The ambivalent politicisation of European communication

Genesis of the controversies and institutional frictions surrounding the 2006 White Paper

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Abstract:
This article analyses the political stakes of the EU's communication policy. The authors study the frictions between European institutions, mainly the Commission and Parliament, after the publication of the White Paper on a European Communication Policy, replacing them in the context of the representations, routines, and compromises that have historically structured the interinstitutional relationships about communication. This historical perspective enables them to show the long lasting and persistent attention of the European actors to the promotion of Europe, as well as the strength of logics of compromise on the politicisation of European communication.

Keywords: European communication, EU, White Paper, European public space.

Résumé :
Cet article analyse les enjeux politiques qui traversent aujourd'hui l'Union européenne concernant sa politique de communication. Les auteurs étudient les frictions qui ont opposé les institutions européennes, principalement la Commission et le Parlement, à l'occasion de la publication du *Livre blanc sur une politique de communication européenne*, en les replaçant plus largement dans les représentations, les routines et les compromis qui structurent historiquement les relations interinstitutionnelles autour de la communication. Cette perspective historique leur permet de montrer non seulement l'antériorité et la persistance du souci des acteurs européens à promouvoir l'Europe, mais aussi la force des logiques de compromis sur la politisation de la communication européenne.

Mots-clés : Communication européenne, UE, Livre blanc, Espace public européen.

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"*Public relations are an independent complement of the general information activity. It is clear that they both deserve maximum attention from both the European Commission and the European Parliament in the absence of which the Communities would exist exclusively at the intergovernmental level and end up speaking a language understood only by a small group of insiders; a 'volapük' for stateless technocrats and not a human language*"

~European Parliament Political Committee report on the information policy of European Communities (January 1972).

If the Union wishes to be listened to, it has to take European affairs to national, regional, and local level. However, it is not sensible to view citizens as the prime movers of participation and dialogue. It would be pointless to listen carefully to what citizens had to say if they were ill-informed.

~Report of the Committee on Culture and Education of the European Parliament on the White Paper on a European communication policy (October 2006).

Published at the height of the crisis triggered in the spring of 2005 by the rejection of the constitutional treaty in France and the Netherlands, the recent White Paper issued by the Commission on European Union communication[1] gave rise to surprisingly bitter exchanges between the institutions of the Union, quite unlike the "culture of consensus" that is usually associated with Community institutions (Abélès/Bellier 1996). Although the Commission issues numerous White Papers, they hardly have anything in common. Unlike the very first of its kind[2] issued by the Commission which made a triumphant début, the political outcome of this White Paper was less glorious. Immediately after its publication, the proposals of the Commission contained therein rekindled the enduring controversy over the objectives and means of European Community

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[1] European Commission, *White Paper on a European communication policy*, Luxembourg, OPCE, 2006 [COM (2006) 35 final]. The Commission specifies on its site that "White papers are documents containing proposals for Community action in a specific area. They sometimes follow a green paper published to launch a consultation process at European level. While green papers set out a range of ideas presented for public discussion and debate, white papers contain an official set of proposals in specific policy areas and are used as vehicles for their development."

[2] Concerning the first White Paper on the economic and monetary union, see Drake 2002. For a personal account, refer to the chapter titled "Le livre blanc de 1993 ou la dernière chance" in Jacques Delors's *Mémoires* (p. 416*sq*).

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communication.[3] However, the issue went beyond the endless debate over the technical diagnostic of the problem which had raged back and forth for nearly two decades. This time around, the major institutions of the Union not only disagreed sharply but also disagreed publicly. If the inter-institutional disagreement alternately took on aspects of the quarrel over "good law" (concerning the "legal basis" of the communication policy), of the experts' debate over the proper means and of the political argument over the proper message, it also drifted into trivial bargaining over the distribution of resources allocated to European communication. The controversy over the common communication policy, which resurfaced between the summer of 2005 and autumn 2007, brought into the open the remarkable extent to which the report was dramatised in Community circles. Additionally, it showed that the explosive disavowal of the draft constitution (the 2005 "no" vote) happened before the cycle of institutional re-balancing triggered by the resignation of the Santer Commission could be completed and, also, before the Commission could re-establish its leadership over issues that *traditionally* fell within its jurisdiction. Having hosted since its creation the European common information service, which has since become an integral part of its administration (the Directorate-

General of Information, see below), the Commission has in effect traditionally played the roles of initiator, coordinator and manager of Community communication within the European institutional game, deploying its human and financial resources in the service of European politicians and their "partners" (mainly the European Parliament). However, the proposals advanced by the Commission in the White Paper, which seeks to replace routines with functional arrangements,[4] drew opposition from MEPs[5] and drew the attention of representatives of governmental interests (COREPER, General Secretariat of the Council). The direction and scope of the Commission's proposals following the cycle of reactions from the major institutional partners[6] are a step backwards in this regard, since they were aimed more at consolidating the well-oiled practices among the said partners than formally defining new ones. The nature of the bargain around the White Paper and, in the long run, the fact that the Commission abandoned its major proposals is therefore indicative of a new balance of power within the European institutional game.

It is therefore evident that what happened between June 2005 and October 2007 can be better understood by retracing the communication policy design component of EU history. Indeed, it is a long way from the initial

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[3] As early as the tortuous ratification of the Treaty of Maastricht, the media observed that accusing fingers were pointed at the communications department in community circles. An article titled *Espace européen: les mal-aimés de Bruxelles (the European Zone: the unpopular figures of Brussels)* published in the 13 October 1992 issue of the newspaper *Le Monde* reads: "There was near-unanimous criticism of the DG-X, a major publisher of brochures extolling the virtues of the Community which were generously distributed to visitors but whose impact on the masses was very limited".

[4] In the White Paper, the Commission proposed to define a legal base for the communication policy of the EU and to formally declare it a common policy (*see below*).

[5] In many respects, the Herrero report ratified by the Parliament in October 2006 marks the rejection of the WPC by MEPs.

[6] In accordance with tradition, the answers to the White Paper by the institutions (Parliament, Council) and the organs (CESE, regional committees) resulted in the Commission publishing new follow-up proposals early October, 2007 (*see below*).

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structuring of administrative services devolved to information and press relations, to the appointment of Margot Wallström as vice-president of the Commission in charge of "inter-institutional relations and communication strategy". Over the past forty years, the project of constructing Europe has changed in scale and nature. Meanwhile, communication has become a major stake on which the foremost responsibility of battling abstention during European elections hinges, legitimising EU policy and enhancing its image in the public opinions of member countries. The bitterness of inter-institutional exchanges is first and foremost due to the paradigm shift on the problem of communication within Community circles. This problem is no longer considered in terms of communication by "teaching Europe", but more as the obligation to urgently and efficiently generate (mass) support, (citizen) consent and (electoral) participation at the same time. The issue of the debate initiated between Union institutions by the White Paper is therefore nothing less than a dismantling of the orientation and the control of Community communication means, which appear today as the main instrument of legitimising a peculiar power, devoid of the traditional attributes of political incarnation (its own territory, a single decision-making centre, administrative machinery or deep electoral roots at the local level).[7] It is this chronic politicisation of European communication - thwarted and euphemised by institutional economics and its relational routines - which revealed the process of institutional

exchanges caused by the publication of the White Paper.

