in a closed circuit. These bubbles, as worrying as they are, might be a lesser evil. The bigger problem is that the content itself is being corrupted. This is happening in many ways.

First, with online platforms, the speed at which news is communicated has increased to absurd levels. News unfolds live with no time for reflection whatsoever. The devastating effects this has had on politics and the public debate are starting to become visible. Politicians have moved from a ‘win-the-day’ mentality (where the focus lies on prevailing in the evening news) to a ‘win-the-minute’ approach (trying to respond to everything in real time).¹³ The machinery of government has not been adapted to such speeds, and the EU institutional framework even less.

The demise of the traditional mass media as the gatekeepers of the public debate is an additional potential source of problems. For decades journalists at major media organisations decided which ideas could be discussed publicly and which were too radical. The social platforms have changed that. Since there are no gatekeepers, shrewd and ruthless politicians can exploit the newly gained direct access to millions. This is best described by the phrase ‘post-truth politics’, which was coined by David Roberts, a blogger on the Grist website. Originally it referred to climate change denial, which is found mostly among right-wing organisations.¹⁴ Now it refers to the whole spectrum of politics and public debate. In the post-truth environment, feelings trump experience. Innumerable messages are purposely riddled with lies, and many people do not seem to care anymore whether the messages conveyed are linked to reality. Instead of truth, people content themselves with ‘truthiness’: ideas which ‘feel right’ or ‘should be true’—but are not necessarily so.¹⁵

The 2016 US presidential elections offer a good illustration of this. BuzzFeed reported that in the months preceding the vote, fake stories related to the elections generated more engagement (i.e. shares, likes and comments) than did the best-performing verified news. It was most probably the first

¹³ R. Colvile, ‘Faster Media, Fractured Government’, *Politico*, 23 April 2016.

¹⁴ *The Economist*, ‘Yes, I’d Lie to You’, 10 September 2016.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*



time in the history of the Internet that fake news had out-performed verified accounts. What happened is that, in the social media environment (the dominant channel of communication for 18–29-year-olds in the US), more people were exposed to outright lies about candidates (especially Hillary Clinton) than to the truth about them and their campaigns. The 20 most popular fake stories from hoax sites and partisan blogs scored 8,711,000 shares, reactions, and comments on Facebook—more than the 20 best-performing stories from major news outlets.¹⁶ Michał Nowosielski, former creative director of the advertising agency BBDO, has commented that on the Internet any objective and honest account of events will always lose out to those generating negative emotions, because it is less entertaining.¹⁷

Another feature of post-truth communication is its contempt for experts. The process of ditching experts and replacing them with the wisdom of the crowd has gone unnoticed for years. It started with trivia: the online-based forums that allow customers to rate restaurants, hotels and other service providers. ‘At a time when we increasingly rely on crowd-sourced advice rather than official experts to choose a restaurant, healthcare and holidays, it seems strange to expect voters to listen to official experts when it comes to politics.’¹⁸ There are two basic problems with this. The first is bad practices. According to some online marketing experts, buying mass fake reviews has become increasingly prevalent in the e-commerce marketing industry. The second has to do with human psychology. Using ‘a person like me’ to present familiar narratives helps them trump fact and argument, however false they may be.¹⁹

Ed Wasserman, the dean of the Berkeley Graduate School of Journalism at the University of California, argued that in the 2016 US presidential elections the traditional, fact-checking media did not really have an impact. Donald Trump was able to influence people without undergoing the usual kinds of quality checks that are associated with reaching the masses.²⁰ With over 1.7 billion users worldwide, Facebook is more dominant than any newspaper or television station has ever been.

¹⁶ C. Silverman, ‘This Analysis Shows How Fake Election News Stories Outperformed Real News On Facebook’, *BuzzFeedNews*, 16 November 2016.

¹⁷ In an interview with the author, Warsaw, 28 November 2016.

¹⁸ G. Tett, ‘Why We No Longer Trust the Experts’, *Financial Times*, 1 July 2016.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

²⁰ *Advertising Age* (online), ‘How Facebook, Twitter Helped Lead Trump to Victory’, 9 November 2016.



The triumphant march of untruths is being made easier by human psychology. Media users favour information sources consistent with their preferences to avoid mentally fatiguing cognitive dissonance.²¹ People chose to believe 'alternative facts' instead.²² The totally fake account of Pope Francis endorsing Donald Trump had (as of 9 November 2016) 868,000 Facebook shares. On this same date the journalist piece that uncovered its falsity had been shared a mere 33,000 times.²³

The Brexit referendum in Britain is another illustration of these trends. Among other reasons, the Vote Leave campaign won because it knew how to use the potential of the new communication patterns to amplify and tap into popular emotions. Like Trump's campaign, the Leave camp did everything it could to speak directly to the voters. It spent 'a big chunk' of its £7 million communication budget on paid content on the social platforms.²⁴ And from the very beginning, the Leave camp seemed to understand that facts do not matter anymore.²⁵

²¹ J. Moeller and C. de Vreese, 'The Differential Role of the Media as an Agent of Political Socialization in Europe', *European Journal of Communication* 28/3 (2013), 312.

²² K. Viner, 'How Technology Disrupted the Truth', *The Guardian*, 12 July 2016.

²³ J. Benton, 'The Forces That Drove This Election's Media Failure Are Likely to Get Worse', *NiemanLab*, 9 November 2016.

²⁴ H. Hodson, 'How Your Facebook Feed Will Affect Your Brexit Vote', *New Scientist*, 1 June 2016.

²⁵ K. Viner, 'How Technology Disrupted the Truth'.



**EU
communication
strategies, past
and present**



This paper defines ‘EU communication’ broadly so as to include all types of transmissions of information that originate from the EU institutions, whether one- or two-way, where these transmissions impart content that the institutions have created for the purpose of fulfilling their statutory missions. These transmissions can be carried out through any possible medium (written, sound, video, online content, etc.) and can occur in the context of media and citizens relations, PR activities or other efforts aimed at encouraging stakeholder involvement, such as running information bureaus.²⁶ The paper focuses on the activities of two European institutions: the European Commission and the European Parliament (EP). When it comes to intensity, the budget allocated and so on, the communication activities of the other EU institutions are not even remotely comparable. The Commission and the EP are the voice of the EU, although the role of European political parties is worth noting too.

It needs to be emphasised that the decision to communicate to citizens is not left to the fancy of bureaucrats: it is an obligation. Like all other democratic governing entities that influence citizens’ lives and are publicly financed, the EU must explain its results, its functioning and the rationale behind its decisions. The Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union itself, among other provisions, guarantees citizens’ right to be informed.²⁷

The general public evaluates the EU’s performance on the basis of what is communicated about its decision-making and activities, and about the conduct of its representatives. In a time when many citizens have lost faith in governments and institutions, proper communication is more important than ever. Only authentic communication can reassure people that things are under control²⁸ and restore trust and a good reputation.²⁹ It is an uphill challenge for public organisations, as their political nature limits the extent to which reputation can be managed.³⁰ These organisations are problem solvers, which means that they are inextricably linked to problems (such as poverty and unemployment). The mass media’s appetite for bad news closes the vicious circle: they report on organisations mostly in negative contexts.³¹

²⁶ N. Stroeker, A. van der Graaf and B.-J. Buischool, ‘Communicating “Europe” to Its Citizens: State of Affairs and Prospects’, European Parliament, Directorate-General for Internal Policies, Policy Department B: Structural and Cohesion Policy, November 2014, 19.

²⁷ Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union, art. 41(2), art. 42 and art. 27.

²⁸ L. Van Hauwaert, Managing Director, EU Institutions, WPP Government & Public Sector Practice, interview by the author, Brussels, 28 October 2016.

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ C. Valentini, ‘Political Public Relations in the European Union: EU Reputation and Relationship Management Under Scrutiny’, *Public Relations Journal* 7/4 (2013), 3.

³¹ A. Waeraas and H. Byrkjeflot, ‘Public Sector Organisations and Reputation Management: Five Problems’, 22.



Effective communication alone will not reverse the deeply rooted negative public mood. Communication is most effective when paired with real results. According to public relations practitioners, people do not tolerate positive messages that are not accompanied by palpable action and effects.³² But without effective communication, even the boldest decisions may go unnoticed. If citizens are unaware of what the EU does and how it benefits them, how can ‘output legitimacy’ (i.e. legitimacy based on what the EU provides to citizens) be established? With a proliferation of referenda on EU matters, the future of European integration hinges upon public support built on communication.³³

The Commission’s communication activities in the past

In 1950–60 the European institutions had no specific communication strategy. It would be fair to say that at the very beginning of European integration, these institutions focused on the opinion-making elite, not on the general public. The institutions took public support for granted, enjoying what scholars call a ‘permissive consensus era’.³⁴ Over the years, as the EU grew and new competences were acquired, the institutions started to engage in communication activities that were explicitly directed at citizens in general. But it was only in 1970–80 that the first information campaigns were launched. From the beginning, the fundamental rule was that information had to be impartial.

