

13. Understanding the Complexity of EU Communication: The Spokespersons' Perspective

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In this report, the perceptions of spokespersons of the European Commission (the 'Commission') on the essentials of European communication are assessed according to three inter-related perspectives: (a) working routines and procedures that spokespersons go through in trying to plan and coordinate their activities, (b) strategies of their communication and cooperation with the media (i.e. formal and informal channels, preferred media types, etc.), and (c) their reflections on the communication deficit and the new communication policy of the Commission, especially on the *White Paper on a European Communication Policy*.

13.1. Affiliation of Spokespersons

In the period of March 30 to April 19, 2006, 14 spokespersons out of the total number of 32 (listed in the *Guide for journalists* by DG Communication) were interviewed. Aside from one working for the Spokesperson's Service Coordination and Planning Unit, all interviewed spokespersons represent different Commissioners and work in close cooperation with the relevant Directorates General (the DGs). Administratively, all the spokespersons are attached to the Spokesperson's Service in the DG Communication (headed by Johannes Laitenberger). For confidence reasons, the names and affiliations (the titles of DGs they work for) of the spokespersons interviewed are not disclosed. The majority of the spokespersons interviewed have university degrees in a great variety of fields: economics, political and social sciences, language studies, communication and law. Some of them have degrees as well as professional experience in journalism, but these are not in the majority. Having a professional background in the field of communication or journalism is not a requirement in the job description. Some spokespersons interviewed had experience in the field of public relations and lobbying; others have previously worked at the European Parliament or in the Commission, representing different NGOs, political parties, and some have worked in the various Council configurations (e.g. ECOFIN) of the Council of the European Union, or in national representations.

It was observed that the spokespersons interviewed were all young people, and that there is a fair balance of gender. There is also a diversity of countries represented by nationality of spokespersons (in the job requirement there is one particular restriction: the spokesperson and the Commissioner he or she works for cannot hold the same nationalities). Spokespersons have two types of affiliation. On the one hand, they belong to the Spokesperson's Service at the DG Communication (DG COMM); on the other hand, they are specialised in certain policy areas and, therefore, also work as public communicators of policy issues from these DGs (see Figure 1). In spite of their multiple affiliations, most of the spokespersons we interviewed have referred to the Commissioner they work for as their 'real boss'.

The spokespersons are also listed on the website of various Commissioners as part of their team. A few of the interviewed spokespersons claimed though that they are not allowed to attend the meetings of the cabinet. According to them, this is a deficient policy because the spokespersons have to be very well informed about the cabinet's decision-making process.

The Commission has a long-term communication strategy, which is mainly coordinated by the Communication Planning and Priorities Unit (belonging to Directorate A: Strategy) of the DG COMM. There is also a Coordination and Planning Unit of the Spokesperson's Service that has the function to efficiently coordinate the activities of the spokespersons. The control of information is an important element in the activities of this Unit: because the Commission is supposed to speak with one voice, thus the Unit proposes a communication line. On the other hand, the spokespersons interviewed claimed that they are the ones who have power in determining what is going to be communicated:

"My role is a little bit to propose a line, to get the line approved and then to communicate the line. So, I don't have a lot in common with or am not in touch with the Planning Unit. I am rather communicating to them what I am going to do."

Each policy area is a broad area, and a spokesperson must be well prepared in advance, regarding the kind of messages he wants to convey, how he communicates with the press, which messages he uses, which tools he will use, what the emphasis is, and so on. At the same time, they always have to remember that the Commission is 'one entity'. In other words, the Spokesperson's Service speaks to the press on behalf of the Commission.

The media residing in Brussels represent the main audience (95 per cent) of the spokespersons. The spokespersons also communicate with lobbyists and NGOs, but the press corps is the real target of the spokespersons. Apart from the Commissioners, the spokespersons are the only persons who speak *on the record* in respective policy areas. [Figure 1]

Spokespersons work on different policy areas. Many of the policy areas (i.e., the portfolio – health, consumer policy, budget and finances, etc.) are not those where spokespersons could expect to get a lot of questions in every midday briefing; but of course there are certain periods of time when a major story is happening and a policy area receives a lot of attention (e.g. the bird flu crisis).

The portfolios of spokespersons are both technical and political. The policy field (the budget, consumer protection, etc.) is political, but many journalists are also interested in details which are often quite technical. In other words, the mission of spokespersons is to provide overall information about what is going on with concrete issues but also to provide information on quite technical aspects of that policy area (e.g., amending budgets, financial regulations, allocation reports and similar issues).