By revisiting the genesis of the unrest the White Paper caused in the institutional game, this article intends to move away from the traditional normative approach (Why does Europe communicate so poorly and how can it be improved?)[8] in order to examine how the issue of "European communication" gradually evolved from a sectoral and marginal situation to an inter-sectoral and important issue. Like other cases caught in the interpenetrated geometries of Community power, communication has always been the subject of accommodation between the competing logics of the institutions and the political constraints of compromise. Therefore, this article will demonstrate that the paradigmatic frameworks[9] of this arrangement are still being fashioned and modified to suit the configurations of the internal and external power game of the Union.[10]

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[7] On the legitimacy of the EU, see Banchoff/Smith 1999. This analysis of the "European power", in point of fact, echoes the theorist view of democracy. On these two dimensions – social and procedural – of legitimity, see de Búrca 1996.

[8] A critical evaluation of the communication strategy of the EU inspired several works. From the social sciences point of view, see Dacheux 1997 ; 2003. Reflexive accounts of European institution actors engaged in EU communication can be found in CEES 2007.

[9] By "paradigmatic framework", we mean orders of signification, certainties, concepts that constitute the "culture" of European actors. The approach is not psychological, but merely aims (P. Veyne, N. Elias) to identify the imaginary "frames" which guide organised action and are apparent in the lines of action ("policies", "strategy", "action plan") and the spaces of justifications that collective actors apply to themselves and demonstrate publicly. Furthermore, "frame perspective" considers how these frames play a role in forecasting, diagnosing and justifying common principles of action. Concerning these roles, see Benford/Snow 2000.

[10] This article draws from two main sources: firstly, a systematic prospecting in the archives of the European Commission and the European Parliament; secondly, interviews conducted in Brussels, Strasbourg, Paris and Berlin with the protagonists of the EU communication policy.

(1) Teaching Europe as communication common sense: The avatars of the diffusionist paradigm

The progressive extension of the domains of intervention of Community communication

The actors who manage the Commission, i.e., the college of commissioners and senior European civil servants, who traditionally speak in the name of "Europe", quickly showed the importance they attach to the supply of information to the public in Member States. Traditionally governed by the communicational practices of the day, the communication policy of the Commission initially drew from the time-tested techniques of public relations and press relations.[11] Mass communication practices were however incorporated into the package in the late 1980s. Initially, media visibility of Community institutions and their activities seem to have dominated the issue of the relationship with public opinion. As early as 1950, Brussels hosted press and information departments which sponsored the early opinion polls on attitudes towards the Europe of Six in the founding states. The intention at the time was to establish contacts within two circles: the media; and what was then referred to as "return information", which consisted of media monitoring and opinion surveys. Over the years, these units matured together with the Commission, thus extending both the scope and the means of its action. Although the Single European

Act boosted the integration process at the level of state-to-state and Commission-state relations, it also strengthened the influence of the Commission within the Community institutional game.

This rise in the power of the Commission resulted in the creation of a reactive and efficient communication machinery, notably for opinion studies[12], media monitoring and campaigns directed at the general public. Thus in the late 1980s, the Commission either organised or supported several events in the area of sports (European Sailing Championship, CE Future Tour, European championships) and culture (1988 Brisbane Exhibition followed by the 1992 Seville Exposition) aimed at "sensitising" the general public to Europe. Additionally, a series of "specific campaigns" were launched in 1986, culminating in the declaration of 1986, 1987 and 1988 respectively as *European Year* of Road Safety, Environment and the Fight Against Cancer. Although the Commission still placed emphasis on "information effort" and "public relations", European communication actors began to develop more marketing-oriented actions.[13] In 1989, the Luxembourg national Jean Dondeliner, Commissioner in charge of Cultural and Audiovisual Affairs, as well as of Information, re-oriented the new Priority Information Program. As a

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[11] Regarding the creation of a common information and spokesperson service, see Rabier 1993; as well as Bastin 2003.

[12] The biannual standard Eurobarometers (questions on opinion "trends") have been published since 1974. The more flexible and more targeted Flash Eurobarometers were launched in the early 1990s.

[13] In a memorandum on the activity of the Commission in the area of information-communication, Anna Melich, then administrator of DG Information, Communication, Culture, presented these "marketing" actions as "informative spaces based on current needs and instituted them depending on circumstances" (Melich 1989).

result, the DG-X was able, on the one hand, to establish "information and communication guidelines" among the various units concerned, leading to better "coherence of resources" in relevant matters; and, on the other hand, the Commission defined "the most important and most appropriate Community issues", and determined the use of resources "depending on the Member State and the targets".[14] Contrary to the retrospective vision which considers the very controversial de-Clercq report[15] (1993) as the beginning of awareness to communication within the College and administration in Brussels, it is clear that issues related to the information and sensitisation of the general public about Europe were major considerations as far back as the first term of Delors.

In spite of preconceptions, an objective look at the communication machinery of the Commission can lead to consider as excessive, or even unjustifiable, the perpetual retooling of this communication policy. The Berlaymont Press Centre, located in the headquarters of the Commission, hosts a sizeable proportion of the one thousand or so accredited journalists from all over the world who hold daily briefings –

referred to as "midday rendezvous" – with the spokespersons of the various directorate-generals of the Commission. Within the framework of its press relations, the Commission also regularly invited to Brussels, at its cost, journalists from the local press of the Member States in order to explain to them the work of the EU. "Europe" was equally present in each country[16] through the official representation of the Commission in all Member States. Informative literature on the history of the EU published by the Commission, e.g., its actions and various programs, are accessible on the premises of the various institutional partners like the Europe Information Centre, Europe Houses, public libraries, and Chambers of Commerce, which serve as its official relays; in addition to the role played by its own representatives and networks in the Member States[17] with regard to information. Since 1999, the Commission has its own website (http://ec.europa.eu/). Redesigned in 2003, it offers European citizens a stream of information on the political agenda of the EU, the Commissioners' work as well as easy access to a significant amount of EU archives (e.g., legislative texts, reports, programs, organisational charts, forms, EU annual activity reports). For several years now, this electronic portal has been hosting interactive systems which enable European citizens to directly contact "Europe" in order to ask questions (the Euro Direct telephone and electronic contact centre). Furthermore, "Europe" has also become a brand: the Commission's logo appears on all

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[14] European Commission, Priority Information *Program 1989 – Operational Orientations,* 1989 (SEC(89)367/3).

[15] In 1992, the Commission appointed a group of experts made up of actors from various professional horizons (journalists, academics, artistes, advertisers, and national and European civil servants), and led by Belgian MEP Willy de-Clercq. The group was charged with a triple mission: "establish a descriptive state of information and communication policies"; "deliver a diagnostic on the quality of arrangements, actions, attitudes and means"; and "make strategic recommendations". In spite of the quality and extent of the elements of analysis in the group's final report, the de-Clercq report was sharply criticised for referring to the Union as a "good product" (see de-Clercq 1993).

[16] The Commission has an official representation in each member state (sometimes two, as in France and Germany). The staffs of these representations are under the Directorate-General of the commission in charge of communication.

[17] Close to seven hundred relays and networks including the four hundred new Europe Direct information relays opened in 2005.

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programs, aid or construction projects for which it provides financial assistance; and on beneficiary partner sites like governmental and think tank portals. These form just a part of the communication arsenal that the Commission possesses.

