

Initiative "one book in one snapshot"

Title of the book/paper

Information Flow and Communication Deficit: Perceptions of Brussels-Based Correspondents and EU Officials. *Journal of European Integration*, 34 (4): 305-322.

Author

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Sectors/areas of interest

European Political Communication/ patterns of communication in EU institutions and press; EU public sphere; EU communication deficit.

Summary

The authors of this article situate their reflections within the academic debate that attributes the alleged lack of legitimacy of the European Union to communicative handicaps. They set themselves the goal of understanding the core structural deficiencies of the problematic by adopting *EU-media relations* as their analytical framework. For that purpose, they made seventy-five semi-structured interviews with both Brussels-based correspondents and EU officials (staff from the Commission, the European Parliament and the Council of the EU with decision-making power in communication matters). Then they assessed their interdependent, yet different, nature as actors of European political communication.

According to the authors, former studies indicate that journalists have identified at least three features about EU information that systemically tend to undermine the flow of communication.

The first is the complexity of EU politics, especially with the deepening of the EU in a vast number of policy areas that catapults European topics from the foreign pages to a multitude of news sections. Such intricate content requires an ever increasing technical knowledge and

standard of specialisation from journalists. **The second** feature of EU information that journalists see as an obstacle in generating greater EU visibility is related to the heavy volume of news emanating from EU's "bureaucratic machine". Rather than giving newsworthiness value to EU daily politics this trend accentuates the media tendency to focus on key EU events. Finally, journalists refer to a **third** rather polemical feature which concerns both the fact that the threefold EU institutional model 'naturally disperses more than coordinates information' and their belief that DG COMM should consider taking up a coordination role in their communication with the press without jeopardising the autonomy of each institution.

While re-testing the conclusions of such studies, the authors put particular emphasis in understanding the perceived importance of informal information channels in Brussels and the factors by which these are governed. Their pre-assumption is that tacit conventions like that of the journalist's *nationality* and *news outlet* are determinants of access to sources.

Based on that, the following conclusions are formulated:

1) The complicated nature of press releases is now accepted as a component of European politics rather than being seen as an obstacle for good journalism. However, at the same time, EU press releases are understood by correspondents as *institutional*, which in their jargon means 'not good to find the truth'.

2) While EU institutions are just one among other relevant sources that need to be consulted, information flow coming from them is extremely voluminous (which, according to a press journalist, could be "the heaven for a journalist from a monthly magazine and a hell for a journalist from a daily broadsheet"). In parallel, EU officials address the information overload problem by creating subject-driven *ad hoc* lists of journalists but admit that units in charge of communication in each Directorate General frequently have the ambition to capture media attention despite the filtering of journalists.

3) Brussels-based correspondents do see diverging communication performances and news value differences emanating from the specific political architecture of EU institutions. The Commission gathers a negative view overall 'justified' by journalists as being due to its "consensus striving nature" that results in "lack of juicy topics". Following the same logic, in the European Parliament, the existence of different political groups allows for more media-tailored news. In this respect EU officials seem to share that view: Parliament members have bigger freedom to produce "sexy" institutional material and their work organised by country effectively follows the media national relevance logics; whereas Commission officials produce same document portfolios which are then translated in different languages and they have to observe a specific press release template.

In what regards inter-institutional communication, this study suggests that correspondents think it is not understandable that they have to miss important Council meetings because they coincide with Parliament's Strasbourg week; and it indicates that the Parliament and

Council officials believe that the Commission is seeking to perpetuate its monopoly over information. In addition, on the issue of inter-service communication input being (or not being) defined and centralised by DG COMM, this study implies that opinions are that "everyone is communicating in their corner", as the Spokespersons are gathering information from communication units of other DGs rather than from DG COMM. This is a strong critique of both the external and the internal communication *coordination strategy* of the Commission. Finally, this study finds that it is mutually accepted (by journalists and officials) that informal or private contacts represent Brussels journalists' most useful source and EU officials' privileged way to speed up their work productivity. However, when it comes to the rules that govern these non-official channels, the news outlet for which correspondents work is perceived as making a major difference to accessing relevant sources (*Financial Times* is by far considered the closest to the EU). While here journalists see an unequal relationship, officials tend to see a strategy to facilitate the effective relay of information. Moreover, as far as the nationality criterion is concerned, the authors state that the assessment of officials goes beyond favouring their own nationals to rather focus on tailoring the key official messages to specific member states *and not others*. E.g. Portuguese correspondents denied having better access to information sources under Barroso's presidency, and a correspondent illustrated that "if a Maltese journalist wants an interview with a Commissioner to discuss immigration issues, he'll probably get it; if he wishes to talk about gas pipelines (...) good luck for him".

In their concluding remarks, Martins, Lecheler and De Vreese try to contextualise their findings in the "communications deficit" debate and they point that the Commission is often criticised for policies (co-)legislated by the Council, which as a whole remains invisible in communication terms. Furthermore, they underline that the political-legal profile of the Commission and its right of initiative favour permanent media attention while this is in conflict with press work constraints. The Parliament's excessive transparency, on the other hand, decreases its newsworthiness.... And the result of such fragile mediation is, according to them, a general low interest.