With some policy areas, for example, financial planning and the budget, important events are happening quite cyclically: in February, in April, in May, in September, in December; and they happen every year. So journalists and spokespersons can plan some of their activities:

"Journalists covering budget issues know what they can expect around the 20th of October (there is a correction of the budget of the Common Agricultural Policy). They will call me, I will call them – that's this point of the job. And then there is the assessment of the political process, where the spokesperson is supposed to follow the agenda of the Council, Parliament and the Commission and to communicate it."

Normally, the spokespersons communicate on the policy of the Commission on a particular issue; they do not give comments on national issues. They try to avoid getting involved in national debates:

"We do not want to intervene in national debates. We are not a service for providing views and comments. We are here to communicate what we want to say and when we want to say it."

As mentioned before, an important element of the spokesperson's function is the control of information, "because the Commission must aim to speak in one voice". This aim to speak in 'one voice' has a strong political background:

"Because there is a rule, which is very important in the Commission: all decisions are taken together, they are all the fruits of the collegial negotiations of the Commissioners. Thus the Commissioners are very upset when they see things in the press that are not correct."

While coordinating their activities and trying to speak in 'one voice', the spokesperson has to find a balance with his/her Commissioner. The spokesperson has to speak on behalf of the Commissioner who is a political person and who has his own political stances, but also he has to take into account what the Commission's public messages are in the areas he is responsible for:

"We have Commission policy areas. A Commissioner is a political person, and he has his own political stances, so a spokesman really should cover both: speaking on behalf of the Commissioner and secondly thinking about what the Commission's public messages are, in the areas for which he is responsible."

The relationship between spokesperson and Commissioner is based on trust. The spokesperson for each portfolio is designated by the spokesperson of the Commission in agreement with the Commissioner in charge of the portfolio. The only restriction is that the Commissioner and the spokesperson have to have different nationalities. Since most of the time the spokespersons leave the DG when a new Commissioner is appointed, they do not have a permanent job. This implies that their appointment could have been influenced by their political affiliation: different spokespersons mentioned that they were asked personally to take the position. They were appointed according to the Commission rules governing the composition of cabinets and do not belong to the permanent staff that is recruited via open competitions.

13.2. Understanding Work Routines and other Internal Communication Matters

The spokespersons have their own limited staff: it may be between one and four people. Alongside these collaborators, the spokespersons can rely on the permanent staff of the various DGs' own information and communications units. While performing their daily tasks, spokespersons are involved in numerous routines and complex activities such as planning, communicating, sharing, and managing of information (see Figure 1). Some of these relationships are based on internal, others on external communication.

The information and communication units of the various DGs take care of the press releases and assist the spokesperson with information and documentation. The DGs' information and communication units are also responsible for the DGs' publications and websites. Some of these DG information and communication units are understaffed but most of them employ 25 to 35 staff members. The permanent DG staff members do not have direct contact with journalists: while the information and communication units of the various DGs can answer technical questions, communication with journalists is mainly the spokesperson's task. Or in the words of one of the spokespersons: "the spokespersons are the public face of the DGs". This division of labour is experienced as problematic since it can represent a bottleneck for the successful transmission of information. The fact that DG staff members are not allowed to answer the questions of journalists, not even by email, may create problems and a work overload for the spokespersons. This is not reflected in the majority of the interviews carried out; there are some staff members who, although tacitly, take the initiative and answer some of the emails in order to help the spokespersons out. This bottleneck situation for the flow of information is mentioned in different interviews.

Spokespersons not only concentrate their efforts on the release of messages, they also monitor the media in different countries in order to get a good idea of what is going on in the public opinion in different countries:

“Normally, the working day of spokespersons starts with checking and reviewing the press. My colleague does a press review every day, where we summarise the articles which have appeared in the press on the relevant issues. We also gather information from the data bases on the Internet, also the summaries, which we receive from the capitals through the representations.”

All this information is combined in one document that is forwarded to the Commissioner and to the cabinet, and to the senior management staff in the DG. Everybody must be aware of what is in the newspapers, i.e. what topics are ‘making’ the news, what may come onto the agenda, and what information has to be prepared. This is how spokespersons get the feeling of what is interesting for journalists in certain countries. This, on the other hand, implies that they mainly monitor those media where the language barrier can be crossed. Here the Representations of the Commission in the Member States (see below) can offer an important contribution.

Reunion of Spokespersons: The 10 o'clock Meeting

The morning is a very busy period: all spokespersons have to attend the 10 o'clock meeting where the midday briefing is prepared. Most spokespersons claim that they rise quite early in the morning, so that at 10 a.m. they already have a clear idea of the latest events. Due to their planning they are also able to pre-organise a part of their workload. The idea of the 10 o'clock meetings is to be as ready as possible to present things to the press and also to be aware of any possible issues that might be raised.

