

# How to meet journalistic aims in European communication? Redefining the potential of online EU news offers

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## 1. FOREWORD

This chapter looks into the research findings of the Adequate Information Management (AIM) project<sup>1</sup> from a new perspective. It seeks to show that there is an increasing need to redefine the potential of new media technologies in EU communication in three ways - as means of information, communication and production. As the AIM project has shown, 'communication' (e-mailing, consulting online) and 'production' (webcasting online, reporting online, blogging) are both intensively and extensively used by both EU institutions (e.g. the spokespersons of the European Commission) and journalists (working in Brussels and in their home offices).

From a journalistic point of view, however, there is a research need to redefine the potential of new media as means of 'information'; or to put it more precise - as means to provide analytical information offering transnational and alternative views on European policy issues. The AIM project and other research dealing with media reporting on European matters made it clear that there are obvious problems in the process of EU communication. In short, the main problems are that media across Europe 'domesticate' EU issues (focussing on their national political agendas) and that transnational (pan-European) views are missing (Machill et al., 2006; Meyer, 2005; Peter and De Vreese, 2003).

This chapter proposes that alternative information platforms,<sup>2</sup> which offer rich and varied information with alternative views and transnational perspectives, could become useful sources of EU news for journalists. By offering rich information and recognising the common interests

of citizens in a pan-European context, these news sources may help journalists to develop the *analytical skills* that are necessary to get background information on complex EU matters and develop a shared sense of 'Europeanness', which, possibly, could in turn enrich the news that is reported.

## 2. INTRODUCTION

When researching the role and function that new media technologies can play in European democracies (in particular), European communication (in general) becomes an interesting research field. Due to the multifacetedness and complexity of the research perspectives (focussing on different actors, or having different levels of analysis, such as the national or the trans-European level), this approach can open new perspectives to look at old questions in journalism research. New light can be shed on the problems of 'communicating Europe' through the analysis of the working routines of (and channels used by) political actors trying to reach the citizenry (and having to cope with the national media). Similarly, the theories of news selection and agenda-setting can be revisited by taking the potential of interactive media into account (for e.g., as offering different perspectives on European information).

Generally speaking, in the context of European news production, the utilisation of new media technologies (internet portals, mobile phones, satellite broadcasting) has become of crucial importance. Political actors understand the growing importance and usability of new media technologies: for instance the recently announced *White Paper on a European Communication Policy*<sup>3</sup> attributes a substantial role to the internet. The media, too, have increased their investment in the development of new media journalism projects.

In this chapter the potential of new media is analysed by making use of two approaches. First, the news management and communication strategies, and the working routines of the two actors (the spokespersons of the European Commission and the Brussels correspondents) involved in the process of EU communication will be briefly discussed.<sup>4</sup> Second, the role of technology will be debated, focussing on the potential it has for EU communication - concentrating on the global availability of online sources which offer varied and rich EU information.

### 3. COMMUNICATING EUROPE AS A CHALLENGE

Political communication takes place when political messages are re-produced by the media. From the perspective of political actors, news management is related to political public relations such as deciding on the timing for public announcements, on how the information should be spun, and on a wide range of other issues related to the communication with journalists. From a media perspective, the news management is related to giving publicity to political messages according to the rules of particular news organisations. The norms governing the interaction between journalists and their political news sources thus become highly significant in order to describe any particular (European) political communication culture. In this context, it is important to question the roots of these norms – are they rooted in a media logic or a political logic? What are the working routines of each of the actors playing an active role in this process? Which channels are being used for information and communication?

Popularly speaking, the concept of news management is associated in political communication with the way political actors deal with the media. News management is aimed at influencing, changing, piloting and controlling the journalistic everyday business and is considered to be a PR function. From a media perspective – if it is presented as above – it is mainly understood as an outside strategy. In this top-down approach to news management, political and other actors seek to determine the media agenda. But news management can also be understood as a process internal to media organisations, which covers different phases of news production such as the choice of information sources, value judgments, assessments of news relevance, and news presentation. To sum up, news production is an active process, which is manifested through the journalistic processes as gate-keeping, decision-making, and agenda-setting, and where top-down and bottom-up strategies of information management are combined.