Since the adoption of the Maastricht Treaty, people have become aware of the ever-growing gap between the European political elite and the citizens. It was in the UK and Denmark that the presumption of the ‘permissive consensus’ on deepening integration first started to crack (for this ‘consensus’ never was a real consensus among citizens). But with the French and Dutch referenda in 2005, the situation took a dramatic

³² L. Van Hauwaert, interview by the author, Brussels, 28 October 2016.

³³ R. Vliegenthart et al., ‘News Coverage and Support for European Integration 1990–2006’, *International Journal of Public Opinion Research* 20/4 (2008), 416.

³⁴ C. de Vreese, interview by the author, Amsterdam, 1 April 2017.



turn. In 2006 the European Commission had to admit officially that the EU's connection with citizens had been severed.³⁵

The EU's communication strategies were developed in the first half of the 2000s. The goal was to repair the link between the EU elites and the citizens, to strengthen the democratic legitimacy of the EU by bringing it closer to citizens.³⁶ In 2004, with the appointment of the first Barroso Commission, communication became an official EU policy in its own right when Margot Wallstrom became the first ever commissioner for communication. In the following years, the Commission issued several documents that described the new approach³⁷. The 2005 *Action Plan* identified three principles of EU communication: 'listening' (allowing citizens to have a say), 'explaining' (clarifying the impact of EU policies on daily life) and 'going local' (connecting to citizens on the ground). The Commission presented this plan as a break with the past, a fundamentally different way of communicating.³⁸ Unfortunately, the documents adopted in 2005–7 did not spell out how the new ideas could be implemented in practice.³⁹ As one expert put it, 'The "Plan D" calls for debate, but it is not entirely clear what exactly should be debated.'⁴⁰

The Parliament's communication activities in the past

Acting in parallel with the European Commission, the EP developed its own communication activities. Every five years since 1979, it has launched communication campaigns aimed at increasing the

³⁵ European Commission, *White Paper on an European Communication Policy*, COM (2006) 35 final, (1 February 2006).

³⁶ E. Monaghan, 'Communicating Europe: The role of Organised Civil Society', *Journal of Contemporary European Research*, 4/1 (2008), 18.

³⁷ *Action Plan to Improve Communicating Europe by the Commission*, SEC (2005) 985 final (20 July 2005); *The Commission's Contribution to the Period of Reflection and Beyond: Plan D for Democracy, Dialogue and Debate*, COM (2005) 494 final (13 October 2005); *White Paper on an European Communication Policy*, COM (2006) 35 final (1 February 2006); and *Communicating Europe in Partnership*, COM (2007) 568 final (3 October 2007).

³⁸ E. Monaghan, 'Communicating Europe', 20.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 21.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 29.



turnout in European elections. Some of these campaigns were limited to providing information on European elections (1979 and 2004). Others were more ambitious, explaining the role of the EP in Europeans' daily lives. The 2014 campaign stood out from the earlier ones in being almost federalist in character: for the first time in history, European political parties attempted to create a truly pan-European electoral platform. This included the choice of candidates for the office of the President of the European Commission.⁴¹

The communication strategies that the European Commission and the EP developed at the beginning of the 2000s were based on three core assumptions. The first was that transparency is what citizens want. The second was that this transparency could be achieved by cooperating with the mass media, which would increase the EU's visibility.⁴² The third assumption was that the better informed citizens are, the more they will understand the EU—and, presumably, the more they will be willing to support European integration.

The Commission's communication activities at present

The European Commission—and more precisely, its Directorate-General for Communication—remains the most important player in the field of communication to the European public. This is closely linked to the European Commission's role as the guardian of the EU Treaties and the guarantor of their implementation. The resources at its disposal, both human and material, help to give it a leading role.

President Jean-Claude Juncker's Commission seems aware of both the past strategic deficiencies of the communication policy and the consequences of these shortcomings. It must be emphasised that at the

⁴¹ N. Stroecker, A. van der Graaf and B.-J. Buischool, 'Communicating "Europe" to Its Citizens', 55–6.

⁴² J. Lodge and K. Sarikakis, 'Communicating Europe: Political Steps to Facilitating a Public Sphere?', in J. Lodge and K. Sarikakis (eds.), *Communication, Mediation and Culture in the Making of Europe* (Il Mulino: Bologna, 2013), 21, 24.



time of writing, the Commission is in the middle of launching a new attempt to overhaul EU-related communication. Three new goals have been set: to make EU citizens aware of EU policies; to engage citizens and create the sense of ownership and European identity; and to provide the European institutions with feedback on trends in European societies (that is, feedback on EU citizens' concerns, hopes and expectations). Instead of providing a toolbox for the media and limiting itself to reacting to events as they unfold, the European Commission plans to focus on directly targeting the audiences in different contexts: 'listening to citizens and engaging them. Communication cannot be treated as an add-on, better packaging of the product. It must be built-in policies from the very start.'⁴³

Currently the European Commission recognises the following axes of communication: jobs and growth, European Solidarity Corps, social pillar, Erasmus +, digital single market (including the Wi-Fi for Europe project) and migration. The EU narrative would be based on three messages: the EU delivers, the EU empowers and the EU protects.⁴⁴ The European Commission also wants to use emotional experiences. For instance, instead of presenting graphs and tables showing the millions the EU spends on humanitarian assistance, a film crew would be sent to Haiti to shoot several powerful 30-second videos documenting the real impact of the EU's commitment. As officials at the Directorate-General for Communication stressed: 'We're sitting on a goldmine of real people stories and accomplished projects. History of the past European communication is partly the history of missed opportunities.'⁴⁵

When devising new ways of reaching the public, the European Commission can draw from a number of recent successful communication initiatives. Two examples are worth mentioning: a pilot project entitled EU Working for You and the EU funds awareness campaigns. One of these campaigns was launched in October 2012 by the Polish government. Although it lasted only one and a half months (and was carried out mainly on television), it produced positive results. It led to a noticeable increase in the number of people who see the positive impact of European funding: from 43% (pre-campaign test) to 49%⁴⁶. Independently conducted studies show that such campaigns, focused on (and financed from) European funds, have

⁴³ M. Landabaso, Director of the European Commission's Directorate-General for Communication, and O. Bruyas, advisor at the same organisation, interview by the author, Brussels, 7 November 2016.

⁴⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁵ Ibid.

⁴⁶ TNS Polska, *Badanie poziomu dotarcia kampanii medialnej marki 'Fundusze Europejskie'* [Research on the Reach Achieved During the Media Campaign of the Brand 'European Funds'] (Warsaw: TNS Polska SA, 2013), 6–15.



contributed to maintaining a high level of support for and trust in the European institutions and European integration.⁴⁷

The EU Working for You campaign was even bigger. With a budget of €13 million, it ran from November 2014 to February 2015 in six countries: Germany, Finland, Latvia, Poland, Portugal and Spain. Its aim was to demonstrate the tangible, easy-to-understand benefits of the EU. The campaign message was spread using different media: television, online media and the printed press. The total reach of the campaign, after duplicate views were removed, was 115 million people—more than a fifth of the EU's population.⁴⁸ Thanks to the substantial budget, the media visibility of EU Working for You was massive. In Poland alone it was broadcast 4,439 times on 7 television stations, supported by online and print ads in 17 different media (newspapers, weeklies and television magazines).⁴⁹ The impact of the campaign was measured: the net positive result ranged from 55% in Portugal, through 34% in Poland and 27% in Spain, to 11% in Germany.

The Parliament's communication activities at present

In a discussion on the communication strategy of the EP, the Parliament's dual nature must be underlined. On one hand, Members of the EP and political groups are free to pursue their own communication goals. This leads to a certain amount of cacophony—which is as democratic as it is inevitable. On the other hand, the EP services within its own Directorate-General for Communication pursue their own policies. The EP's main goal is to raise EU citizens' awareness of the Parliament, its political nature and powers—in other words, to communicate about itself.⁵⁰ The target group of this communication is defined—too

⁴⁷ J. Skrzyńska, account manager in Kantar TNS Warsaw, interview by the author, 28 September 2016.

⁴⁸ M. Landabaso and O. Bruyas, interview by the author, Brussels, 7 November 2016.

⁴⁹ European Commission, Directorate-General for Communication, internal memo (November 2014), provided to the author.