Before going to the 10 o'clock meeting, the spokespersons will have discussed with the cabinet which topics are important and whether the spokesperson will propose to incorporate a special announcement in the midday briefing.

During this morning meeting the spokespersons have contact through video-conferencing with the Representations of the Commission in the Member States (representations). This video-conferencing is an internal consultative structure between the Brussels spokespersons and the people working in the different representations. The staff of the representations is informed as to which announcements will be made during the midday briefings and they can ask questions or inform the spokespersons regarding topics that are prominent on the national news agenda of their countries.

At this meeting the news agenda of the day is discussed and the communication plan for the short run is designed. The principle concern is to decide what stories will make the news, what stories the spokespersons would like to ‘sell’. There is also the possibility to discuss possible sensitive questions that could come up, and to reach agreement on how to deal with such questions. As journalists can raise any questions during the midday briefings, the spokespersons discuss which topics or questions may arise. This can be considered as a kind of training-exercise to prepare spokespersons to cope with unexpected questions. The link with the representations in the member states is very important in order to get feedback: what stories are ‘running’ in the national media, which of these stories could lead to questions in Brussels.

Many of the spokespersons stress the importance of those representations in getting the message across, or in having valuable feedback regarding what is going on in the different member states. Many of them consider the representations in the member states also as a means of improving the communication

strategy of the EU (see below). The importance of these representations may differ from a geographical point of view (proximity means that more journalists can come to Brussels, that cultural barriers are easier to overcome) and may differ according to policy. For instance, 'enlargement' was a policy area that was frequently linked with the importance of having well functioning representations.

In short, during the 10 o'clock meeting core decisions are made, i.e. it is decided which announcements, by which spokespersons, will be presented at the midday briefing. All actions and messages of spokespersons are coordinated – "it is very important that we speak with one voice and in order to achieve this we limit the speakers to one or a maximum of two".

Writing Press Releases

The press releases (most of the time definitive versions, prepared by the information and communication units of the various DGs, supervised and later issued by the spokesperson) are also discussed in the morning meetings. The press releases should be no more than 3000 words and are usually published in the three working languages of the Commission. Producing press releases involves a lot of collaborative effort:

"By the time we put out the press release, I have received a draft from the information unit, which has been agreed within the DG and has been approved. I receive that approved draft and either I check it or edit it further, and then I send it to the cabinet and the Commissioner for their approval. Normally, the time is sufficient for the cabinet to give comments and to approve it. But on certain important issues I go straight to the Commissioner to check if he is happy with the text."

The spokespersons try to turn the press releases into user-friendly and transparent documents in order to prevent more calls from journalists asking for clarification of specific elements. However, sometimes their documents are revised a second time by the legal advisers of their DG and the text comes back in a more cryptic language. One of the interviewees explained:

"The information unit will get technical information from the experts in the DG, they draft a press release which they check with the experts before they send it to me. I try to avoid drafting it myself. I get a draft from the information unit, which has been checked for the technical accuracy and has already been approved as far as possible in terms of readability. And then I make further changes trying to improve it, to make it easier to understand and also from the political side, for example to quote the Commissioner. I usually make some changes before I send it to the Commissioner."

However, some spokespersons claim that press releases are indeed not the most important means of communication: "press releases are of course important, because news agencies use them; but especially as concerns communication about certain [not named for anonymity reasons] issues, there is nothing more important than personal contacts and conversations with journalists."

Midday Briefings and Press Conferences

All spokespersons attend the midday briefings. These briefings usually are attended by 150-300 journalists and are organised in the pressroom of the Berlaymont building. The Commissioners do not attend the briefings; in the midday briefing, the main activity is the presentation of the announcements by the spokespersons. The texts of these announcements are prepared by the portfolio spokesperson in collaboration with the relevant cabinet and in agreement with the spokesperson of the Commission. The announcements have to be as accurate and transparent as possible in order to illustrate credibility and professionalism.

The midday briefings are an instrument for the Commission to communicate to the world. As a general rule, according to our interviewees, all spokespersons present from five to a maximum of 15 announcements per month. As the Commissioners meet every Wednesday and as political decisions are frequently made at that time, there is always much activity on Wednesdays during the midday briefings. The briefings are public, accessible to journalists and are broadcast live (by satellite) as well as distributed on the Internet. Although the press releases are available in print for the journalists during the midday briefings, it is the announcements that transfer more recent and more topical news.