Following the massive abstention in the European elections of 2004 and the "no" vote to the constitutional treaty the following year, the Commission first responded with a program of consultation of European citizens aimed at understanding their expectations and opinions which, in turn, would inform a new communication policy.[18] A few months later, the Commission offered to organise the entire communication apparatus more formally and systematically under its own structures. For various reasons, however, these initiatives met with stiff opposition from different quarters, especially from the other institutions of the institutional triangle (Parliament and Council) which had their own information and communication departments; and subsequently from the various directorate-generals of the Commission which, since the 1970s, have each progressively set up a communications unit directed towards specialised audiences of their policy domain (Joana/Smith 2000). They all questioned not only the attempts to centralise control and the means of Community communication within the Commission, but also its right to single-handedly manage the communication of the Union. Finally, they questioned the right of the Commission to speak on behalf of "Europe"[19]. This resistance and these

criticisms signalled the end of the undisputed leadership of the Commission earned in the 1980s and 1990s. This situation results mostly from the increasing politicisation of the relationships between EU institutions (linked to the extension of the scope of the Community's action), correlative of a misalignment of political interests, among which those of Parliament and the Commission. In 2006, there was no longer a single self-evident approach of European communication, as in the past when the focus was on promoting the European "great idea", explaining its lines of action and legitimising its institutions. The follow-up to the White Paper points to the ambiguities of the process of politicisation of Community communication, both driven by the imperative of legitimisation introduced with the electoral trial and subdued by the logics of government by compromise specific to the EU (see Smith 2002 on this point). Imperceptibly, the long-standing principles of tacit institutional agreement linking the Parliament to the Commission's orientations have degenerated over recent years into systematic criticism of the College's choices and proposals on the part of MEPs. Thus, in a follow-up text to the White Paper published in January 2007, this separation is described and justified in the following terms:

> *Over the years, the European Parliament has critically examined the Commission's proposals in the field of communication. As the representative of the interests of Europe's citizens, it also itself has a duty to communicate what Europe is about and to articulate and act upon citizens'*

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[18] European Commission, *The Commission's Contribution to the Period of Reflection and Beyond: Plan D for Democracy, Dialogue and Debate*, Luxembourg, OPCE, 2005.

[19] The role of the spokesperson - defined as the recognition of the authority to speak on behalf of

Europe (and therefore in effect embody all the actors and institutions of the Union) and the right to operate its symbols – results in the strengthening of the dominant position of the Commission. Concerning "the social technology of the delegation" and the effects of " circular circulation of recognition", see Bourdieu 2001.

interests in Europe. In its reports, Parliament has repeatedly made detailed proposals for improving the relationship between the EU and its citizens, although in many cases the Commission has only accepted them to a limited extent. As a result, Members of the European Parliament have become very critical of Commission initiatives. However, there is no dispute as to the fact that the EU's communications capacity needs to be significantly improved.[20]

Tottering halfway between polemical posture and acceptance of needs, the ambivalence of these words at once indicates the political weight taken on by the Commission and its narrow leeway in a decision-making space, based on the initiative of the Commission; and, traditionally, the search for compromise. In order to make allowances for long structural transformations, permanent inter-institutional game and contextual effects, it is useful to reposition the mutation of communication issues within the historical plasticity of the European Community. While the progressive extension of the field of Community communication is the consequence of the changes in the institutional representations of the "public" following electoral trials, these changes do not only affect the improvement of the techniques and instruments of communication. By shifting from one paradigm to another, the rationalisation of communication – from policy of Community communication to Community policy of communication - is a process that upsets institutional routines by calling into question the original distribution of roles and competences. The centralisation of the Community policy of communication in favour of the Commission, which had started during

the Delors years, became more and more problematic as relationships within the European institutional game got increasingly politicised.

The diffusionist paradigm, or the political blind spot of information on Europe.

When the Joint Press and Information Service (SPI) was established in the early 1960s at the behest of the European Parliament,[21] the European Project covered only six States and only involved – apart from the strategic production of steel and nuclear energy – the creation of a customs union among Member States by 1970. Although the rapid progression of this objective and the considerable increase in trade among the countries that signed the Rome Treaty bode well for enhanced political development that would eventually lead to prospects of confederacy, European communities still constituted an evolving legal architecture hinged on an embryonic administration. In the late 1950s, the EEC Commission created a special department for its relations with journalists sent to cover its activity. This spokesperson department, the Communication and the Spokesperson's Service (SPP), was soon structured around a system of accreditation whereby, in collaboration with journalists in Brussels, officials of the

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[20] Fact Sheet on communication policy, http://www.europarl.europa.eu/facts/4_16_7_en.htm.

[21] Considering that "the three European Communities were hatched from the same political idea and constitute the three differentiated elements of a unitary enlargement", the Parliamentary Assembly on 27 June 1958 adopted a resolution which recommended the establishment of three common services including a "press and information service" (JOCE, 26 July 1958). Difficult negotiations between the EEC, ECSC and Euratom prevented its establishment prior to 1962.

SPP chose journalists authorised to attend the Commission's press conferences (Bastin 2003). However, the exchange of information material on the Communities at the time was a reflection of the latter, given that it was legal in content and diplomatic in form. It attracted very little media interest in the respective States, thus making the European Agency[22] the only media house providing complete and daily coverage of the Commission's deliberations.

From the Information Service to DG-COMM

Successively known as Common Press and Information Service (1968-1967), Directorate-General of Press and Information (1967-1973), Directorate General of Press and communication or DG X (1973-1999), the administrative directorate in charge of communication affairs within the Commission in Brussels was also temporarily the seat of Culture. It was dissolved by the Prodi presidency in 1999 (its responsibilities were shared between the Education-Culture DG and the spokesperson unit) but was reconstituted in 2001 under the name of Directorate-General of communication or DG-COMM. This directorate-general traditionally managed relations with accredited media houses, the activity of representations in the Member States, partnership with information relays as well as coordinating the publishing of major information and communication documents on the activities of the EU. With close to one thousand employees in the twenty-seven countries of the Union, the organisation and effectiveness of DG-COMM have been one of the main subjects of debate in each of the proposals – or other action plans – adopted by the Commission in the matter of EU "communication strategy" since 2001.

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[22] Founded in Luxembourg in 1952 immediately after the installation of the ECSC High Authority, Agence Europe moved to Brussels when the EEC Commission took office in 1958. It played the long-term role of a "European" press agency and of daily newsletter for "Brussels" information.

Up until the 1970s, the Commission had no communication policy *stricto sensu*. The dominant perception within the European institution with regard to prospective issues of communication is embedded in what we shall refer to as the diffusionist paradigm based on two approaches to the problem: the "ballistic" approach, or choosing the correct channel; and the deficiency approach, or filling the EC knowledge gap. This translated into an information dissemination policy on, for example, "historical origins", "the great missions" and the "initiatives" of the EU. Entrusted with this educational mission, the Press and Information DG, which is the section of EU administration in charge of these affairs, limited itself to publishing a surprisingly limited amount of copies of brochures (about a thousand at most), and sending memoranda to sections of the public such as trade unions and specialised press (Rabier 1993) who are directly concerned with Community decisions. In 1972, MEPs adopted a report in which they severely criticised this concentration of communication towards "specific audiences".[23] In the report, the MEPs – who were then still delegated by the respective national parliaments – accused the Commission of neglecting the importance of communication as a channel for explaining the integration process to citizens and convincing them to accept this historic project. The rapporteur, Wilhelmus Schuijt, bemoaned the relative decrease in funds allocated to communication since the creation of a single Commission in 1958, and expressed concerns about interventionist tendencies in the financing of projects involving local

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[23] Report of the political committee of the European Parliament on the information policy of European Communities known as the Schuijt Report, January 1972.

partners.[24] In the face of this critical assessment of their activity, the Commissioner in charge of the Information portfolio, Albert Borschette and DG-X director, Jacques-René Rabier, defended this sectionalised approach to their mission, which we will refer to here as a public relations approach. Indeed, the DG-X was split into specialised sections[25] with the responsibility for drawing up information programs targeted at audiences identifiable mainly by occupation. The responsibility for publishing dossiers and brochures detailing Community provisions was given to external professionals who often turned out to be Brussels-based accredited journalists. Just like the diffusionist concept of the information missions pursued by the commission, this organisational model remained essentially unchanged until the 1980s.