⁵⁰ European Parliament, Directorate-General for Communication, *Annual Activity Report 2015*, 4. File obtained at author's request on 13 October 2016.



vaguely—as a ‘wide audience’.⁵¹ The breakdown of EP’s Directorate-General for Communication budget is also intriguing. In 2015, 42% of the total budget (set at €92 million) was allocated to visitor services at the EP premises (Brussels and Strasbourg), national EP Information Offices, Parliamentarium and so on. Audio-visual services (including the EP’s television and radio production capabilities) accounted for 24%. The ‘targeted dialogue in the member states’ was allocated 11% of the budget; Web presence, 9%; and information campaigns, events and exhibitions, 6%. Finally, media monitoring activities and the press service each received 3%.⁵²

The Parliament has been making praiseworthy efforts to communicate more effectively. One of the examples of good results achieved with extra effort is the activity related to the State of the Union speech delivered on 14 September 2016 by the Commission’s President Jean-Claude Juncker. For a few hours, the #SOTEU hashtag trended globally.⁵³ The estimated reach of the #SOTEU-related content was close to 21 million.⁵⁴ Still, this figure, as impressive as it is, pales by comparison to the other State of the Union address: US President Barack Obama’s 2016 speech, his last #SOTU, reached an audience of one billion.⁵⁵

Efforts to improve the EU’s visibility are also being undertaken by the European parties. During the televised *Spitzenkandidaten* debate on 15 May 2014, the official hashtag #telleurope trended (at least momentarily) in eight member states.⁵⁶

⁵¹ N. Stroeker, A. van der Graaf and B.-J. Buiszkool, ‘Communicating “Europe” to Its Citizens’, 45.

⁵² European Parliament, Directorate-General for Communication, *Annual Activity Report 2015*, 11.

⁵³ The term ‘trending’ is used to describe the most popular topic of conversation at a given moment in a given social medium. The most common medium is Twitter, where the use of hashtags (#) to indicate keywords was born.

⁵⁴ European Parliament Web Team, ‘State of the Union: How to Best Promote a Political Event’, 27 September 2016.

⁵⁵ Y. Arora, ‘Infographic – How Social Media Reacted to State of The Union 2016’, *Zoomph*, 14 January 2016.

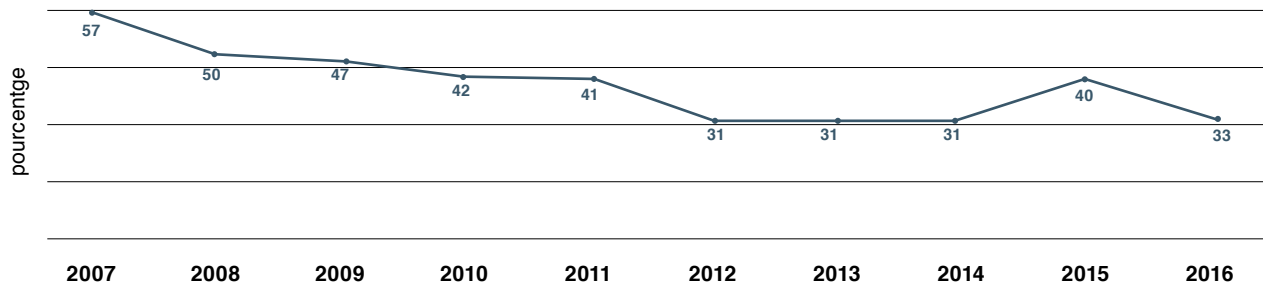
⁵⁶ P. Nulty et al., ‘Social Media and Political Communication in the 2014 Elections to the European Parliament’, 12 October 2015, 6.

**A look
at the results:
how the EU is
losing Europeans'
support**



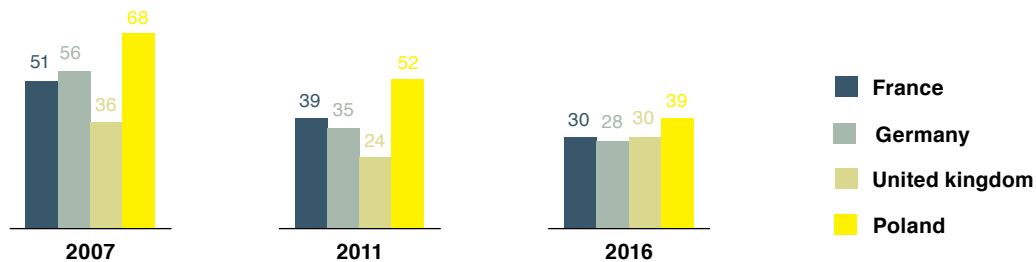
The Eurobarometer polls make it possible to assess changes in how the public views the Union. One of the Eurobarometer indicators seems particularly relevant: the declared level of trust in the EU. In recent years, this has generally been falling. This holds both for the EU as a whole (see Figure 1) and for individual member states (see Figure 2).

Figure 1 Percentage of EU citizens who tend to trust the Union: EU average



Sources: Standard Eurobarometer 67 Full report, Standard Eurobarometer 75, Standard Eurobarometer 85.

Figure 2 Percentage of citizens who tend to trust the Union: selected member states



Sources: Standard Eurobarometer 67 Full report, Standard Eurobarometer 75, Standard Eurobarometer 85.



The declining turnout at European elections provides further evidence that the EU is losing public support. Turnout dropped from 62% in 1979 (the year of the first direct elections to the EP) to a record low of 43.1% in 2014.

The available studies agree that bad communication has been at least partly responsible for the decline in trust in the EU and for the Union's tarnished image. As early as 1994 the European Commission admitted that decreasing public support was largely due to 'inadequate information and understanding'.⁵⁷ In 2003 Professor C. de Vreese warned that the EU is particularly challenged in the field of effective communication and that the negative consequences of the failures in this area had been building up, to the detriment of the EU.⁵⁸ What could possibly have gone wrong?

⁵⁷ N. Stroecker, A. van der Graaf and B.-J. Buiskool, 'Communicating "Europe" to Its Citizens', 17.

⁵⁸ C. de Vreese, *Communicating Europe*, Foreign Policy Centre, British Council (Brussels, 2003), 5–7.



Seven weaknesses in EU communication



There are many reasons for these communication failures. The following analysis concentrates on the seven most important elements.

1. Waning output legitimacy

Karl Marx claimed: 'It is not the consciousness of men that determines their existence but, on the contrary, their social existence determines their consciousness.'⁵⁹ He was probably right. For a long time the integration process has been justified by the material results it provides. The EU's appeal was based on output legitimacy. The major elements of this output were easy to identify, starting with the single market and the free movement of persons. Unfortunately, this output legitimacy has been fading. The more the perception of living standards worsened, the more difficult it was to explain the benefits of European integration. The EU was apparently unable to persuade citizens that it had added value.

The case of Spain illustrates this well. For many years, Spaniards were amongst the strongest supporters of European integration. In 2009 as much as 59% of the Spanish population supported economic integration. Four years later this had fallen to a paltry 34%. In just four years the EU had ceased to be seen as a guarantor of a good quality of life and had instead become a source of insecurity.⁶⁰ This change was directly related to the severe worsening of the economic situation. Although this is not really a problem of communication, it did complicate EU communication even further.

⁵⁹ K. Marx, *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy* (Chicago: Charles H. Kerr & Company, 1904), 11.

⁶⁰ N. Stroecker, A. van der Graaf and B.-J. Buischool, 'Communicating "Europe" to Its Citizens', 27.



2. Missing input legitimacy

EU communication has also been incapable of defending another source of the Union's legitimacy, 'input legitimacy'. This can be understood as the widespread feeling that people take part in the EU's governance.

From the very beginning, the European community has been considered a project of a political elite. The more clout European institutions and laws had, the more the perceived 'elitism' was an issue. This came to a head when the crisis broke out in 2008. Various austerity measures, often perceived as impositions from above, were taken at closed door summits in Brussels. This strengthened the feeling shared by many Europeans that the elitist EU is forcing them into unacceptable situations,⁶¹ without asking their opinion or consent. EU communication did not address this issue properly, if at all.

3. Low visibility

The third cardinal weakness of European communication is its low visibility. Despite the efforts taken, the EU Institutions have long been struggling to generate substantial media coverage. Apparently, transparency has not brought the expected results. Studies covering the final three decades of the last century show the very low coverage of EU topics in the news, even during the campaigns preceding the elections to the EP. For example, in 1999 only 8% of the news programmes, on average, were devoted to the European elections.⁶² Nothing has changed since then: a 2013 study confirmed that the EU's presence in news programmes is marginal.⁶³ Private publishers and broadcasters find the topic unattractive, while the

⁶¹ Ibid, 29, 30.

⁶² C. de Vreese, *Communicating Europe*, Foreign Policy Centre, British Council (Brussels, 2003), 13.

⁶³ H. G. Boomgard et al., 'Across Time and Space: Explaining Variation in News Coverage of the European Union', *European Journal of Political Research* 52 (2013), 609.



market share of public media (or private media with a public mission) has been constantly decreasing.⁶⁴ The EU institutions claim that they focus on journalists from ‘traditional’ media (television, printed press and radio). But they apparently have not met the media’s needs.

First of all, the institutions have concentrated too much on EU correspondents based in Brussels and have made too little effort to connect with national and regional journalists.⁶⁵ Second, the content itself has been judged to be neither appealing nor interesting. In most cases, the EU has spoken in an impartial, neutral and transparent way. As understandable as this may be, it has made EU communication gutless, boring and ineffective.⁶⁶ Some studies say that the dull tone of EU communication is bound up with how the EU works. Decision-making in the EU is based on compromise, which by its very nature requires diplomatic language and restraint.⁶⁷ Conflict is a deal breaker, but at the same time, it makes the story more interesting. But however tempting it may have been for the European Commission or the EP to heat up the conflict with member states’ governments over this or that decision and to make things ‘emotional’—hence newsworthy—at the end of the day, neither institution has played this card. The instances are rare where an EU institution has deliberately entered into conflict with one or more member states—as the European Commission did in early 2016, when it started the rule of law procedure against Poland’s new right-wing government.⁶⁸ This had the effect of instantly increasing the EU’s visibility.