The official languages of the midday briefings are English and French and interpretation in the pressroom is available in those two languages. If the question is raised in French, the spokesperson has to answer in French. For most of them this is not a real problem but some of the spokespersons we interviewed mention that it sometimes makes communication more difficult as spokespersons and correspondents from some member states have limited knowledge of French or English. After the announcements, journalists can ask questions about these announcements, but they can also raise questions on whatever EU topics they choose. The present spokespersons will answer the questions relevant to their DG. According to one interviewee, at the midday briefing communication with the media is considered to be a kind of a game:

“It’s like playing chess, we are playing with the white pieces and we open the game. But at the end they can also make their move. They can ask questions in the press room that you would prefer not to answer, but you have to since you are in the press room where the agreement is that every question will be answered.”

On the other hand, there is also a kind of balancing between journalists and spokespersons. According to one of our interviewees:

“The journalist must have the impression that he is the source of the information to his public, that he is the owner of this information and that I am only helping him to fulfil his task, giving him the requested material.”

One can consider the midday briefings as an essential part of the two major functions in communication. The first function is to convey the message that the Commission *wants* to convey. The second function is conveying the message in the *way* the Commission wants. This means a little bit of information and a little bit of ‘spin’. The proactive communication also means that spokespersons try to ‘sell’ the news.

There are also special press conferences organised on specific ‘hot’ topics. Then it is the Commissioner who addresses the journalists. The press conferences often take place after the midday briefings; most of the time they are organised on Wednesdays because of the weekly meeting of the Commissioners.

Coordination and Planning of Actions

The role and function of a spokesperson has certain routine elements, such as reviewing the press in the morning, gathering for the reunion with other spokespersons and the representations in the member states at 10 o’clock, preparing press releases and selecting announcements for the midday briefing, etc. The spokespersons try to establish a policy of presenting newsworthy information every day of the week. So the information is planned and fitted into a calendar in order to get a certain media coverage during as many days as possible.

The Spokesperson’s Service has a Coordination and Planning Unit that attempts to forecast the news topics that will arise in the near future, and, at the same time, send the journalists a programme of the

briefings, press conferences, and press releases that are coming up. The service of DG COMM – to send press releases, announcements etc. to journalists via an email-mailing list – is called esPRESSo. According to some spokespersons the policy of communication is discussed while preparing a communication plan:

“We have a media planning within the department where we look ahead so that we can see what we can expect in terms of policy initiatives and legislative proposals, or other big events the DG is preparing, which we want to communicate or which we expect could be of interest to the media. We put them in the media calendar when we sense these issues will arise. The type of communication (whether proactive, e.g. press release, or defensive briefing and less active, e.g. just putting information on the Web) depends on the event.”

The planning has to do with ensuring that information efforts are worthwhile:

“So the first objective, the first aim, is avoiding the provision of too much at the same time to the press, or that nothing is given to the press on certain days. So the idea is to spread communications around as much as possible, which implies press releases but also information about what the Commission is doing are distributed in quite a consistent and wide spread manner. We organise our work on a weekly basis. We also try to plan at least six weeks ahead in order to have clear view of what is happening not just in the EU press or in the Brussels press, but lets say on the international scene in order to see exactly when is the best moment, for example, to communicate something and when is the worst moment to communicate. Also we see when it is probably better to avoid holding certain press conferences or saying something about a certain issue. The planning gives us a framework and helps us better organise our work and our communication activities.”

Planning and managing of information, thus, is a natural part of a spokesperson’s daily routine that shapes both internal and external communication. The media plan, of course, is not strict, as the scenario of journalists changes rapidly and quickly, but the standard planning procedures help the spokespersons to foresee what might happen.

13.3. Understanding Spokespersons’ Relationships with the Media

In our conversations, different spokespersons often referred to the accredited journalists permanently present in Brussels. This implies that the diffusion of EU news to countries that only have a limited amount of correspondents is hampered. Countries with more journalists present in Brussels therefore have a better chance to gather the essential information since the spokespersons have to divide their time and resources. Therefore the spokespersons’ conversations are quantitatively more elaborated for those countries with more journalists present.

The channels used in communication with the media vary widely. Of course the midday briefing is an important event, but interpersonal contacts are just as important. Most of the journalists who want to contact the spokespersons use the phone or email them. Considering the problems that the researchers on this project had in making contact with some spokespersons, this is a rather optimistic approach.

Although the majority of the spokespersons address their communication to the accredited journalists present in Brussels, some also say that they offer information to non-accredited journalists – these contacts are made by email or by phone. Communication strategies differ among the spokespersons. Several have a very well elaborated system of informing the journalists of niche media outlets. Others just limit their communication efforts to the accredited journalists, cutting and pasting some bits of information through email if they think that that is appropriate.