It seems, then, that communicating nothing, communicating too much and communicating in a procedural way are, none of them, resulting in good media reporting and analysis about the work made by EU institutions in the name of EU identity and European citizens.

I consider that, in general, this study is a useful update and deepening of the problematic of structural deficiencies in EU-media relations; mainly when it comes to uncovering correspondents expectations about the Council and, within the Commission, their desired role for DG COMM. However, I cannot help myself thinking that if the main problem is that EU correspondents and EU officials are **interdependent** but **different** - in the sense that their routines are governed by a relation of mutual interest but they have distinct evaluations of (EU affairs areas') news value -, this is not something exclusive to the EU. Most other political

entities have complementary and conflicting media relations. So the question is why is difference emphasised as a problem here?...

The authors preview, too, that "*a communication deficit will endure as long as resistance to inter-institutional cooperation stems from the very same institutions/services which advocate this objective*". They also contend that topical phenomena, such as leaks and scoops, mainly from the Commission appear to be reinforcing its hegemonic position and fiercing competition rather than cooperation between the EU institutions. From that point of view, the authors are not addressing how, in fact, journalists could communicate better to citizens what the EU is, which would be a legitimate debate within this analytical framework (of an alleged lack of legitimacy of the EU due to the complicated EU-media relations). The authors are, on the contrary, academically amplifying journalists' expectations about what the Commission should be, i.e. not a political actor professionalised in strategic communication but, instead, a moderator of communications between the Council and the Parliament. Therefore, more than assessing EU communication, the Brussels-based correspondents and the authors of this study are making a political statement.

In my opinion, there are several good examples of news coverage of EU affairs by non-privileged media outlets, which suggests that reporting and analysis on the EU is possible when journalists put their minds into it. Besides, good journalism implies precisely that journalists do not rely on institutional information as their only source of wisdom. In other words, Brussels-based journalists are expected to be specialised and maintain themselves well-informed by other kinds of experts in EU affairs and actors besides the EU officials. Keeping sources well-oiled, and being informed and updated, is part of journalists' job. Trying to get published by their editors also.

For me, then, maybe the relevant problematic to be studied in a research about the difficulties of the EU-media relations and how these might contribute to an alleged lack of legitimacy of the EU is not so much the role of the Commission but rather certain journalistic cultures. If specific editorial policies cannot accommodate all the 'voices' constructing *knowledge* about an issue, then perhaps they need to be changed and/or trigger change in their public's 'un-inclusive' demand of 'ready to consume' black *or* white op-ed politics. This would imply making a serious and in-depth inquiry into the media and whether they are taking the 'balanced contradictory principle' seriously enough. Although most journalism is not a public service but rather a business – and one which is going through a difficult financial period now – journalism still is expected to be a watchdog of radical democracy.

Takeaway messages for DG DEVCO

2015 is the European Year of Development and one of the main goals of this year's topic is to give visibility to the work carried out by DevCo. Many different initiatives are

envisioned in DevCo's communication and transparency campaign to inform and engage Union citizens on EU development cooperation for reducing poverty and promoting sustainable growth, in the framework of the Millenium Development Goals. Within the specific context of mediated content, the Lorenzo Natali Prize for journalists seems to be a great DevCo's flagship initiative. However, when we look at Eurobarometer's figures showing that there is a very low level of awareness among EU citizens about where their country's development money goes and almost no awareness about where EU aid goes, more time-efficient measures to reach a massive public through the media should perhaps be considered a priority.

While it cannot be denied that the new media are increasingly more sought after by citizens as a privileged source of "unmediated" information between themselves and the source, the mass media have an important role to play in reaching vaster and different publics at the same time with similar (or segmented) messages.

Therefore, there might be well-documented reasons for giving priority to online media and relegating newspapers, radio and television to a secondary plan - as mentioned in my review, on the grounds of the mismatch between the traditional media time and space constraints on the one hand and, on the other, the permanent attention required and the volume of procedural information produced by the EU institutions. It is true that the very concurred space in newspapers and expensive time in broadcast media has frequently led to "dumbing down" political messages to sound bites and these will mostly be symbolic and empty at the same time. However, the mass media still are very useful means to raise awareness about specific issues and important gatekeepers. Through their agenda-setting role, they can put them on the table of debate in such platforms as webpages or social media like Facebook, Twitter and Instagram.

One could consider, therefore, relevant to provide the (mass) media with different angle stories about the motto "our world, our dignity, our future". These could for instance report about the work done by different EU institutions around topics within the subject of development, therefore including different political and national orientations within the Commissions' priorities for 2015 and beyond. In practice, this would mean *not focussing just* on conveying final decisions reached after a Commission's proposal about gender equality, respect for the environment, etc was co-decided by the Council and the Parliament *but also emphasizing* how particular *differences* – be them national or party-specific – were incorporated in the *Union* via citizens' national and regional representatives in the Council of Ministers and Parliament Committees, respectively.

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