Independent evaluations point to other sources of this low visibility. One is the Commission’s overreliance on its spokesman service, which is considered the most important element of its communication machine. This runs contrary to the conclusions of many studies that the model of communication based on the mediated messages is no longer effective.⁶⁹ Other sources of the lack of visibility are costly paper publications⁷⁰ and lack of a commonly agreed ‘institutional identity’.⁷¹

⁶⁴ Ibid, 613.

⁶⁵ N. Stroeker, A. van der Graaf and B.-J. Buiskool, ‘Communicating “Europe” to Its Citizens’, 14.

⁶⁶ C. Valentini, ‘Political Public Relations in the European Union’, 8–10.

⁶⁷ N. Stroeker, A. van der Graaf and B.-J. Buiskool, ‘Communicating “Europe” to Its Citizens’, 74.

⁶⁸ M. de la Baume, ‘EU Launches “Rule of Law” Probe of Poland’, *Politico*, 13 January 2016.

⁶⁹ N. Stroeker, A. van der Graaf and B.-J. Buiskool, ‘Communicating “Europe” to Its Citizens’, 45.

⁷⁰ Ibid, 51.

⁷¹ C. Valentini, ‘Political Public Relations in the European Union’, 9.



The Commission assumed that transparency would be the best way to combat mistrust. But while ethically laudable, this has proved insufficient on its own.⁷² The European institutions believed that they did not need to insist on explaining what they do, as their ‘good product’, meaning good governance, would defend itself. ‘We are living in a world where facts don’t speak for themselves. These days even perfect products need marketing’, commented Krzysztof Kruszewski, CEO of Millward Brown Poland.⁷³

4. Targeting non-existent European public opinion

The fourth problem with EU communication has been the presumption that there exists such a thing as a European public sphere.⁷⁴ Take the immigration crisis as an example. European institutions have communicated about it as if the problem was perceived in the same way in all 28 member states. But it is not. Despite more than 60 years of European integration, social discussions on EU-related issues take place firmly within national borders.⁷⁵ Most political communication is country specific: the public reads about EU politics from a national perspective.⁷⁶ There is no EU-wide debate on EU-related topics. At best, there is ‘parallelisation’: the same or similar issues are debated at the same time, but in national contexts, without reference or links to the debates in other countries.⁷⁷ A European public sphere does not exist because of the diverse cultural, linguistic and historical contexts of the individual member states. The countries also differ greatly in the matter of ‘euro-socialisation’: interaction with people from other EU countries. For example, over 70% of the Netherland’s population say that they have travelled to another member state and/or have interacted with somebody from another EU country. Countries like Poland, Italy and Portugal are at the opposite end of the scale. Only 30% or fewer of

⁷² J. Lodge and K. Sarikakis, ‘Communicating Europe’, 21, 24.

⁷³ In an interview with the author, Warsaw, 30 August 2016.

⁷⁴ J. Lodge and K. Sarikakis, ‘Communicating Europe’, 30.

⁷⁵ N. Stroeker, A. van der Graaf and B.-J. Buisckool, ‘Communicating “Europe” to Its Citizens’, 31.

⁷⁶ C. de Vreese, *Communicating Europe*, 8.

⁷⁷ P. Nulty et al., ‘Social Media and Political Communication’, 8.



their citizens have travelled abroad or met somebody from another member state.⁷⁸ But despite these realities, the European institutions continue to appeal to the concept of European public opinion in official documents.⁷⁹

5. Forgotten values

It is not only the lack of a European public sphere that has undermined the EU's communication activities. Something even more important is missing: universally accepted European values. They are mentioned in the treaties: democracy, the rule of law and respect for human dignity. But is this list complete? What about European patriotism? The EU has not offered anything tangible in that field. Certain identifiable symbols have been introduced: the blue starred flag, the EU anthem (Beethoven's 'Ode to Joy'), the standardisation of passports and driving licences and European health insurance cards. But it appears that these are not enough.⁸⁰

The EU has been unable to create a sense of belonging, an identity of its own to be shared by citizens of the member states. Especially in times of economic hardship, the issue of identity—the feeling of being part of a bigger group—gains in importance, as it strengthens the sense of security. The EU is obviously not able to offer an ethnic-based identity, but it could have tried to focus on material values. Material solidarity, not an abstract but a tangible one, could have been the source of 'European patriotism'. The sense of belonging could have been built around concrete benefits, such as the European social safety net. This sort of benefit-based attachment should have been developed before the crisis, in times of economic prosperity. Another opportunity has been missed.

⁷⁸ N. Stroeker, A. van der Graaf and B.-J. Buischool, 'Communicating "Europe" to Its Citizens', 33.

⁷⁹ J. Lodge and K. Sarikakis, 'Communicating Europe', 30.

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, 20.



6. Cacophony and fragmentation

Persisting fragmentation is another weakness in the EU's communication activities. These are not fully effective if measured against the resources spent, and the basic issue here is that they are scattered. The communication efforts of the different EU institutions are not aligned. Even within a single institution, there are often too many incoherent activities.⁸¹

Fragmentation not only makes the EU's voice less audible: it also triggers negative reactions as it makes citizens believe that the EU is not able to speak coherently, something they expect it to do. Each of the three main EU decision-making institutions has its own communication department and, to a large extent, a separate communication strategy. There is not enough coordination between them, although many attempts have been made to establish this, such as the Inter-institutional Group on Information.⁸²

7. Neglected core audiences

The seventh weakness in the EU's communication activities is their limited ability to identify and reach core audiences. There are four major audiences with whom the EU's institutions should have tried to build and maintain relationships: the governments of member states, journalists, special interest groups and European citizens. Of these four groups, the relationship with citizens has been the least developed. Measures to broaden the outreach—for example, custom-created online platforms such as *Debate Europe*, *Your Voice in Europe* and *Citizens Agora*—have not been successful in terms of public penetration.⁸³

⁸¹ L. Van Hauwaert, interview by the author, Brussels, 28 October 2016.

⁸² This body brings together the senior figures responsible for communication at the EP, the Commission, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee, and the European Committee of the Regions. See C. Valentini, 'Political Public Relations in the European Union', 6–7.

⁸³ Ibid.



The failure to recognise the needs of the core audiences has resulted in a style of communication that is impersonal and distant, and overly bureaucratic, formal, technical, long-winded, inward-looking, abstract and (sometimes) complacent.⁸⁴ Viewed from a distance, it looks as though the pro-European leaders on both the European and national levels have failed to understand the true nature of the people they have tried to talk to. European communication was built on the idealistic picture of well-educated citizens who speak various European languages, are open to cultural differences and are able to place their national identities in the wider context. But as Szymon Gutkowski, CEO of advertising agency DDB Tribal, has commented, most Europeans speak only one language well. And not many of them belong to the jet set, unlike the members of cultural, academic and business elites—or Erasmus graduates, for that matter.⁸⁵

⁸⁴ N. Stroecker, A. van der Graaf and B.-J. Buiskool, 'Communicating "Europe" to Its Citizens', 12.

⁸⁵ In an interview with the author, Warsaw, 7 September 2016.

**New ways of
communicating the EU
inspired by business
best practices:
recommendations**



Better communication alone will not be enough to overcome the existential crisis the EU is going through. But without more effective communication, any change in European integration, however deep, may go unnoticed. The EU cannot survive without better reputation and relationship management.⁸⁶ As has been said, it is communication that builds reputation.⁸⁷

The insurgent, anti-establishment parties differ from one another, but they seem to share both the marketing techniques needed to destabilise the EU and the willingness to do this—some of them want to see the EU destroyed altogether. Populist parties (both right- and left-wing) are gaining strength with each election: in June 2016 they held over 1,300 seats in national parliaments in the EU.⁸⁸ For the EU to survive, the populist narrative must be effectively countered. There is no magical solution to all of the EU's communication problems. As explained, many different approaches and tools have been recommended over the past years. Many of these were duly implemented, but the results have been poor.⁸⁹ It is time to fundamentally change the approach. Instead of reinventing the wheel, European institutions need to employ proven tactics: the business approach to communication.

In the past the business sector has faced comparable challenges: how to win over new customers in oversaturated markets, how to gain customers' attention, how to stand out in the crowd and so on. Companies have been able to create effective communication, public relations and advertising tools. Car companies are not trying to appeal exclusively to reason and to 'communicate' the technological advantages of their products. Rather, they mainly sell a promise of a lifestyle customers find attractive. In other words, they sell emotions. Of course, business operates in a different context than public organisations do. Public bodies are not in a position to freely choose their strategies and identities. The same goes for the EU: its political nature imposes constraints.⁹⁰ Most public organisations do not have the required autonomy. They are often required by law to behave in a certain way.⁹¹ A public organisation's strategy and statements cannot be easily separated from the political mandate under which it

⁸⁶ C. Valentini, 'Political Public Relations in the European Union', 9.