From Information Service to communication policy – facing the test of elections

It was during the "Delors years"[26] that a gradual change of approach emerged in the communicational practices of the Commission. This change was particularly due to the upscaling of the process of European integration, which considerably increased the Commissioners' power of action and decision-making, thus concurrently transforming the conditions under which they exercised their mandate. This period marked the passage from an economic community, which was vigorously revitalised after the signing of the Single European Act in 1986, to the unprecedented monetary and political unification project launched with the signing of the Maastricht Treaty in 1992.

During this transitional period, the role of the Commission became a central part of the political life of Europeans. Beyond the three hundred or so directives aimed at harmonising the internal market, the Commission emerged increasingly as the "European government", taking on roles such as negotiating agreements with third countries, and reprimanding Member States that flouted EU regulations. This was especially the case after the Maastricht Treaty came into force, which substantially extended the European Union's sphere of activity, especially by establishing jurisdiction in matters of consumer protection, health, research, environmental protection and immigration policy.

The European Project of the 1990s was far more complex than that of the 1960s. It covered fifteen countries, forged an integrated policy in the areas mentioned above, and further developed intergovernmental cooperation in matters of foreign policy, common security and the judiciary. At the time, the Commission had over 15,000 employees. Nearly 800 journalists from Europe and around the world were accredited to the Commission's SPP. The mandate of the Commission became more political, leading to greater media exposure of their activity and therefore greater attention paid to their individual

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[24] *Ibid.*, p. 22.

[25] As in 1971, the DG-X was composed of the following departments: Youth-Adult Education; University Affairs; Trade Unions; Economic and Social Information Group (the most well-equipped in terms of staff); Agriculture; Industry-Energy-Scientific Research; Development Aid; Foreign Relations and Trade Policy.

[26] Jacques Delors was president of the European Commission from 1985 to 1995. For Delors's push towards increasing the power of the Commission's presidency, see Ross 1995.

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and collective communication[27]. This politicisation of the Commission gradually changed the issues of EU communication policy. Although still orchestrated by the Commission through the SPP, this customary jurisdiction was subject to debate with the other institutions at the same time as the Commission. The result is the politicisation of the communication strategy. The diffusionist paradigm, which has always been dominant in the general approach to European communication, assumed a visibly strategic coloration. The pedagogic justification for informing "specific audiences" such as farmers, academics, and journalists gradually gave way to a persuasive communication discourse aimed at the general public or at "target audiences".

Historically, the beginning of the first shift in the institutional concept of European communication and its reality can be situated at the transition from the 1980s to the 1990s. With the political revolution initiated by Maastricht, EU actors were no longer the artisans of a customs union, economic integration or harmonisation of standards of member countries only. They became the entrepreneurs of a model of regional democracy: a combination of supranational and intergovernmental decision-making bodies, which emerged as a frame of reference for political regulation, i.e., the level at which public problems are defined and solved in member countries. Beyond the powers delegated by the representatives of national populations and written into the treaty, the legitimacy of European authorities was henceforth to come from the consent of citizens. The decade

between the first European parliamentary elections with direct universal suffrage (from 1979), to the ratification of the Maastricht Treaty (1992-1993), is therefore the first movement in a new phase of European enlargement in which the decisions of Brussels would be more systematically subjected to the vote and judgement (e.g., opinion polls) of the people. The support of citizens was now the primary condition for a building and decision-making process hitherto confined to diplomatic circles, and to negotiations between executives of national administrations. By virtue of its scope, this new "democratic challenge" – as termed by the actors of these institutions – could only be overcome by means of relational communication sectionalised into public relations, media relations and lobbying, as well as confined to specific audiences. Resembling the governments of Member States, European Community institutions, especially the Commission, gradually interiorised the public's demand for democracy,[28] that is, a principle of legitimization based on a permanent link between policy and current public opinion.

From 1985, the Delors College put the issue of communication on its list of priorities and worked towards greater media visibility of the EC by means of "appropriate and selective sensitisation campaigns in various European countries".[29] Following this new and broadly advertised approach to solving

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[27] After 1985, the commissioners were more than before key political figures, having already held ministerial positions in their countries. See Joana/Smith 2002 : 47-50.

[28] The notion was borrowed from Bernard Manin who divides democracy into three successive ages, namely "parliamentary government", "party democracy" and "democracy of the public". The last age is characterised by personalisation of electoral choice, instability of political preferences and the weight of public opinion. See Manin 1995: 279*sq.*

[29] European Commission, *Orientations and objectives 1985-1988 of the information and communication policy of the Commission*, 1985.

the problem, MEPs adopted a report the following year which declared that the institutions must "resort to the most appropriate means of communication-audiovisual, press, posters, advertisement".[30] Both in the MEPs' report and the Commissioners' orientations, communication was defined as a distinct entity from information, the strategic association of a message and a dissemination technology capable of influencing citizens.

> "*There is an information policy on Community policies. However it does not convey messages, only news. (…) Parliament is a symbol, and symbols that fail always attract negative feelings. That is why Parliament has the political obligation to commit the States of the Community to a policy of European communication within which not only all national institutions but above all Community institutions are able to express their meaning. (…) an information policy designed without a communication policy is a policy without raison d'être. No symbolic celebration, no festival, no prize, no sporting tournament can fill the political vacuum created by the failure of the political idea and structures of the Community*."[31]

It is during the 1980s that the perspective of the dominant institutional approach would change due to the test of universal suffrage and the increasing criticism of the "democratic deficit"[32] to which the EU was subjected. However, essentially, the change was limited to applying advertising techniques to EU institutional communication, as the "92 market" programme, managed by DG-X and meant to promote the Single Market, shows (Tumber 1995). The shift from an

information policy designed to build to a communication policy designed to persuade is only an adjustment of the response model to the problem within the limits of the diffusionist paradigm. The issue therefore was to find remedies to the loopholes, vacuums and failures by associating the professionalized techniques of strategically generating and disseminating messages and those of the "information effort". The original education-communication model now doubles with a persuasion-communication model. Henceforth, the figures of the general public and opinion are part of the institutional language and vision of the problem, and explicitly constitute a "target" to be won over using the recipes of mass communication and marketing.[33]

De-sectorisation and prioritisation of EU communication.

With the accelerated Europeanisation of the political horizon of EU countries in the early 1990s, the leaders of the Commission, including MEPs, took a second look at the political role played by the information and communication work of the EU. The advent of European citizenship[34] would compel and authorise the Commission – even as the Member States were still suspicious of "propaganda" from another authority towards their own citizens – to

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[30] European Parliament, Report on the communication policy of the European community (rapporteur: Gianni Baget Bozzo), 1986 (A 2-111/86).