Several spokespersons have a more proactive attitude and use personal databases and mailing lists with the names of interested journalists. While some do this very regularly, for others this is more an exception than a real practice, and depends on the policy area. As one spokesperson stated:

“Certain animal health problems or food safety issues will be of interest to the food industry, to farmers, to certain sectors of society. Those sectors have some specific trade publications and specialised media, which are read by few people, but are very widely read within that sector. The people that we most frequently speak to tend to be specialised journalists writing about agricultural food safety, animal health issues. We also deal a lot with news agencies. Through these the news is spread to a wider audience. Most of my regular customers are: the specialised press, news agencies having reporters specialising in different areas, and journalists writing for any other specialised publications.”

There are also issues that are more general, i.e. relevant to a wider audience. When such communication occurs, spokespersons are trying to find a balance between more general and specialised information. For this purpose a compromise is needed. In general terms, the group of accredited journalists is in a privileged position. Communication with those journalists is a two-way relationship: spokespersons use them as mediators and journalists contact spokespersons when the need arises. From the point of view of spokespersons, the low number of foreign correspondents from some of the new EU member states represents a problem: “For example, from Lithuania there is only one TV journalist that we can contact easily. One should then think about contacting Lithuanian journalists directly but this is simply impossible.” Besides, the few accredited journalists have to cover a lot of different fields. This, by definition, also limits the flow of information.

All interviewed spokespersons have stressed the fact that the midday briefings are a good occasion to establish more personal contacts with the journalists, especially after the briefings, when journalists and spokespersons meet informally in the cafeteria next to the pressroom. All respondents claimed that the informal contacts with journalists are important. In particular print media journalists who, as a rule, seem to be more interested in EU issues than their colleagues in the audiovisual media, appreciate these informal contacts. The informal talks in the cafeteria create opportunities for a scoop, for a special approach, etc.

The majority of spokespersons admit that they have time problems that prevent them from addressing the journalists equally. Often they make some strategic decisions, from an economic perspective, regarding how to get their message to as broad a public as possible. In this context, several of the spokespersons admit to the favoured position of the *Financial Times* but they also stress the fact that this newspaper has no less than six correspondents on a permanent basis in Brussels. These journalists are highly specialised and have a network of informal contacts. Due to their specialisation they often ask the less obvious questions, which gives them a strategic benefit, although many of their journalist colleagues seem to think that information is leaked to them. Several spokespersons confronted with this critique stressed the fact that “whoever is active in the press room gets the information they want”.

However, spokespersons perceive a clear hierarchy between different media:

“For immediate communication you address yourself to broadcast media and wire. In the case of crisis those are the first media to reach. If you want to reach the elites to influence the public opinion, you choose the quality newspapers. For interviews we are privileging the reference newspapers: the *Financial Times* in the UK, *Le Monde* in France, the *FAZ* or *Süddeutsche Zeitung* in Germany, *Gazetta Wyborcza* in Poland, or *Diena* in Latvia. We try to reach the newspapers as much as possible: we have

to admit as well that if something appears in the *Financial Times* that all the correspondents and EU affairs journalists working for other media outlets will also read that article.”

The time restrictions represent an economic approach to getting the message through to as many receivers as possible. Hence they use a two-step communication flow procedure. The *Financial Times* is a news source for many journalists all over the world: giving a special interview to a journalist of the *Financial Times* can, therefore, be considered the equivalent of a loudspeaker from which the news spreads very efficiently. This argument also applies to the news agencies that all have correspondents in Brussels:

“The best idea for me when I want to disseminate a message is to use the agencies, because the journalists of the print media and of the television channels will use the agencies and probably they will come back and ask for concrete things, if they need a ‘voice’, if they need an image. I can understand that my information is quite technical, so if I will go with this very technical information to general journalists, they will understand nothing. So I need a little bit of mediation, people who can just pass along the message.”

However, some interviews with spokespersons also revealed a more ‘leak oriented’ attitude, an attitude which was also mentioned by many journalists interviewed in the first and second field studies of the AIM project. One person claimed to have “what we call my *clientele arbiter*”. In this respect, he/she explained:

“It means my usual clients are specialists in the area of relevance to me. I have a group of 30 journalists, who are very well informed and to whom I send information under embargo, of the reviews. That’s why they are informed before the others are. So they can immediately work as press agencies. They have no time to lose.”

The idea of having scoops is of course inherent to the journalistic profession. Here the objectives of the journalists and of the spokespersons are in conflict. As one spokesperson explained:

“Journalists define their job in terms of getting the story before it happens. But the spokesperson has an opposite interest: the spokesperson would like journalists to write about the story when the decision has been made and communicated.”