⁸⁷ L. Van Hauwaert, interview by the author, Brussels, 28 October 2016.

⁸⁸ S. Dennison and D. Pardijs, *The World According to Europe's Insurgent Parties: Putin, Migration and People Power*, European Council on Foreign Relations (June 2016), 1–2.

⁸⁹ N. Stroeker, A. van der Graaf and B.-J. Buischool, 'Communicating "Europe" to Its Citizens', 11.

⁹⁰ A. Waeraas and H. Byrkjeflot, 'Public Sector Organisations', 186–206.

⁹¹ Ibid.



operates. It cannot freely choose its customers or the context in which it functions. Private companies can discriminate among buyers; public organisations cannot. A public organisation must often follow a policy that is perceived negatively by the general public. It is sometimes forced to take unpopular decisions, and this creates disappointment and results in negative publicity.⁹² Finally, business organisations do not necessarily have to work with the truth: they work with their interpretation of what their products offer. Their only constraint is that advertising cannot be misleading. But interpretations of what a product has to offer can be quite vague. On the contrary, public organisations are bound to facts. But even when these differences are taken into account, there still is a lot the EU institutions can learn from how businesses communicate. In developing a new approach to communication, these institutions should start by answering a number of questions of fundamental importance: Why do they engage in communication? What is the precise aim of the effort? Who is the target of the communication? Any responsible company would answer these questions before engaging in any communication activity.

The Basics

What's the Big Idea?

Not only are there too many EU institutions pursuing their own communication goals and competing for public attention, but there are also too many messages being sent at the same time. These range from messages about 'fundamental values' to those dealing with very technical matters, such as the Horizon 2020 research programme. This can be confusing. The EU should follow the lead of many successful companies and limit the number of messages it sends to the public. The new 'Big Idea' for the Union must be identified—and only one Big Idea, instead of a set of priorities.⁹³

⁹² *ibid.*

⁹³ L. Citron, WPP Government and Public Sector Practice Managing Director, interview by the author, London, 14 November 2016.



Finding the new Big Idea is by no means an easy task. Even the cornerstones of the EU, such as the single market, are being contested here and there in the EU. To appear in an EU advertising campaign, any item would need the agreement of all EU players.⁹⁴ This new Big Idea must be positive—like Erasmus+. Moreover, it should not be about defending the status quo. If the EU-brokered deal with Turkey on immigration holds and if the newly created European Border and Coastal Guard helps member states to stop the influx of refugees, then the new Big Idea could be based on the theme ‘the EU keeps immigration under control where some member states cannot cope’. This would be politically risky since it is based on the two big ifs. But it would touch a raw nerve in almost every member state.

What is in it for the people?

The Big Idea must be about telling Europeans exactly how they benefit from the EU, about how the policies affect their daily life.⁹⁵ If one says, ‘Europe is working for you’, one must be able to answer a simple question: ‘How exactly?’ The message must be focused on the end benefit. From a citizen’s point of view, that an EU-funded road shortens the travelling time between A and B is more important than are the details about its construction and financing, however impressive these may be.⁹⁶ A positive narrative, substantiated by deeds, is more powerful than many people think. Contradicting certain post-truth practices, recent research has shown that the effects of positive messages can actually outlive the results of negative messages, in terms of influencing citizens’ evaluation of how the EU is performing.⁹⁷

⁹⁴ C. de Vreese, Department of Communication Science, University of Amsterdam, interview by the author, Amsterdam, 27 October 2016.

⁹⁵ N. Stroeker, A. van der Graaf and B.-J. Buischool, ‘Communicating “Europe” to Its Citizens’, 38.

⁹⁶ M. Nowosielski, former Creative Director at BBDO Agency, interview with the author, Warsaw, 28 November 2016.

⁹⁷ P. Desmet, J. van Spanje and C. de Vreese, ‘Discussing the Democratic Deficit: Effects of Media and Interpersonal Communication on Satisfaction with Democracy in the European Union’, *International Journal of Communication* (2015), 3192.



The Message

Be persistently visible

Beyond being positive and benefits oriented, EU communication must be continually visible. Successful businesses never stop marketing and advertising. One campaign swiftly follows another. Communication has to be more continuous as it takes a very long time for a campaign message to have a lasting effect.⁹⁸ Visibility has always been the key to political effectiveness, but it is even more so in the age of social media and general information overload. For an average citizen, a full and objective assessment of political performance is close to impossible.⁹⁹ What really matters is the perceived effectiveness: a political campaign (and its content) is effective when people believe in its effectiveness. And they start to believe in it on the basis of its visibility.¹⁰⁰

Target the right audience

EU communication activities have not always reached the core audiences. They have certainly had problems reaching those social groups who are not interested in European affairs or have a negative opinion of the EU. The wrong channels have been used, and most importantly, communication has not been preceded by in-depth research.

The business sector proceeds differently. Before companies launch costly advertising campaigns, they identify as precisely as possible both the core audiences and the channels needed to reach them.

⁹⁸ E. Lecerf, Global Director for Political and Opinion Research at Kantar Public (formerly TNS Sofres), interview by the author, Warsaw, 13 October 2016.

⁹⁹ J. van Spanje et al., 'Getting the Message Across: Perceived Effectiveness of Political Campaign Communication', *Journal of Political Marketing*, 12 (2013), 102.

¹⁰⁰ *Ibid.*, 105.



The intelligent targeting of the audience should be the top priority. It should be based on ex ante, in-depth social research conducted by means of EU-wide, multiple focus groups interviews (FGI) and online panels. Before starting a new campaign, questions should be asked: Who is the target? Why? Where can a given group be found? Where does it get information from? Who influences these people? What are their expectations? It is advisable to look into socio-demographic criteria as well as behavioural insights and to test communication materials before using them.¹⁰¹ One must constantly bear in mind that each social group perceives the EU differently, depending on factors such as education, professional experience and the level of euro-socialisation. Farmers in Poland probably do not share Danish factory workers' views on the EU. If they are to be convinced of the merits and benefits of European integration, both the content and the language of the message must be adapted to their likings, language patterns and perception capabilities.

Some practitioners, such as Kruszewski, take extreme positions.¹⁰² He believes that in the current situation one cannot win people's support by way of facts and figures and careful reasoning. In Kruszewski's view, such refined communication would require an educated, well-informed audience. But the masses are not educated—not in a way that would make of them an educated citizenry. Hence his openly provocative view: 'It's advertising which guides consumers. We should stop informing about the EU and start advertising it.' Asked about the ethical justification for financing such controversial activities with public money, Kruszewski observed that promotional activities need to be labelled 'civic education' because that is what they really are. If the EU is to achieve its goals, it needs to have public support. This makes awareness and promotional campaigns more justified.

In the current political context, the following social groups merit consideration as the priority targets of EU communication activities: people who are financially disadvantaged, non-voters and Eurosceptics. There are other distinctive social groups that may be important: people living in mid- or small-sized towns; and people living in rural areas, poor districts and suburbs of big cities. Researchers also suggest paying more attention to the poorer, less-educated segments of the public (aged over 65, with primary and basic vocational education). Although they are distinct, individual groups, together they constitute the bedrock of current anti-European populism.

¹⁰¹ L. Van Hauwaert, interview by the author, Brussels, 28 October 2016.

¹⁰² K. Kruszewski, interview by the author, Warsaw, 30 August 2016.



Not surprisingly, European adolescents should also be one of the main targets of the EU communication effort. Adolescence is a crucial time for political socialisation: attitudes are created and patterns of media consumption are established.¹⁰³

The research that the European institutions need to perform before engaging in communication should not be limited to meticulous target segmentation and identifying the proper transmission channels. In parallel, the stage of public responsiveness should also be verified. Anthony Downs's theory of Issue-Attention Cycle¹⁰⁴ (and subsequent theories drawing from it, like 'public response function' theory) identifies five different stages in the public's reaction to any given issue: the pre-problem stage (the problem has not yet received any public attention); the discovery stage (after a certain threshold of attention has been reached, the general public suddenly becomes aware of a problem); the plateau (interest in a given issue stabilises and starts to wane); the decline stage (the presence of the problem starts to cause public irritation since no simple solution has been found) and finally, the post-problem stage (a given issue is considered uninteresting and eventually vanishes from the public debate).¹⁰⁵ Launching communication on a given issue at the same time the issue itself enters the fifth stage of public responsiveness would be unproductive, to say the least.

Embed communication in national contexts

EU communication must be tailored to the specific context of each member state. As already explained, there is no uniform European public opinion, and nor will there be in the foreseeable future. One should cease from any attempt to use a one-size-fits-all communication approach.