[31] *Ibid*., pp. 21-22.

[32] David Marquand first used the expression (Marquand 1979).

[33] This shift towards professional communication is not specific to the Commission and can also be observed in various national governments in Europe.

[34] "European citizenship" was created by the Maastricht Treaty (art. 8) in 1992, and sanctions the following rights: freedom of movement; right to vote and eligibility to stand for the Parliament in Strasbourg; right to vote and eligibility to stand for municipal elections; right to petition Parliament; and diplomatic protection from a Member State if one's State has no representation in a third State.

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reconsider the organisational modalities, means and objectives assigned to officials in charge of directing EU communication. If the de-Clercq report[35] stands for anything at all, it is surely the beginning of the assumed use of the instruments of communication within Community institutions. The general approach to the problem remained diffusionist, that is, deficient in conception and ballistic in implementation. Nevertheless, communication was now taken for what it is: an artificiality of institutional pose and discourse cleverly presented to the public as natural.[36] Consequently, communication towards the "general public" was considered as the weak point of European enlargement. Consequently, it became a veritable obsession, regularly revisited by the major EU actors in inter-institutional debates, reports and political forums in the media. The conversion to, as well as the faith in the power of communication were such that reference to it gradually innervated the publicising of the major Community policies, such as presence of logos, single graphic charters for all communication supports, and standardisation of message. The opinion surveys sponsored by the Commission identified "sections of the public" who were less Europhile than others, namely young people, women and people with lower levels of education.[37] In the face

of this problem, communicational dialectics provided a solution in that it adjusts the message and the language to these "target audiences", with the view to "selling" Europe as the de-Clercq report explicitly recommended as early as 1993. It was no longer only a question of designing a program for education about Europe by informing "specific audiences" (Schuijt report, 1979), nor one of communication based on the emotional force of symbols (Baget-Bozzo report, 1986). According to the rhetoric of targeting borrowed from commercial marketing, the point was to draw up messages and mediatisation mechanisms that would help reach indifferent and ill-informed audiences. It is in this light that the development of a Community audiovisual policy, the increase of aid for training and education and the information programs should be understood (Eugène 2005). As early as this period, the limited press coverage of European affairs and the absence of genuinely transnational media led to move beyond a model of public communication where the media are the prevalent vector. The introduction of marketing instruments ensures that journalists are no longer "the only audience of Europe" (Baisnée 2000; 2002).

In more than one respect, the EU's theme of "institutional reform", operating in the soon-to-be sanctioned concept of "European governance"[38] and later in the draft Constitution adopted in 2004, was an expression of the desire to reconcile the general public and Europe. By means of successive adjustments, the institutional reform was aimed at simplifying and therefore making the decision-making process of the EU more

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[35] de-Clercq Report, *op. cit.*

[36] Dominique Memmi analysed the work of advisors on political communication from the perspective of "maieutics of power", or working to "naturalise" domination, especially by "the pedagogy of poses" (Memmi 1991).

[37] This institutional reading by diverse Europhile "segments of the public" is supported by a scholarly theorisation of which Ronald Inglehart, a close associate of the administrative executives of the DG-X, (notably Jacques-René Rabier, founder of Eurobarometer) was an influential figurehead in the 1970s and the 1980s. On these sociological theorisations of membership in Europe, see Belot 2002.

[38] European Commission, *White Paper on European governance*, Brussels, European Commission, 2001 [COM(2001) 428 final].

intelligible to a maximum number of people. This teaching of the institutional action is supposed to curb the increasing abstention and mistrust of citizens in "Brussels". After the creation of the Common Market (1986-1992) which was characterised by increased Commission activity, in terms of constraining norms for Europeans, and the passage to a political Europe with the Maastricht Treaty, it became imperative to "democratise" institutional and decision-making mechanisms. The Maastricht Treaty immediately mentions that the "principle of representative democracy"[39] is the model of institutional design of the EU and consequently strengthens the role of the European Parliament.[40] Within this context of democratisation, the intergovernmental conference charged with adopting the new treaty included a series of requirements regarding transparency in the decision-making process, and the legibility of Community texts.[41] It was followed in 1993 by an institutional declaration jointly signed by the Council, Parliament and the Commission; and held up as a necessary step forward for democracy which would promote greater transparency in the decision-making process, as well as clarify the restrictive conditions of applying the principle of subsidiarity.[42] The formal democratisation of the EU, reinforced by the provisions of the Amsterdam Treaty[43] did not produce the desired effect on EU public opinion. The mediatisation of the scandal and resignation of the Santer Commission (March 1999) appeared as the symptoms of a deep crisis of confidence in the EU both on the part of the elites,[44] traditionally considered more amenable to Europe, and the citizens who have been staunch opponents of Europe since Maastricht.[45] Even after its conversion to the "science" of communicational marketing, the diffusionist paradigm, like the action model that extended it, reached the limit of its effectiveness in the face of the EU's "democratic deficit". The challenge facing EU communication was no longer only a problem of popularity, in other words, popularising Europe, its history, and actions. It was more a problem of image, or softening negative perceptions about the EU. Indeed, public perception of Community action changed considerably in the period spanning from the Delors Plan to the resignation of the Santer Commission. The normative nature of

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[39] Treaty of Maastricht, 1992, article I-46.

[40] Especially, for example, by codifying the use of the Commission's vote of investiture and the introduction of a co-decision procedure (jointly with Council) in matters of legislation.

[41] Declaration 17 of the IGC (1997 Amsterdam Treaty) amendment to the TEU states: "The Conference considers that transparency of the decision-making process strengthens the democratic nature of the institutions and the public's confidence in the administration. The Conference accordingly recommends that the Commission submit to the Council no later than 1993 a report on measures designed to improve public access to the information available to the institutions". Declaration 39 emphasises that: "The Conference notes that the quality of the drafting of Community legislation is crucial if it is to be properly implemented by the competent national authorities and better understood by the public and in business circles".

[42] Inter-institutional Declaration on Democracy, Transparency & Subsidiarity, *Bulletin of European Communities*, n°10, 1993.

[43] The Treaty of Amsterdam (1997) meets the urgent need to "democratise the EU" by adapting its institutions to enlargement and "bringing it closer to its citizens" as inscribed in the Maastricht Treaty.

[44] On this point, see Meyer 1999. Regarding the resignation of the Santer Commission, Georgakakis shows that the outcome of the crisis can be understood in terms of "external" and "internal" factors. The weakening of the bonds between the Commission and accredited journalists, and the distancing of MEPs are "external"; while the breakdown in solidarity between the commissioners and their administration is "internal". See Georgakakis 2000.

[45] See Eurobarometer 42, autumn 1994.

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the Commission's work became more important to people than its distributive policies (structural funds, regional policies, CAP) (Scharpf 1999). Vilified endlessly by the growing mobilisation of Eurosceptics in public arenas, "Brussels" came to acquire the image of a distant bureaucratic, technocratic and interventionist "Hydra".[46] Being a new phenomenon at the time, Euroscepticism made waves not only in electoral debates and media platforms, but also in the political discourse of national governments.