Journalists want scoops and this means not waiting for the information, but spokespersons can communicate usually only on something already decided. Finding the middle ground becomes crucial. Journalists are going to write the story anyway. According to one spokesperson:

“You try to help them a little bit, making sure that you are not prejudging the decision and that you are not giving any information which is confidential or that could get you into trouble.”

Balancing also implies that spokespersons provide only a little information in advance, but as journalists in Brussels are in competition with each other it happens that information is leaked to different media. But some other mechanisms are developing as well. It appears that the big media firms (e.g. the *Financial Times*) do not really rely on the spokespersons for information leaks. They also have their own ways and sources for getting insider information.

13.4. Understanding EU Communication Drawbacks

In the interviews the spokespersons were asked how they perceive the so-called ‘communication deficit’ of the EU. All of them acknowledged that this was a real problem. However, their suggestions for a solution of this problem vary: Several spokespersons linked the communication deficit with the lack of

interest of the public, some linked it with journalistic procedures and routines, and others also were critical of their own personal function and role in the whole process.

At the level of the public, the communication deficit was perceived in the following way: ordinary citizens lack an understanding of issues taking place at the political level of the EU. Brussels is seen as a remote, anonymous bureaucracy, which is not understood by the people, which speaks a foreign language, etc. However, the European Union has a complex structure that is not easy to explain to people who often do not even understand their own national political structures.

Regarding the media, the spokespersons refer to the journalists that are unable to bring their message across with a sufficient level of transparency. They feel this reflects a lack of knowledge also on the part of the journalists. Or to quote one of our interviewees:

“Journalists often do not understand, and then they blame it on the bureaucratic language that we use. [...]. I think it is fault on both sides. They need to understand that and find ways to explain it themselves in a simpler language. It is not just our fault.”

Another negative observation concerns the journalists' national framing of EU news. The spokespersons, certainly those with a journalistic background, understand that the national media focus on the national framing and on the policy of national governments. Thus, they do not blame the media, and are aware that journalists have to manage to report with very limited resources as:

“Most newspapers, if they have any journalist in Brussels at all, they have only one correspondent. Some larger newspapers of course have more. This is reflected in the accuracy. One cannot write so many stories every day. One is fighting to get the attention of national media and cannot always manage to explain issues as well as one would like.”

According to the interviewed spokespersons, particularly those with a journalistic background, many problems occur because journalists of small media outlets are underpaid and work in very harsh conditions; they are obliged to write stories before they really know the subject and they do not have time to carry out a deep and profound investigation. As a result, they are looking for stories that are easy to produce and easy to sell. This, again, adds to a communication deficit.

Political Decision-Making and the Inherent Complexity of Communication

One of the main causes of the communication deficit, according to the spokespersons, is the complexity problem. This already begins with the preparation of the press releases: although spokespersons try to explain the issues in a clear, transparent language, the DG 'Eurocrats' (most of them lawyers) often turn them, again, into a complicated text. In their announcements the spokespersons try to reduce the complexity, but the press releases are always re-circulated in the DG for approval and often the text is changed once again into a less clear, less transparent version.

There is, however, no simple solution for this complexity-problem. According to the spokespersons, the bureaucratic language is inevitable. “No matter how hard we try we will always face this criticism,” one interviewee said. The Commission is a bureaucracy and spokespersons cannot express things in a way other than that already agreed. The official responsible will stress that this sort of phrasing has to be used in order to have accurate technical details and facts. Thus, the complexity becomes an inherent element of decision-making processes at the EU. Spokespersons try to help journalists to overcome the complexity, but often it becomes an unavoidable problem. For instance, as one interviewee noted:

“To some extent I always try to seek simple language, shorter language, but sometimes even to do this, it is the technically correct terminology that you have to use or otherwise you are not conveying the correct information. You have to try to find a balance between trying to use correct terminology and trying to say things in a simple way. What I always try to do is to find other words, simple words, less bureaucratic words to explain things, to try to put the news first and put the process and the background afterwards, at the bottom of the press release. Avoiding too much technical language is always the aim, but it is not always possible.”

Another aspect of EU communication, which also adds to this complexity issue, is the fact that the job of spokespersons is often to announce directives. This type of information makes very little sense to ordinary people:

“It’s very difficult to tell the people, this may affect you in two years’ time. Because then they will say: ‘then you will tell me who cares in two years time’. The mission of spokespersons is to communicate information that has only limited relevance to people’s life in the short run.”

The bureaucracy of the DG COMM is another problem mentioned. It has become a huge organisation, employing a large number of people, which in turn leads to coordination problems. In addition, the communication qualities of spokespersons and civil servants have to be taken more into account. In order to improve the communication process, real communication specialists have to be recruited. According to one of our interviewees:

“If you want to have people in the Commission who know how to communicate, then you have to hire people who have experience in communicating. Therefore, you need a specific recruitment process that also focuses on the communication skills. This could bring about a very important improvement.”