As early as 2003, de Vreese called for the 'nationalisation' of the EU narrative. European stories, including the new Big Idea, need to be discussed in the national context. The EU story must be told from the perspective of an average citizen, and this means giving it a national twist. The EU needs to talk about

¹⁰³ J. Moeller and C. de Vreese, 'The Differential Role of the Media', 319.

¹⁰⁴ K. K. Petersen, 'Revisiting Downs' Issue-Attention Cycle: International Terrorism and U.S. Public Opinion', *Journal of Strategic Security*, 2/4 (2009), 3–7.

¹⁰⁵ M. van Klingeren et al., 'Real World is Not Enough: The Media as Additional Source of Negative Attitudes Toward Immigration, Comparing Denmark and the Netherlands', *European Sociological Review*, 31/3 (2015), 271–2.



regions and member states within this context. This rule must be applied across the board, even in standard press releases.¹⁰⁶ Clearly, this nationalisation does not mean leaving EU communication to national governments. ‘Nationalised’ means ‘put in national context’: adapted to national cultures and to national emotions, anger and fears. Communication teams should be structured in accordance with, not particular themes, but national lines—as they are, in part, in the EP.¹⁰⁷ Even in the social media, most communication occurs within national and linguistic boundaries.¹⁰⁸ The EU needs to address the genuine popular craving for identity. And since there is no genuine European identity, the EU should find a way to use national ones.¹⁰⁹

Be blunt, be emotional

Communication language must be blunt. To date, the EU institutions and the whole pro-European camp have strangled themselves with excessive political correctness. Take immigration and multiculturalism. There are obvious questions that an average citizen might want to ask in this particular area, but these questions have been avoided in official public discourse as they are deemed politically incorrect. For example, does the influx of immigrants pose a risk for public health? One must allow that it does. There have been documented cases of refugees infected with tuberculosis. But this is not a reason to keep them out. Instead of dealing with questions of this kind head-on, politicians and institutions have carefully avoided them. But EU citizens have been asking these questions—and have been dismayed that no honest answers were provided.

Those representing the European institutions need to be emotional too. Following this particular piece of advice would require breaking with the decades-old practice of limiting the message to sterile facts and opinions based on reason. But it has to be done. If organisations are going to make us admire, respect and trust them, they have to appeal to our identity and not merely offer us something that meets our functional needs. This belongs to the current zeitgeist.¹¹⁰ The lack of emotional, personal identification with the EU is causing problems for European integration.¹¹¹

¹⁰⁶ C. de Vreese, *Communicating Europe*, 23–4.

¹⁰⁷ N. Stroeker, A. van der Graaf and B.-J. Buischool, ‘Communicating “Europe” to Its Citizens’, 14.

¹⁰⁸ P. Nulty et al., ‘Social Media and Political Communication’, 2.

¹⁰⁹ S. Gutkowski, interview by the author, Warsaw, 7 September 2016.

¹¹⁰ A. Waeraas and H. Byrkjeflot, ‘Public Sector Organisations’, 186–206.

¹¹¹ T.G. Ash, ‘Bij się o Europę’ [Fight for Europe], *Gazeta Wyborcza*, 27 February 2016.



Populists seem to have understood this earlier on. Their communication harnessed emotions when it offered the sense of belonging to a community, something that many citizens (who feel excluded, insecure and uncertain about the future) truly crave.¹¹² The available research indicates that the emotional element of attachment (which results in personal identification) is stronger than ‘utilitarian support’ as benefits may change in time or disappear altogether.¹¹³ The EU must challenge the populists’ messages, which are charged with negative emotions, with a message imbued with positive emotions that energise and inspire.¹¹⁴

Intensify the use of ‘new’ media

The traditional media, such as the printed press and radio (including online radio), are rapidly losing their importance to the EU’s communication process. The printed press, whose journalists used to dominate Brussels’ press corps, is in particularly bad shape. It is probable that the ‘old’ media, fighting for survival, will further limit their coverage of the EU. The European institutions have no choice but to learn how to adapt to new patterns of communication. This is not to say that the EU should stop communicating through the traditional media straightaway. The impact of these media is still considerable, as the role of British tabloids in the pre-referendum campaign showed. The tone of the news provided by the traditional media still affects the public’s evaluation of the EU’s activities and policies, so proactive media and public relations will be needed.¹¹⁵ For the time being, television remains the most powerful medium. It should remain the main channel for any well-budgeted awareness campaigns in the near future (three to five years, depending on the speed of online platform penetration).

At the same time, the EU institutions should gradually shift their focus from the old media to their new online counterpart, and especially social platforms. These platforms are used by the EU institutions. However, official EU documents seem to indicate that these organisations consider their presence on Facebook, Twitter and other social media to be merely a supplement to the communication being carried out through

¹¹² C. Reinemann et al., ‘Populist Political Communication: Toward a Model of its Causes, Forms and Effects’, in T. Aalberg et al. (eds.), *Populist Political Communication in Europe* (Routledge: New York, 2017), 19.

¹¹³ N. Stroecker, A. van der Graaf and B.-J. Buischool, ‘Communicating “Europe” to Its Citizens’, 36–7.

¹¹⁴ C. de Vreese, interview by the author, Amsterdam, 1 April 2017.

¹¹⁵ P. Desmet, J. van Spanje and C. de Vreese, ‘Discussing the Democratic Deficit’, 3192.



the press, their own paper publications (!) or static websites.¹¹⁶ Soon the relationship will have to be reversed. This would entail a modification of the position of spokesman services within the organisations. Spokesmen should be as important to the EU institutions as PR and media teams are to the marketing efforts of Apple, Daimler-Benz, Airbus and Danone.

Working with social media requires a break with the traditional media relations environment, where institutions address journalists, who in turn digest the information and pass it on. The top-down communication model that large organisations have often favoured in the past is a non-starter in today's integrated communications environment. Yet it is still too often the case that organisations tend to 'shout' out their message, while genuine direct engagement only comes through interaction with the public that is authentic, on a massive scale and meticulously sustained over time. To be more effective, voter turnout campaigns should not start six months before an election. They should build on constant citizen engagement. There is no on-and-off button in social media.¹¹⁷

The social media make it possible to gain high visibility at a relatively low cost. Again, the enemies of European integration understood this first. In the 2014 EP campaign, anti-EU candidates were especially vocal. They used their profiles on, among others, Facebook and Twitter much more heavily than did the mainstream candidates.¹¹⁸ This led to a rather surprising situation: fringe parties managed to dominate the discussion on the social media. A substantial part of the conversation on the social media was devoted to contesting the EU. Anti-EU content fared better at catching the attention of public opinion, possibly because it was much more emotional than the content offered by pro-European, mainstream MEP candidates.¹¹⁹

Better use of social media to increase (or maintain) visibility requires constant evaluations of changes in media consumption patterns. The fast-growing role of video content illustrates this well. It is predicted that in just five years (2015–20) consumer video will move from accounting for 64% of all Internet traffic to making up more than 82%. This clearly suggests which type of online content must be prioritised.¹²⁰

¹¹⁶ N. Stroeker, A. van der Graaf and B.-J. Buiskool, 'Communicating "Europe" to Its Citizens', 48.

¹¹⁷ L. Van Hauwaert, interview by the author, Brussels, 28 October 2016.

¹¹⁸ Nulty et al., 'Social Media and Political Communication', 18, 35.

¹¹⁹ Ibid., 24, 35.

¹²⁰ Cisco, *White Paper: Cisco VNI Forecast and Methodology 2015–2020*, (6 June 2016).



There is another important trend in the social media that must be mentioned at this point. Marketing spending on paid content on social media is poised to rise, as the ‘organic’ growth of reach (brought about by offering interesting and rich content, and not paid for) has stalled. Eighty per cent of industry executives polled said they had plans for placing paid advertising programs on social media within a year.¹²¹ Free marketing tools—such as posts on Facebook and Twitter—no longer result in a substantial expansion of reach. This is due to the change in the social media’s modus operandi. Both Facebook and Twitter have started to reward (in terms of reach) paying customers, limiting the potential reach of simple posts. Sustained success in marketing on the social media now requires paid advertising.¹²² The EU institutions need to accept that the social media are undergoing a transition from being shared to becoming paid media. The European Commission currently spends approximately €100,000 on social media every year. But this is not nearly enough to make a substantial impact. It is of paramount importance that funding should be increased as soon as possible. EPP Group Chairman Manfred Weber recently posted an emotional and well-produced video message on giving every 18-year-old European a free Interrail ticket so that he or she can travel and understand what the Union is about.¹²³ Such materials should be promoted intensively to increase the chance they go viral.

The tools

Advertise the Union, not the institutions

It is high time the European institutions acknowledged that most EU citizens cannot tell them apart. The average citizen would not be able to list the individual competences of the Commission, Parliament, and the Council. Despite years of public education efforts, the EU’s decision-making process is still perceived as being too complex. It should not be surprising. For a long time, scholars have been pointing out that citizens simply do not regard the European institutions in the same way they view their own national governments.

¹²¹ M. Nayak, ‘Marketers Seen Spending More on Paid Social Media Ads: Gartner’, *Reuters*, 3 October 2016.