Indeed, the concept of news management is relevant to describe the procedures that are applied within the contexts of news manufacturing. In EU communication, news management is understood as a three-step-flow process, where European institutions provide information to the foreign correspondents in Brussels (1<sup>st</sup> step), who in turn select and edit the news, and feed it to the media at home (2<sup>nd</sup> step), which from their part inform the citizens of the European countries (3<sup>rd</sup> step). This kind of arrangement is quite common for foreign news coverage, however, as will be demonstrated in the next parts of this chapter, the Brussels' news

site still has its particularities concerning European – as foreign news – reporting.

### *3.1. The working routines of the spokespersons of the European Commission – a bottleneck of EU communication<sup>5</sup>*

In EU communication, the spokespersons of the European Commission (the Commission) are the intermediaries between the Commission and the media (and indirectly the citizens of the European Union). In their daily routines, the spokespersons follow the agenda of the Commission and plan the events-communication. Their job involves weighing and balancing information, combined with limiting many voices to one. Spokespersons control the distribution of news and seek to distribute a coherent message. They plan what to communicate, whom from the DG to give the right to communicate to, and when to provide 'low or no communication at all'. In this process, numerous channels are used, and activities performed, both officially (organising press releases, midday briefings, press conferences) and confidentially (organising meetings with journalists in unofficial situations).

From the spokespersons' point of view, the so-widely discussed problem of 'communicating Europe' (i.e. the information deficit, the lack of public debates on EU issues, etc.) has several aspects. The first problem is related to the complexity of political issues. Generally speaking, the European Union is addressing things that are not easy to comprehend. To put it more precise: the EU is talking about directives, regulations, the integration of markets, the interconnectivity of networks, security, etc. The second problem is related to political and administrative procedures, i.e. to the length and complexity of the decision-making processes of the Commission. Two or three years may pass by, from the time when the legislation has been adopted by the Commission until the citizen will be affected by this legislation. Due to the specificities of their communicational structure (with the different affiliations of the spokespersons, their multi-tasking and the collaborative efforts to find a common ground in order to speak in 'one voice', etc.), the spokespersons have to be selective, and they can only have limited attention for the broader media landscape and for the media in those countries with a small number of correspondents present. Thus, they have their preferred journalists and media companies (e.g., the news agencies, the *Financial Times*). The third issue they raise is that the EU is in many ways, geographically but also mentally, very far away from the daily lives of the 'average' citizen.

To avoid these problems, the spokespersons try to reach citizens by applying a long-term communication strategy, which is based on a multi-channel method (combining media with the internet) and which is aiming for long-term effects. The spokespersons mainly deal with the press corps in Brussels, as journalists located in the member states are considered being too far away. This implies that much of the success in EU communication also depends on the resources that Brussels-based national media have, as for instance the number and competence of journalists from the different member states, and the type of medium 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 messages.

In general, the spokespersons look positively at the changes introduced by the Commission's new communication strategy. Spokespersons support the idea to give Europe a more 'human face', to 'go local' by investing more resources into the representations of the member states, to improve the corporate image and to invest more in new technologies, etc. However, it is also very obvious that these change will be very difficult to implement due to the complicated nature of the procedures for finding a common ground, and the problems related to re-thinking strategies that have been already implemented (e.g. the internet websites of different DGs).

To conclude this part, the major policy principles shaping the European communication from the point of view of the spokespersons are related to the following issues. They need to speak in one voice, avoid involvement in national debates, manage the complex and bureaucratic language (which is seen as an inevitable part of the working process – it is considered necessary to stress all technicalities in order to demonstrate the level of consensus that was reached), plan and manage the information distribution and use the available variety of communication channels.