Some spokespersons wonder whether the excessive monitoring of the EU coverage in the media (by their own DGs, by DG COMM) makes sense because it is a quantitative analysis and a qualitative interpretation is missing. Another problem mentioned is the length and complexity of decision-making procedures of the European Union. According to one of our interviewees it takes up to two to three years between the adoption of new legislation by the EU and the perceived effect in daily life.

Bitter Fruits of Media Commercialisation

The national dimension of EU issues will also determine to a great extent the attention they get in the national media. According to one of the spokespersons, the national framing of the national political leaders is also responsible for the communication deficit of the EU:

“Decisions in Europe are always made through compromise. National politicians will ‘sell’ their story to their national public by focusing on the things they achieved in Brussels. When they had to make a compromise and give in on other subjects, automatically Brussels is to blame.”

To some extent, the national framing of EU related news can be described as a bottle neck situation, “which is created by the fact that national news, national issues are much closer to citizens and they are much more keen to read or hear national news. So there is geographical distance. [...] It works in parallel with a distance in terms of interest.”

For many spokespersons it is quite understandable that the national media try to focus on personalities and the policies of national governments. This is the logic under which the national media base their decisions on what to transmit. According to the spokespersons, it is difficult to blame journalists: the

media have much less resources in Brussels compared to what they have in the member state capitals. In addition, some spokespersons believe that the communication deficit is not only the responsibility of the EU but also of national governments because they could establish better information channels to their citizens. Other spokespersons also stressed the importance of education programmes about the EU in schools. If citizens are better informed about the EU, they will become more interested in EU news.

When talking about the communication deficit, one must also take into consideration the cultural differences and the different languages within the EU. Ideally, 27 different press releases should be written, one for each country. This is very difficult because there are at least 27 different public opinions, and there is no European public opinion. So it is very difficult to prepare a message with regard to something that does not exist.

From the spokespersons' point of view, in the media, there is little reflection on what the European Union *does* for people; the media tend to focus on what it *gives* to people. Indeed, when information has some practical application the message is easier to convey. A good example is the news on mobile phone roaming charges where the EU wants to protect consumers from excessive prices. This concern over excessive prices is really crossing national boundaries and was communicated very extensively in most EU countries. Even in those countries where the media reflect an overall negative image of the EU this type of information was framed positively. Communication, however, is not only a language problem. As mentioned earlier, the complexity of issues make them difficult to communicate and they often also do not interest journalists and their public. The spokespersons know that sensational, negative news, human interest topics, news about EU scandals and huge spending of EU money will get more attention. The journalists interviewed in the context of this study also made this exact point. The commercialisation/tabloidisation of the media is a major problem for the spokespersons: "the EU issues are not very sexy and not appropriate for infotainment."

Reactions to the White Paper on a European Communication Policy

The spokespersons have different views on the White Paper, with some being more sceptical than others. They acknowledge that the White Paper has noble aims, but feel, however, that it is not clear whether these aims will be easy to achieve in practice. In the White Paper, there are certain initiatives which are concrete and are welcomed by the majority of the spokespersons, e.g. giving additional resources to the representations in the member states (the 'going local' perspective), working on human resources (i.e. reinforcing such recruitment strategies wherein only the best communicators are selected to do the job), giving the EU a 'public face' by reinforcing the role and publicity of the Commissioners in the national countries, designing a corporate image, and investing in new technologies.

Several spokespersons, however, doubt that the new policy to 'go local' and turn the EU issues into 'a story' will be successful. Others are not persuaded that the approach of explaining EU topics in a more popular way will be the correct strategy. Experience shows that EU issues appeal more to quality media and they are not keen on story-based news. Also, the idea of 'going local' implies that the representations in the member states become more important in orientating the EU information news flow. To quote one spokesperson: "Brussels should be the place where the EU provides ammunition for the 'troops' in the member states." However, the lack of resources for representations to do their job successfully is an old problem, and a new element in this issue is the communication competence which needs to be introduced:

"The first aspect that has to change is that offices in the member states should receive a lot more resources and staff. But this is a process that takes some time. They do not by definition need more staff. They need more competent staff that can act with a higher degree of autonomy. The idea is that

they should act as the voice of the European Commission in the member states. This means that they need the authority to organise press conferences on a national level whenever they think that is necessary, not just when we launch some press releases in Brussels.”