It was in this sombre atmosphere that the EU communication strategy was redesigned in the late 1990s and early 2000s. The main principles of this new strategy consisted in greater accessibility to information on Europe, especially electronic, and presenting Europe as receptive to its citizens. By investing heavily in Internet, the Commission opted for participative structures, which are the showcase and concrete manifestation of a discourse espousing the virtues of open and transparent institutions that listen to citizens. This new paradigm, which can be said to be procedural, quickly spread throughout the institutional space of the Union like the new "European governance" and, by extension, a historic movement considered by some specialists as "the retreat of the interventionist doctrine" (see Magnette 2006: 213*sq.*). However, during the "crisis" of 2005 some protagonists were tempted to radicalise this paradigm by extolling the supposedly democratic virtues of direct dialogue – with neither media nor mediators – with citizens. Although this contemporary communicational myth – whereby policy is no longer a rational process of agreement among experts (Neveu 1994: 31) but an egalitarian voicing of opinions on public problems – was able to seduce the current Commissioner for Communication, it met with stiff opposition from the other institutional partners.

(2) The inescapable "democratic deficit", or the hypochondria of European communication: Rejection and accommodations of the procedural paradigm.

Communicating to re-enchant Europe

The post-Santer era is characterised by the fluidity of the European institutional game. The Commission was permanently weakened by accusations of favouritism, fraud and nepotism, which finally forced the Santer Commission to resign in March 1999 before the censure of Parliament.[47] Although the latter undeniably exerted its power in this unusual confrontation, its action paradoxically remained dependent on the initiatives of the Commission in accordance with the principles of the decision-making process. At a time when the various EU actors had to define the rules and routines governing the

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[46] Under the leadership of technocrats with no democratic legitimacy, the Commission was driven by a sheltered administrative spirit under the influence of lobbies. However, the Commission was not the only target of these constant criticisms expressed by the public. The European Parliament was also accused of being too technical, invisible and de-politicised. Finally, the Council was faulted for cultivating the art of secrecy, prejudicial to the principles of democratic publicity. See Mazey/Richardson 1993.

[47] By the end of summer 1998, the Parliament was debating accusations of haphazard- if not fraudulent- management of the Commission's contracts. The Community executive and the European Parliament appointed a "Committee of Sages" made up of five independent experts who submitted an alarming report on the management practices of some of the Commissioners.

system of institutional relations, communication became a sensitive point in their discussions. As part of the overhaul of the Commission's administration recommended by the report from the "Committee of Sages", Romano Prodi dissolved the DG-X soon after his commission took office in September 1999. President Prodi took the unprecedented step of attaching the "Media and Communications" portfolio to his own mandate,[48] and shared the responsibilities of the erstwhile DG-X between the SPP, which was in charge of Media and Communication, and the DG-Education-Culture, mainly in charge of opinion studies and publications. However, this administrative fragmentation of means, staff and interlocutors failed to satisfy the MEPs. An alarming rate of abstention in the European elections of 1999[49] was all it took for them to demand a more active communication that would re-assess the standing of "Europe" in the eyes of the general public prior to the switchover to the Euro and upcoming enlargement. More than ever, a new communication policy appeared to them as the means of countering the indifference, as well as the lack of interest in the EU on the part of Europeans (Meyer 1999).

In response to the requests of the Parliament, the president made a commitment in Strasbourg during the parliamentary session of spring 2000, that the Commission would adopt "an information strategy" before the end of the year. However, as Prodi delayed in making good on his promise, in March

2001, MEPs adopted a "resolution on the information and communication strategy of the EU" in which they emphasised that the communications strategy of European institutions "must be urgently adapted", and "note with concern that the distribution of responsibilities in the information policy sector is considerably slowing the adoption of decisions in the said sector".[50] A few weeks later, the DG-X was re-established under the name of DG-PRESS (for press and communication) and given to the Portuguese Commissioner, Antonio Vitorino, who was already in charge of Justice and Home Affairs. Mr. Vitorino began his task in a tense atmosphere in which the unease resulting from the crisis of confidence in the Union was further worsened by the Irish voters' rejection of the Treaty of Nice.[51] As early as the following June, the Commission adopted the recommendations made by the Vitorino team, and proposed "a new framework of cooperation for activities concerning the information and communication policy of the European Union".[52] The general spirit of this text was to redefine the design and implementation of EU communication through greater involvement of various European actors in the information-communication effort of the EU. The Parliament, and its information offices in the Member States, constituted consultative bodies (EU Economic and Social Council, Regions Committee), civil society organisations, and political parties.

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[48] Traditionally, Prodi's official mandate also covers the General Secretariat and the Legal Department, which are transversal sectors of the Commission's administration.
[49] Voter turnout at European elections has declined steadily since the first elections with universal suffrage: 63 % in 1979; 61% in 1984; 58 % in 1989; 56.8 % in 1994; and only 49 % in 1999.

[50] European Parliament, *Proposed Resolution on information and communication policy of the EU*, 8 March 2001 (B5-0174/2001). Proposal passed on 14 March (2001).
[51] A referendum on the Treaty of Nice was called in Ireland on 8 May 2001.
[52] European Commission, *A new framework for co-operation on activities concerning the information and communication policy of the European Union*, Brussels, European Commission, June 2001 (COM(2001)354 final).

Moreover, even States were duly designated as partners in an "open framework for co-operation" for a "concerted implementation of the information policies characterised by a management that is light, decentralised and the least bureaucratic possible". This implicit reference to the new European governance that would be highlighted a month later in the White Paper[53] marked the beginning of change in the institutional framework in which the problem was viewed. The diffusionist paradigm gave way, albeit without disappearing altogether, to a procedural paradigm whereby the attitudes of European institutions, and the mechanisms and modalities of interaction with citizens appear as a sovereign remedy to the ills of Europe and, by extension, to the gaping "democratic deficit".

Partnership as "good practice", or communication in the prism of "governance".

In many respects, the Commission's attempt to bring about general change at the end of the 1999-2000 crises, and by the same token its communication strategy, is placed within the modes of action of the deliberative shift. In the 1990s, this turn gripped the institutions of political power in Europe one by one, obliging them to experiment with deliberative mechanisms, such as neighbourhood committees, citizen juries, and participative forums, which gave priority to citizens and concerned groups in terms of policy decision mechanism.[54] Political sociologists, who have carefully observed this

phenomenon, link the implementation of these procedures to the emergence of a new principle of justification of political decision and, by extension, legitimisation of official action supposed to tackle the crisis of representation in parliamentary democracies. This greater plurality of actors in the decision-making process had catchwords like transparency, deliberation, participation, consultation, listening, forum and, of course, the concept-word of governance, which subsumes all this new spirit of public action.[55] Although an earlier manifestation of this was to be found in the 1993 Inter-institutional Declaration and in the theme of institutional reform, this procedural democratisation was largely put forward in the 2001 White Paper on governance and in subsequent official communications by the Commission (see Michel 2007). Under the progressive influence of the Commission's senior officials and Commissioners from the countries with Nordic-style governments (Denmark, Sweden, Finland and Germany), these deliberative mechanisms were factored in to the administrative, institutional and communicational reform of the EU (Georgakakis 2000, Meyer 1999). The sudden enthusiasm of the European institutional actors for these procedures that promised a renewal of democratic life was the result of several years of mounting criticisms regarding Europe's "legitimacy deficit" (Magnette 2003). Although in terms of democratic theory the analysis shows that the powers of the EU are limited (especially considering its own constraining means) and that

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[53] European Commission, *White Paper on European Governance*, Luxembourg, OPCE, 2001 (COM(2001) 428 final).