### *3.2. Media approaches to EU news reporting: contextual means to transnationalise journalistic practices*

Previous research has shown that Brussels has a unique information culture with its own rules, norms and source hierarchies (Baisnee, 2002; Raeymaeckers et al., 2007). For most Brussels correspondents, this communication culture differs dramatically from what journalists are used to at home. Getting to know this political communication culture requires time, resources and a professional attitude. While working in

Brussels, journalists have to be flexible and switch between different frames of reporting, such as the transnational and the national, the global and the local. At the level of the national frame – as research on media reporting on EU matters has shown – the highest probability for the EU news to enter on the national agenda is to ‘domesticate’ these news items (i.e. to nationalise them by trying to find an angle that fits the national political agenda). In other words, national relevance – the implications of EU decisions for national politics, economies and the life of citizens – is the most important and common selection criterion for journalists covering the EU<sup>6</sup>.

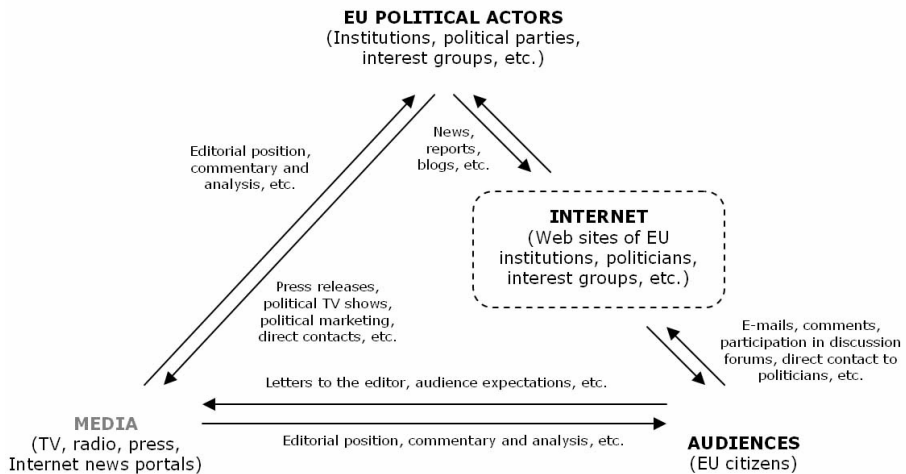
In particular, it seems that this contradiction between the journalists’ national affiliation, on the one side, and the supranational topics they are asked to cover and the transnational environment within which they operate, on the other, materialises in two aspects: professional practices and news values. When in Brussels, journalists obviously work in an international milieu. They face distinct newsgathering rules, an organisation and attitudes of their sources that can be radically different from what they are used to in their homeland. The transnational character of the Brussels ‘newsroom’ creates many opportunities for journalists to meet and communication cultures and practices to merge. Journalists go through a certain learning-by-doing period and they develop many common elements in their communicative practices. Eventually, their daily routines become fairly identical: in the mornings, normally, correspondents scan some international morning papers, listen to international news services, check online newsletters, go through invitations to organised political events such as midday briefings, and then communicate with the news editor at home about the priorities for the day. The sources that journalists access are also relatively similar. In this way, national differences tend to diminish, because professionals use the same working procedures and because news tends to be very similar in content and in framing.

To conclude, the Brussels’ journalistic microcosm creates the opportunities for a transnational journalistic culture to emerge. Very frequently, journalists share the same sources, and come to similar interpretations and evaluations of what has happened. Brussels has thus become – for journalists – a socialisation opportunity and a place for cooperation.

### 3.3. Where do political and media objectives clash?

In spite of many contextual possibilities for a homogeneous communication culture to emerge, there are – from the journalists’ point of view – serious problems located at the 2<sup>nd</sup> level of EU news mediation (in Brussels). Here, the concept of ‘adequacy’ in news management can be used to understand the goal-oriented behaviour in the tripartite relationship between the different partners in EU communication, namely the EU institutions, the media and their national audiences (see Figure 1).

**Figure 1:** Different partners in EU communication and the means of influencing their behaviour (adapted from Balčytienė and Vinciūnienė, 2006).



As became clear from the news production analysis, the problems of ‘communicating Europe’ (such as the lack of transparency, the complexity of issues to be communicated, etc.) are based on structural and organisational conditions. Moreover, these news management processes are affected by social, cultural, political and economic conditions and dynamics. The professional work routines of both actors decisively determine the shape of the European information. The political news sources – the spokespersons of the European Commission – do deliver rich information and use various means for communication, but they also aim to maintain a balanced (mono-vocal) perspective and seek to communicate achieved results. The media, in contrast, value unsolicited access, issue relevance and are interested in matters that related to proc-

esses, which renders them dissatisfied with the current situation. Therefore, one of the major problems of 'communicating Europe' is not based on the *quantity* (research shows<sup>7</sup> that numerous channels and sources of EU information are indeed available), but rather on the *quality* of the information processing.