¹²² *Ibid.*

¹²³ This video can be accessed at <https://twitter.com/EPPGroup/status/806408058947547136>.



They are not interested in understanding the details of how the EU works because they cannot see an electoral bond between the EU institutions and themselves.¹²⁴

This is why the European institutions should urgently consider communicating about the EU as a whole, rather than about the EP or the Commission individually. Such a change would require a great deal of political will as it goes against the long-established tradition of institutions focusing on their own importance within the institutional system. The view being advocated here is backed by de Vreese: 'Intra-institutional competition must die! How is the EU ever going to convince anybody if European institutions are competing with each other and sending out competing messages? This is the low-hanging fruit.'¹²⁵ Limiting the current over-fragmentation is doable. There are no legal constraints that would inhibit it. Establishing the coordination of communication activities is cost free. It requires only the goodwill and consent of institutions' directorates. The leaders of the European Commission, EP and European Council should initiate the process and show the importance of such cooperation. It is the absolute minimum of what can be done in the short term.

Use storytelling

One of the paths for EU marketing is the use of 'storytelling'. In recent years 'storytelling' has become one of the buzzwords of the advertising industry. Some practitioners claim that the term should replace 'advertising' as the name of the activity.¹²⁶ Telling a story is more powerful than simply placing an ad because it addresses humanity's cultural DNA. People have been telling stories since they started to communicate by way of speech. 'We want stories that engage us—make us laugh, cry, think, dream, love and every human emotion in-between. We want to be entertained. But the advertising industry isn't creating enough compelling stories that people actively seek out. Hollywood is brilliant at it.'¹²⁷ Myths cannot be dispelled with boring facts. What is needed are counter-narratives that are powerful and emotional and yet based on facts.¹²⁸ Statistical evidence and industry jargon are the least effective means to educate a general audience on complex topics. Successful communication avoids big numbers and abstractions: 'millions of citizens', 'bil-

¹²⁴ M. Elenbaas et al., 'The Impact of Information Acquisition on EU Performance Judgements', *European Journal of Political Research*, 51 (2012), 731.

¹²⁵ C. de Vreese, interview by the author, Amsterdam, 27 October 2016.

¹²⁶ J. Zada, 'Why It's Time to Kill Advertising as We Know It and Start Building "Storyworlds"', *Adweek*, 30 June 2016.

¹²⁷ Ibid.

¹²⁸ C. Gallo, *The Storyteller's Secret*, 53.



lions of euros' or (even worse) 'GDP percentage points'. Stories help people make sense of matters they know little about.¹²⁹ That should apply to EU communication as well.

Use data

Both big and granular (micro-level) data improve the ability of public organisations and businesses to respond to crises.¹³⁰ Technologies like cloud computing make it cheap and easy not only to communicate one-way, but also to collect, store and analyse immense quantities of information. And this information, in turn, may affect political outcomes. Voter targeting is one of the techniques that gained a good deal of publicity at the beginning of 2017, thanks to in-depth reporting on tactics used during the 2016 US presidential elections. The Clinton and Trump campaigns both tried to target individual voters with tailor-made messages that were aligned to the characteristics of the people they wanted to reach: their past political behaviour, opinions, level of party engagement and so on. Using Facebook as a test ground, Canada's Liberal Party campaigners were able to produce over 50 different advertisements a day that were targeted at different audiences.¹³¹ During the 2016 UK referendum campaign, the 'Leave' team employed a sophisticated system for gathering and analysing data, accumulating feed from different sources: electoral rolls, polling results and social media, as well as grassroots volunteers and canvassing constituencies. According to Dominic Cummings, Director of the Leave.eu campaign, this system allowed them to send out one billion targeted advertisements, mostly via Facebook. It also made it possible to produce and send dozens of versions of leaflets (over 46 million leaflets in total) to different types of voters.¹³²

Such targeting of voters is made possible through data mining, combining different databases: social media profiles (and the information that comes with them) and voter registers. It is assumed that targeted messages, fitting the particular receptivity of a given individual, are more effective than one-size-fits-all

¹²⁹ Ibid., 80–2.

¹³⁰ L. Morgan, 'Crisis Response: 6 Ways Big Data Can Help', *InformationWeek Government*, 17 September 2015.

¹³¹ *The Economist*, 'Politics by Numbers', Special Report: Technology and Politics, 26 March 2016, 4.

¹³² D. Cummings, 'On the Referendum #20: The Campaign, Physics and Data Science – Vote Leave's "Voter Intention Collection System" (VICS) Now Available for All', *Dominic Cummings's Blog*, 29 October 2016.



communication. On the other hand, there is a fear that, if successful, the digital targeting of voters might end up reducing the democratic process to an exercise in marketing.¹³³

Big data helps predict political behavior. Examining trends by using search engines sometimes offers a picture that is more precise than the one created with 'old' techniques such as polling. For example, on 20 November 2016, France's right-wing parties (Les Républicains, Le Parti Chrétien-Démocrate, Le Centre National des Indépendants et Paysans and L'Union des Démocrates et Indépendants) held the first round of the primary race to choose their candidate for the presidency. Polls conducted a few days earlier suggested a clear win for Alain Juppé (declared support at 36%), with Nicolas Sarkozy in the second place (30%) and François Fillon in third (18%).¹³⁴ But on the morning of Sunday, 20 November, the Google search pattern was substantially different (see Figure 3).

Figure 3 Voting intentions predicted by Google Trends



Source: @GoogleTrends, 20 November 2016, accessed at: <https://twitter.com/GoogleTrends/status/800403598697865216>.

¹³³ *The Economist*, 'The Signal and the Noise', Special Report Technology and Politics, 26 March 2016, 4.

¹³⁴ J. Waintraub, 'Sondage: entre Juppé, Sarkozy et Fillon, les écarts se resserrent', *Le Figaro*, 14 November 2016.



The actual result of the vote was closer to the Google data than to the polls. To the surprise of commentators, journalists and pollsters, Fillon won by a landslide, garnering 44.2% of the votes. Juppé came second (28.5%) and Sarkozy, third (20.6%).¹³⁵ In that particular situation, data mining, the ability to analyse the search trends, gave a better picture of public opinion than did traditional polling. This is not to say that Google Trends is the new oracle and that traditional polling should be considered obsolete. The latter can still be very accurate, as it was during the 2017 electoral campaign in the Netherlands.¹³⁶ Nevertheless, online tools for measuring social trends have proven their value.

Budget effectively

The European institutions spend approximately €400 million yearly on communication activities (including the cost of staff). This is a substantial amount of money, comparable to what businesses spend. However, unlike the business world, the European institutions conduct no proper evaluation of the expenses related to communication. Various studies have raised questions as to whether the EU institutions' communication efforts are cost effective at all.¹³⁷ Representatives of the business sector have raised similar questions. 'One of the paradoxes: some of the non-governmental organisations staunchly campaigning against the TTIP and CETA [trade and regulatory agreements with the US and Canada] were funded by the European Commission', noted one of them.¹³⁸

It is high time the EU institutions started following yet another business practice and measured the return on investment. In other words, the EU must weigh the costs against the results of all communication efforts. But the latter must be measured wisely. Some past evaluations raise doubts about their accuracy. For example, the EP's Directorate-General for Communication's Annual Activity Report 2015 counted the number of journalists attending briefings, seminars and special visits (7,225 in 2015) and the total number of articles published on MEPs or the EP (106,363). Then, to measure the impact, it estimated the 'potential readership' of these articles—down to a single digit (234,792,836). No company would measure the impact of its communication activities in this way.

¹³⁵ J.-B. Garat, 'Primaire à droite: Fillon s'envole, Juppé s'effrite, Sarkozy s'efface', *Le Figaro*, 21 November 2016.

¹³⁶ C. de Vreese, interview by the author, Amsterdam, 1 April 2017.

¹³⁷ N. Stroeker, A. van der Graaf and B.-J. Buiskool, 'Communicating "Europe" to Its Citizens', 39.

¹³⁸ P. Sennekamp, Director of Communications at BusinessEurope, interview by the author, Brussels, 28 October 2016.



To measure the effectiveness of the EU's communication efforts, institutions need to be clear about what the expected outcome of these efforts is. To date, the aim has been unclear. To engage citizens? To increase public support for the European integration and for European institutions, as measured in the opinion polls? Or simply to increase the number of press releases issued? There is a strong tendency to measure PR activities on the basis of input, rather than output. This must be discontinued. Without proper measurement, there can be no improvement in the EU's communication activities. Communication budgets must follow a return-on-investment logic.