[54] On the introduction of these arrangements in Europe, see Sintomer 2007.

[55] This "new spirit of public action", as termed by Loïc Blondiaux and Yves Sintomer (in reference to the "new spirit of capitalism" analysed by Luc Boltanski and Eve Chiapello), is based on the idea of greater participation of non-political actors and ordinary citizens in the shaping of public policy and decisions (Blondiaux/Sintomer 2002).

they conform in all manners to the principles of traditional representative democracy (Moravscik 2003). Governance as a concept helps procure a concerted and "civil society-oriented" model of Community decision-making. By communicating on this point, the Commission sought to deflect criticisms about the technocratic single-mindedness plaguing Brussels. All the participative and deliberative mechanisms set up since the 1990s[56] were characteristic of flexible, open and efficient proximity democracy; far removed from the "Hydra" of Brussels. In terms of "policy", the Commission proposed giving concrete expression to this new cooperation by extending the scope of action of the Inter-institutional Group on Information (IGI), where political appointees and civil servants of the Commission and Parliament have been cooperating since 1995 in defining the priority campaigns of the EU in partnership with Member States.[57] Established for the purposes of debate and consultation, the IGI may in the long run be changed into an "institutional information agency".[58] This possibility of externalisation shows the EU government's tendency to divide decision-making mechanisms and the institutional (e.g., conflicting jurisdictions, slow pace of communication and negotiation procedures) and political (e.g., the need for majority or super-majorities, pressure

from public opinion) constraints (Everson/Majone 2001: 139*sq*). Nevertheless, although the Commission was weakened, it reasserted its institutional prerogatives – and by the same token, the more limitative prerogatives of the Parliament – in matters of communication.

> *"The autonomy and integrity of all of the institutions is fully respected in the new framework. In particular, the European Commission is solely responsible for the communication and information activities relating to its exclusive authority, e.g. the right of initiative, the guardianship of the Treaty or the execution of the Budget under the control of the budgetary authority. The European Parliament, when acting in its role as legislator, as budgetary authority or as the democratic control authority, must have full independence to voice its opinion and its members to speak freely on any subject of their choice."[59]*

According to the adherents of this model (which could arguably be called an ideology) of decision-making, "governance confers the double advantage of re-introducing new principles of order in the inter-institutional space and theorising the modernity of European democracy. Consequently, official communications referred to a "new institutional culture" and a "change of communication culture", while endlessly glorifying the formula of "participatory democracy", which became the order of the day, sometimes to ridiculous proportions.[60] Explicitly based on five broad principles (openness, participation, responsibility,

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[56] The Europe telephone hotline (later Europe Direct) was launched in 1999. It was portrayed as a "direct dialogue" for citizens and companies wishing to know the rights and opportunities conferred by the Union.

[57] PRINCE- a European citizen information program established in 1995 (but which extended the Priority Information Program initiated in the 1980s) and subsequently reserved for enlargement in 2001, the Euro, the debate on the future of Europe and the creation of a new zone of freedom, security and justice.

[58] European Commission, *A New Framework for Co-operation..., op. cit.,* p. 18.

[59] European Commission, *A New Framework for Co-operation..., op. cit.,* p. 5.

[60] Throughout the forty pages of the White Paper on Governance, "dialogue" appears 18 times, "civil society" 21 times, "responsibility[ies]" 36 times, and "citizens" 44 times. *Cf.* European Commission, *White Paper on governance..., op. cit.*

efficiency and coherence), "good governance" prescribes "good practices" as the vehicle for conveying this new spirit of partnership with the various associations and institutions that represent citizens. It is therefore not a question of creating direct relations with the latter but rather of initiating "a systematic dialogue with European and national associations of regional and local government while respecting constitutional and administrative arrangements".[61]

On the basis of the recommendations of the White Paper on governance, the Commission opened a debate in the fall of 2002 on its new "communication strategy for the EU" project by submitting it to the Council, the Parliament and institutionalised consultative bodies.[62] In the memorandum on the actual implementation of the project he sent to the Commission, Commissioner Vitorino states:

> *"In order to succeed, the information and communication strategy of the commission must be determined at the highest political level and must be based on political priorities. It cannot be deployed in the vacuum but placed on the contrary in the framework of a new culture which acknowledges the importance of communication. By taking control of its own image through the development and broadcast of messages and the planning of related activities (…), the Commission will give itself the means for implementing the new strategy".[63]*

To significantly encourage with "utmost coherence" the involvement of local and national authorities, the Commission recommended the installation of "a common system of reference for all institutions". This consists of highlighting four themes that would serve as a "vital lead".[64] Fully anchored in the semantic universe of governance, this strategy is at the sole initiative and exclusive responsibility of the Commission. Nevertheless, the Commission systematically consults political instances and other instituted groups in their capacity as "partners", i.e., actors in developing the communication policy. However, for reasons that will be explained hereafter, the design of the policy in this area gradually turned into an arrangement for direct interface with citizens after 2004. This penchant for a radical version of the procedural paradigm was quickly opposed by the adherents of representative and vertical democracy, who felt their traditional role as mediators was being questioned.

From participatory turn to "radical transition"

In spite of the frequent disagreements that have characterised the inter-institutional discussions on communication policy since the 1960s, the Commission has always obtained at least the tacit support of the other bodies at the top of the institutional triangle. The representatives of the States, who for so long had been unwilling to embrace any policy directed at their

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[61] European Commission, *A New Framework for Co-operation… op. cit.*

[62] European Commission, *An Information and Communication Strategy for the European Union*, *Brussels,* European *Union*, 2002 [COM(2002) 350 final/2].

[63] DG PRESS, *Memorandum to the Commission on the consequences for the Commission of the Information and Communication strategy for the EU*, 2002 (SEC(2002)744/3), p. 7.

[64] The virtue of exchanges (freedoms, diversity, humanism); value added in terms of efficiency and solidarity; the notion of protection; and the role of Europe in the world. *Cf*. European Commission, *An Information and Communication Strategy for the European Union… op. cit.,* p. 12.

constituents, quickly chose to maintain a vigilant silence over these issues.[65] The Parliament, which has always espoused a more voluntarist attitude, as expressed through resolutions (1981, 1993 and 2001) or reports (Schuijt in 1979, Baget Bozzo in 1986), unfailingly associated itself with the work of the Commission, endeavouring to influence it. In the matter of European Union communication, there was equally a certain culture of compromise resulting from the euphemisation of polemics and the glossing over of officially exchanged texts.[66] Over the last three years, however, this modus vivendi has given way to unusually frank exchanges, particularly between the Parliament and the Commission. After the record abstention in the European elections of 2004[67] and the rejection of the draft constitution by French and Dutch voters, the Council of June 2005 invited EU institutional actors to a "period of reflections leading to a wide debate" on the future of the EU. The Commission was given the mission to lead a

"mobilising debate" on Europe in Europe.[68] Very quickly, members of the new Barroso Commission responded to this request by adopting an Action Plan for improving communication on Europe.[69] The following July, the Commission adopted a program of reforms aimed at professionalising and decentralising communication services.[70] In autumn, Commissioner Wallström launched a series of debates and consultations throughout the EU referred to as "Plan D".[71] The goal was to redesign the contours of the communication policy of the Union through participatory debates. In February 2006, the White Paper on Communication was published. Both in terms of design (borrowed from participatory democracy) and objectives, successive initiatives of the Commission

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[65] This attitude of the Council (and thus of the Member States) towards the SPI and DG Information-Communication has been explained in the same terms by several senior officials. Incidentally, their point of view confirms the testimony of J.-R. Rabier (Director of the SPI from 1960-1967, then Director General of the DG-X from 1970-1973), when he told the story of his career to Yves Conrad and Julie Cailleau in 2004 as part of the CONSHIST.COM program (Internal History of the European Commission 1958-1973). *Cf. The Oral History Project,* Historical Archives of the European Union, European University Institute.