The weakest aspect in the European information management process is the lacking of sufficient *analytical capacity* in the 2<sup>nd</sup> step of the mediation process – namely, at the point in time when news is selected and interpreted by the Brussels correspondents. Exactly at this point the major differences between the transnational political communication context of the EU institutions and the national journalistic culture occur. Journalists do not accept the Commission's PR – indeed, they remain very sceptical about any kind of clear journalistic pre-production of information by the staff of the Commission. Journalists also do not see the Commission as capable of engaging in interpretations and analyses of its own information output (because the Commission follows the 'speaking in one voice' policy, avoids national views and communicates on what has been achieved rather than disclosing conflicting views and background information on the decision-making process). Therefore, having little opportunities to look behind the scenes of the decision-making process, journalists lack the *analytical skills* (to question factual details, to interpret background information, to find relevant arguments, and to analyse the received information) to move beyond the pre-prepared statements of the Commission.

One way to get out of this vicious cycle is to increase the capacity of the Brussels correspondents to bypass any kind of PR-like strategy of the Commission and to find other kinds of sources offering them fresh insights and background information concerning key policy issues. According to the interviewed journalists, more readiness from the side of the EC representatives (Commissioners and senior staff) to engage in meaningful debates and to express their own views and analytical arguments is considered to be indispensable as well.

#### 4. INFORMATION OFFERS ONLINE AND TRANSNATIONALISATION OF EUROPEAN REPORTING

Taking into account the EU's communication problems – the overflow of information, the lack of transparency, the bureaucratic jargon, the pitfalls of cross-cultural misunderstandings on all levels and concerning all aspects of politics, etc. – independent online news sources could become

of crucial importance for journalists to gain insights into EU policy-making processes and could offer more diverse (and sometimes conflicting) perspectives on European issues.

Indeed, the existence of a knowledge-based society obviously changes the role of new media technologies, as they are being used as means of information, communication and production. An indirect finding of the AIM project was that reporting on Europe increases with the advent of a younger generation of professional journalists that rely on a clearer and more active understanding of the European dimensions involved in their daily trade (AIM Research Consortium, 2007b). The AIM study confirmed that most of the correspondents read media websites and check online information from governments or other official bodies. They use the internet quite frequently and do not often bother to participate in pre-planned events (such as the midday briefings or press conferences) because they will not be able to ask questions anyhow. Following the press conferences on the internet provides them with sufficient material. The correspondents also find it helpful that official documents and reports are made available online without any delay, so that they can get a view on what is going on. In addition, effective search features allows them to find new inspiration and new topics for their work. Journalists also turn to weblogs, online communities and forums to find out what is being discussed online and where news might develop. One problem, however, is that the editors also have access to most internet sources at home, and are demanding more justification for the correspondents' presence in Brussels than was the case some years ago. At the same time there are justified concerns that internet news, especially when provided by do-it-yourself journalists, can lead to error, rumour and propaganda. But it is also considered that amateur reporting offers valuable perspectives on news, which is often missed by the traditional media, especially when the number of traditional foreign correspondents is in decline.

In short, there is a growing tendency to rely on more than institutionalised information systems concerning European affairs. A strong trend, based on technological developments within the world of the internet, points into the direction of non-institutionalised, non-governmental, non-administrative and clearly transnational information.

Indeed, there is a wide array of alternative online communication platforms available which offers all kinds of insights into European matters<sup>8</sup>. These are ranging from those offering specialised information to the ones that can be accessed by general audiences. An important and distinctive feature of these platforms is their transnational orientation, which is especially useful for journalists to get access to background

material and to other views on policy matters than those communicated by official sources in official documents.