According to some spokespersons, the representations in the member states could help the communication process by framing issues in ways more closely linked to the different national perspectives:

“The representations can take the complex information from Brussels and translate it into messages that the citizens of Riga or Vilnius can understand more easily. In relation to a policy matter the people in Vilnius are not interested in the dialogue in Mediterranean countries. But if the representation in Vilnius will frame the policy communication as an interconnection between Lithuania and Poland, the public’s interest can be expected to be greater.”

However, some spokespersons are less confident concerning the outcome of these intentions. They say that some representations did a wonderful job in previous years, and the offices could rely on excellent, qualified people who developed an efficient communication strategy towards journalists and citizens. Nevertheless, some spokespersons observed that in recent years some of the representations were down-sized, a lot of the qualified staff members was dismissed and only one person became responsible for the communication strategy. The intention of reversing the situation once again elicited a rather sarcastic tone to some reactions from the spokespersons.

The White Paper also stresses the need to give the EU a ‘human face’. This idea is not easy to realise. Indeed, the Commissioners are EU officials and it is important to see them as public faces, especially in their home countries where they should act as ambassadors of the EU. However, the problem is that Commissioners are political actors driven by their own political agenda related to their job. Even if they wanted to, they cannot spend much time promoting other issues or the work of other Commissioners. Although they are willing to contribute to a wider communication effort, they often lack the relevant resources to do so (time, energy, opportunities).

In terms of organisational communication, an important aspect is having a coherent corporate image. Currently different DGs have different logos, because of their own agenda and policy. Some of those DGs have already invested a lot of money in this process and are therefore reluctant to change their efforts into an overall corporate image. The spokespersons have also made suggestions as to how to improve communication with the help of new technologies. According to the interviewees, the current website is structured according to the logic of the ‘Eurocrats’ and not to the logic of the interested outsider looking for adequate information. However, restructuring the website of the Commission, making it more user-friendly and easier to find information, is a difficult thing to do, especially when there is already a lot of information there.

In spite of these suggestions, the spokespersons also see some very obvious drawbacks in the implementation process:

“The EU is not a light ship that can quickly navigate to change direction. The democratic processes are quite time consuming. Before a decision becomes a law it needs two, three, four, five years. And there are national applications of the law that sometimes end in court procedures, making the implementing process even longer up to ten or fifteen years. Well, people are not living in the perspective of ten to fifteen years. They want results now!”

13.5. Synthesis

In the EU communication process, the spokespersons of the Commission are the intermediaries between the Commission and the media (and in a general sense, also the citizens of the European Union). From the spokespersons' point of view, the widely discussed communication deficit of the EU has several aspects. The first problem is related to the complexity of issues: generally speaking, the European Union is not addressing things that are easy to understand. Or to be more precise: the EU is talking about directives, regulations, integration of markets, interconnectivity of networks, security, etc.

The second problem is related to political and administrative procedures, i.e. to the length and complexity of decision-making within the European Union. Two or three years may pass from the time when the legislation has been adopted by the EU until the point where the citizen will be affected by this legislation. The third issue is related to the fact that, in many senses, geographically but also psychologically the EU is very far away from the average citizen.

To overcome these obstacles, the spokespersons are trying to reach the citizens by applying a long-term communication strategy, by using various means (mass media, the Internet) and by aiming for a long-term effect. They mainly deal with the press corps in Brussels as journalists in the member states are considered as being too far away. This implies that much of the success of EU communication also depends on the resources that Brussels-based national media have: the number and competence of journalists from different member states, and the type of the media the journalist is working for (TV, newspapers, news wires, etc). In short, journalists in Brussels are seen as 'customers' to whom the spokespersons aim to 'sell' the Commission's message.

In their daily routines, the spokespersons follow the agenda of the Commission and plan events and communication. Their job involves much weighting, a lot of balancing, and the reduction of many voices to one. Spokespersons control the distribution of news and seek to spread a coherent message. They plan what to communicate, to whom they give the right to communicate from the DG, and when to provide 'low' or no communication at all.

In this process, according to spokespersons, the difficulties of decision-making are reflected in the bureaucratic and difficult to understand language of communication. Therefore, confusion becomes inevitable. Due to job specifics (different affiliations, multi-tasking and collaborative efforts in finding a common ground to speak with 'one voice', etc.), they can give this only limited attention. The spokespersons must be selective in their communication with the media. Thus, they have preferred journalists and media companies (e.g. the news agencies, the *Financial Times*).

In general, the spokespersons look positively at changes proposed in the Commission's new communication strategy. The spokespersons support changes, such as giving Europe a 'human face' or 'going local' through investing more competence and resources in the representations of the Commission in the member states, improving the corporate image, etc. However, it is also very obvious that change will be very difficult due to the complicated procedures of finding a common ground, developing a corporate image, and re-thinking strategies that have been already implemented (e.g. on the websites of different DGs).