It is not the intention of this paper to criticise any initiative whatsoever. All it calls for is a proper assessment and honest answers to questions such as the following: Do the EU institutions really need to own a costly television infrastructure, given that the television market is saturated? Are EU-funded programmes, aimed at 'engaging citizens' and allowing them to take part in discussions on EU-related topics, truly effective, given that their popularity is limited? To illustrate, 2.8 million citizens, or 0.5% of the total EU population, took part in the Europe for Citizens programme in 2007–9.¹³⁹ EU institutions need to consider all expenses, whether very large or very small. Instead of publishing paper newsletters, at a monthly cost of €1,000, they might be better off buying Facebook-sponsored content and reaching 130,000–350,000 Facebook users.¹⁴⁰

Optimally, the EU institutions' communication budgets should be raised, as serious promotion requires significant budgets. But since increasing expenditure on promotion substantially is politically unacceptable, the second-best solution is to save money on ineffective projects and to spend it on those that do have a real impact. The current communication budgets are insignificant compared to the colossal amounts of money at stake should the European project collapse.¹⁴¹

¹³⁹ N. Stroeker, A. van der Graaf, B.-J. Buiskool, 'Communicating "Europe" to Its Citizens', 54.

¹⁴⁰ Estimate valid on 26 January 2017. It holds for simple Facebook posts (not videos) and for a target group consisting of Belgians aged 18–65.

¹⁴¹ E. Leckerf, interview by the author, Warsaw, 13 October 2016.



4. The messengers

Find a trusted messenger

In its communications, the EU should side with the public. To do so, it needs a trusted messenger, someone who is credible. The choice of messenger is crucial: unfortunately, many voters believe that the EU and its institutions are agents of big business and corrupt elites.

A 2014 study called for the use of ‘trusted national level actors’ to circumvent the sometimes deep-rooted distrust in European institutions.¹⁴² This is yet another example of tactics used on a daily basis by companies, whose advertisements feature well-known celebrities (sportspeople, actors, etc.). One would not necessarily trust a company which maintains that its own arthritis drug works best. But one might be subconsciously willing to believe a renowned sportsman who makes this claim. To get around the distrust it faces, the EU must consider using non-political, trusted celebrities to convey its message—celebrities, sportspeople, scientists, movie stars and so on.

Get other players involved

As already mentioned, more effective communication, based to a large extent on paid media, requires increased spending. The mere streamlining of promotional budgets, however useful and desirable, may not suffice to cover the costs of a full-fledged advertising offensive that lasts a number of years.

Even if there is political backing for an increase in spending, expanding the available allocation will take time, not least because of financial regulations, which can slow the transition process down. It is against this backdrop that an out-of-the-box approach could be considered: non-government players

¹⁴² N. Stroeker, A. van der Graaf and B.-J. Buiskool, ‘Communicating “Europe” to Its Citizens’, 63.



should be invited to finance parallel pro-European awareness campaigns. This would be strictly on a voluntary basis. The invitation should be addressed mainly to the business sector, for two reasons. First, the sector profits from European integration. The very existence of the single market and fundamental freedoms translates not only into new jobs and continuous growth, but also into benefits for companies. Hence, voluntary participation in promotional activities would amount to acknowledging that a part of business activities is made possible by the EU. Second, of all the sectors of the economy, it is the business sector that has necessary financial means to become involved.

Companies and business associations willing to join the pro-European communication effort would need to run the campaigns on their own. From the outset, the financing and ownership of such campaigns would have to be fully transparent.

There are precedents. Many companies in Europe have taken part in various Corporate Social Responsibility programmes, some of which have included awareness campaigns. There is no reason not to allow companies, acting with the approval of their corporate governing bodies and shareholders, to join the pro-European communication effort.

Engage European-level politicians and political parties

To gain visibility, the EU needs political conflict—but not just any conflict. The EU needs debates in national parliaments on topics such as the scope of the negotiating mandate given to national governments ahead of EU summits. That would provide additional doses of both media visibility and democratic legitimacy.¹⁴³ Political parties on the national and European levels should not shy away from taking polarising positions related to the EU as this increases the visibility of the EU in the news. The drawback is that more polarisation may lead to anti-European voices becoming even more prominent. Still, this risk seems acceptable as these voices already have a well-established place in the public debate.

¹⁴³ C. de Vreese, *Communicating Europe*, 28.



The European-level political parties could persuade their members (national parties), and especially those in power, to launch EU communication projects on the national level using the resources at their disposal. However, the strongest available tool is the parties' presence in parliament and their ability to inject the positive, pro-European narrative into national political debates.

National politicians can be very effective in introducing EU-related topics into the national public debate. Take the example of the Netherlands, where, ironically, it was the Geert Wilders' anti-EU Party for Freedom (Partij voor de Vrijheid) that managed to place the EU at the very centre of the public debate. Unfortunately for the EU, the Party for Freedom managed to do this while fiercely criticising European policies (especially those linked to migration) and repeatedly demanding that the Netherlands should leave the EU. This emotional approach turned out to be quite effective in terms of visibility gained.¹⁴⁴ It is also up to the members of European-level political parties to proactively fight the widespread practice of using the EU as a scapegoat. Scholars emphasise that national politicians too often get away with defending the EU in Brussels and criticising it back home.¹⁴⁵ It is never too late to remind citizens that major decisions are taken by democratically elected national governments, not by faceless bureaucrats in Brussels.

European-level and national parties must not forget that they still have an impact on many citizens. Belonging to a particular party can influence people's opinions of the EU. That is, regardless of their own experience with the EU, certain individuals may adopt an attitude towards European integration that is shaped by their chosen party.¹⁴⁶

A common European identity must be presented as complementary to national identities. The latter must be admired in European discourse, as they are incomparably stronger than their EU counterpart. The only chance for a European identity to gain a foothold in EU citizens' minds is for it to be carried along with their national identity.

¹⁴⁴ N. Stroecker, A. van der Graaf and B.-J. Buischool, 'Communicating "Europe" to Its Citizens', 20.

¹⁴⁵ C. de Vreese, interview by the author, Amsterdam, 1 April 2017.

¹⁴⁶ R. Vliegthart et al., 'News coverage', 417.



The commissioners need to increase their media presence. Being recognisable on the national level, they should be key communicating agents—the face of the EU that is currently missing. In this respect, the commissioners should not be limited to their portfolios, as they are now.¹⁴⁷ De Vreese has argued for the return of the ‘EU road show’: the tradition of organising most European Councils in various national capitals and not only in Brussels. He has reminded his readers that the EU presidencies, as they were organised before the Lisbon Treaty, literally brought the EU to citizens. Locally organised summits used to boost media attention and public debate in local cafés.¹⁴⁸

¹⁴⁷ C. de Vreese, *Communicating Europe*, 28.

¹⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 29–33.

Conclusion



The European institutions should seriously remodel the way they communicate about Europe and what they work to achieve. Not only have their past and current strategies failed, but the communication environment has changed as well. The rise of new, online media has deeply altered the way people learn about the outside world. The social media are becoming the dominant channel of information. It is now possible to communicate directly with citizens. The message no longer needs to be mediated by journalists and editors. The speed at which information now spreads is breathtaking, as is its abundance.

There is no need to reinvent the wheel. The EU institutions should follow the example set by parts of the business sector. Accurate, high-quality information is still needed, but the EU institutions have to struggle to break through the noise and reach the intended audiences. This is why the EU should not shy away from corporate-style advertising. It needs to increase its impact online. The European institutions are present in the social media, but they need to increase their visibility by several orders of magnitude.

The EU institutions must use appropriate research to target crucial audiences, to understand the language of these groups and to find the messages that resonate best. To maximise their impact, the number of messages the EU sends to citizens should be limited to a few that focus on new Big Ideas. The latter must be developed around the tangible benefits the EU offers its citizens. The current cacophony of goals and ideas is counterproductive.

EU communication should target not only the audiences identified, but emotions too. It should be as persistent as corporate advertising is. It also needs to be renationalised, that is, embedded in specific national contexts. For there is no such thing as 'European public opinion' that one could address. There are 28 (soon 27) national bubbles; each can and should be addressed separately.

Ideally, the communication budgets should be increased since the costs of effective communication are significant. Should this be politically impossible, the low-hanging fruit is to streamline the available budget and cut out those parts of the communication effort that are ineffective. To identify them, the EU institutions need to measure continuously—just as companies do. Finally, the European institutions should invite third parties—and especially representatives of the business sector—to join the EU advertising effort.

Bold moves are needed, for we are facing a grim choice: either the EU convinces people or the populists will win the battle for their hearts and minds. And this would lead to the destruction of the European project. The situation is serious but not hopeless. The EU is a superb 'product'—let us advertise it successfully.

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The EU is losing the battle for Europeans' hearts and minds. The long economic crisis and the subsequent immigration crisis have frustrated millions of citizens and angered them against the elites—and, unfortunately, against the EU. Many fear that their material status, the economic security of their families and their ability to fulfil their own expectations and ambitions are slipping out of their hands. Europeans are also suffering from an identity crisis. Many believe that their countries and neighbourhoods are being threatened by mass immigration and that the ruling elites, sealed off in steel and glass towers in their respective countries' capitals, are not listening.

The EU is facing its biggest communication challenge ever. The EU institutions need to take up the gauntlet and start defending the European project.

The purpose of this paper is to analyse potential new ways of 'advertising the EU'. The key assumption is that, whenever possible, EU institutions should follow best practices from the business sector since these have proved to be more effective in the current communication environment.



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