## 5. OUTLOOK AND FURTHER RESEARCH NEEDS

It appears that there are old questions (concerning information selection and management) and new questions (reacting to social changes) that journalistic theory and political communication research need to address. In this chapter, the need to redefine the role of new media technologies is stressed on the basis of three kinds of uses: as a means of information and transaction (for policy research and analysis), as a means of communication (for e-mailing, chatting, interviewing, and consulting), and as a means of production (for producing new media journalism, weblogging). From the news production and work routine perspective, it appears that both actors (the spokespersons and the media) are increasingly using the internet as a means of communication and production. In the light of the problems of 'communicating Europe' there seems to be a yet unexplored potential of the internet as means of (alternative, independent, analytical and transnational) information.

This chapter aims to stress the yet unfulfilled need for journalists to gain access to procedural aspects of political decision-making (such as conflicting views, background information and opinions). It is proposed that online information, and more specifically interactive platforms which are widely available and are already used by some journalists, become a possible solution to at least some of communication problems discussed above.

Indeed, several processes evolving towards more radical changes in EU communication can be observed in relation to new media and interactive technologies. First, institutional re-arrangements are taking place at the EU level: the Brussels microcosm ('newsroom') is rapidly changing due to a combination of subjective changes (where more spokespersons with degrees in communication and media related fields are recruited, and where the EU information policy is moving towards the more active use of new media) and objective changes (where the structure of Brussels press corps is changing because of the arrival of a new generation of journalists). Second, in all European countries the media field is rapidly restructuring itself, and evolving towards more intensified forms of competition, and towards a more commercialised form of news production (applying the new logic of news production 'as fast and as cheap as possible'). New technologies are now actively being used to fill the holes

in the market. Third, the technological awareness of citizens is constantly growing, which affects the development of alternative platforms offering independent and personalised access to EU information.

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## NOTES

- Eleven countries took part in the 6<sup>th</sup> FP AIM project, which ran from 2004 to 2007. Its aim was to analyse specific news production processes (EU information selection, analysis, editing, presentation) that resulted in EU coverage in the mass media. Information about the project is available online at <http://www.aim-project.net> (accessed on August 2007).

- 2 In this chapter the concept of 'alternative online platforms' is used to describe new kinds of information sources offering diverse and, most importantly, varied information from a transnational point of view. As will be demonstrated by a number of examples in the following sections of the chapter, these platforms have become 'mainstream' in many cases, and are known and fairly actively used by journalists. Their 'alternative' character is defined here by contrasting the content they offer online with the national media's urge to 'domesticate' (i.e. to nationalise) EU news.
- 3 [http://ec.europa.eu/communication\\_white\\_paper/doc/white\\_paper\\_en.pdf](http://ec.europa.eu/communication_white_paper/doc/white_paper_en.pdf) (accessed in August 2007).
- 4 The role of audiences is not addressed in this study but with the growing importance of alternative online platforms (such as internet news portals, weblogs, chat rooms, online forums and other kinds of virtual meeting spaces) this needs to be addressed in future studies.
- 5 The working routines of the spokespersons are summarised on the basis of the information that was gathered in interviews of the AIM project. Researchers from eleven European countries studied the media's impact on the development of (a) European public sphere(s). For this project, the Belgian and Lithuanian researchers interviewed spokespersons of the different DGs (for more information, see AIM Research Consortium, 2007a). In the spring of 2006, 14 spokespersons (out of the total number of 32 listed in the DG Communication's *Guide for journalists*) were interviewed.
- 6 It is of course possible to find news about the EU as a political entity, but this is often only reported in times of major crisis, by the newspapers read by elite groups, by some public broadcasters and by some news agencies.
- 7 One common result of all national reports of the AIM project was that they showed the wide availability of communication channels (both official and unofficial) that are used by journalists (AIM Research Consortium, 2007a).
- 8 Consult, for example, such projects online as 'Europe media monitor' (<http://press.jrc.it>), 'Euro Topics' (<http://www.eurotopics.net>), 'EurActiv' (<http://www.euractiv.com>), 'EuroZine' (<http://www.eurozine.com>), 'EU Observer' (<http://www.euobserver.com>), 'Café Babel' ([www.cafebababl.com](http://www.cafebababl.com)) and others.