[66] An examination of the reports of meetings between principal secretaries explicitly shows the willingness "to render some wordings neutral". On the institutional glossing over of texts, see Ollivier-Yaniv/Oger 2006.

[67] Abstention reached 60% in the older Member States (54% in Spain, 57% in France and Germany, 61% in Sweden and the United Kingdom), and sometimes more than 70% in the new Member States (71% Czech Republic, 73% in Estonia, 79% in Poland and 83% in Slovakia).

[68] The terms chosen by the Heads of State during this invitation are indicative of the issues of perception of the institutional framework: "We have noted the outcome of the referendums in France and the Netherlands. We consider that these results do not call into question citizens' attachment to the construction of Europe. Citizens have nevertheless expressed concerns and worries which need to be taken into account. Hence, the need for us to reflect together on this situation. This period of reflection will be used to enable a broad debate to take place in each of our countries, involving citizens, civil society, social partners, national parliaments and political parties. This debate, designed to generate interest, which is already under way in many Member States, must be intensified and broadened. The European institutions will also have to make their contribution, with the Commission playing a special role in this regard". (The European Council, 16-17 June 2005, Brussels, *Declaration on the Ratification of the Treaty establishing a Constitution for the Europe*, SN 117/05).

[69] European Commission, *Action Plan to Improve Communicating Europe by the Commission,* European Commission (ed.) Brussels July 2005.

[70] *Ibid*.

[71] European Commission, *The Commission's Contribution to the Period of Reflection and Beyond: Plan D for Democracy, Dialogue and Debate*, Luxembourg, OPCE, 2005.

decoupled the procedural paradigm from haphazard experimentations, thus making it the basis for European communication and, ultimately, modifying the principle of legitimation of EU government. From the Action Plan of July 2005, there was talk of a "new approach" to communication on the basis of permanent direct debate between European institutions and citizens based on three principles:

"- *Listening: communication is a dialogue, not a one-way street. It is not just about EU institutions informing EU citizens but also about citizens expressing their opinions so that the Commission can understand their perceptions and concerns. Europe's citizens want to make their voices in Europe heard and their democratic participation should have a direct bearing on EU policy formulation and output.*

– *Communicating: EU policies and activities, as well as their impact on everyday lives, have to be communicated and advocated in a manner that people can understand and relate to if citizens are to follow political developments at European level.*

– *Connecting with citizens by "going local": Good communication requires excellent understanding of local audiences. The Commission's communication activities must be resourced and organised in such a way as to address matching demographic and national and local concerns, and to convey information through the channels citizens prefer in the language they can understand."[72]*

The plan makes apoint of specifically detailing the rationalisation and professionalisation of communications activities within the various Community departments. On a political level, the pivotal and centralising role of the Commission was considerably

strengthened. The Commission thus showed a "single face" and facilitated a better use of communication tools and services. The Commissioners, who are the "public faces", were encouraged to visit and communicate in Member States more often, as they were not only the "main communicators" but also the "most effective communicators" of the Commission. The Commission's representatives (attached to the DG in charge of communication) in Member States were urged to improve their role as "ambassadors" and "spokespersons" with the media and public opinion. At the administrative level, the fight against the persistent "fragmentation of communication activities" demanded a massive reorganisation of the communication machinery of the EU. This involved the true professionalisation of officials in charge of this policy, i.e., their access to specialised information and recruitment of communication specialists. Professionalisation also demanded better coordination of the communication departments of the various DGs. They therefore proposed that the DG-PRESS solely assume full responsibility for co-ordination. It was re-named DG-COMM to "take into account the global character of the new approach to communication" and "assume the new responsibility". This responsibility includes planning and assessment of the EU communication policy, in addition to its traditional roles of analysing European public opinion and monitoring the media. Under the leadership of the Commissioner in charge of communication, the "group of Commission members in charge of communication and programming" defined common "priorities" and "agenda" for communication. Equally in connection with the development of a common message, "all information relays financed by the Commission were placed under a limited number of

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[72] European Commission, *Action Plan, op. cit.*, p. 3.

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regulatory bodies, sometimes one or two, depending on the target audience, such as companies or the general public".

The strengthening of the co-ordinating role of the Commission was in conjunction with the promotion of direct links between the Commission and European citizens. As seen in the Action Plan, the Internet was presented as the preferred tool of the new communication strategy. Referring to *Europa.eu*, the Internet portal of the EU – said to be "the world's biggest public Internet site" – the plan announced new progress in the electronic interface with citizens, which came as a result from the appointment of an Europa editor and the creation of a "news site". Europa has interactive arrangements which allow for accessing personalised information,[73] expressing points of view on Community policies[74] and accessing the Commissioners' personal blogs. *Europa.eu* was portrayed as a tool for engaging "dialogue" and "debate" with citizens. Adopted by the Commission a few months later and presented as "the contribution of the Commission to the period of reflection and beyond", Plan

D[75] was designed to "initiate a wide and intensive debate on EU policies. However, it was much more ambitious than a cycle of debates over Europe in the Member States and on the Internet. Moreover, the Commission described it as "a long-term program aimed at revitalising European democracy and contributing to the emergence of a European public sphere, within which citizens would receive the information and tools they need to actively participate in the decision-making process and to appropriate the European Project".[76] Thus, as part of the direct consequences of the principles enunciated in the White Paper on governance, there is a clear link between interactive communication procedures and legitimacy of the political system. It is the radicalisation of this approach in the White Paper on Communication (February 2006), which drew opposition to the Commission's attempt to concentrate the initiative and management of EU communication.

The black legend of the White Paper

Originally scheduled to be released in the autumn of 2006, the conclusions of the Commission on the responses to its proposals were published more than one year later in October 2007.[77] These

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[73] Launched in 1999, the Europe telephone hotline - later known as Europe Direct- helped to directly solicit information from European institutions. Questions can be asked by telephone (the number redirects the call to the Commission's representations in the caller's country), or on *europa.eu.int/europedirect/*. *Eurojus* is a similar program meant for legal issues.

[74] In this regard, see the programs: *Your voice* and *Interactive Policy Making,* which are aimed at helping European institutions "understand the needs of citizens and enterprises better". It is intended to "assist policy development by allowing more rapid and targeted responses to emerging issues and problems, improving the assessment of the impact of policies (or the absence of them) and providing greater accountability to citizens", (*Europa.ec*.).

[75] European Commission, *The Commission's Contribution to the Period of Reflection and Beyond: Plan D for Democracy, Dialogue and Debate*, Luxembourg, 2005 [COM(2005) 494 final].

[76] *Ibid*., p. 3.

[77] Published in February 2006, the WPC announced a six-month period of consultation with official institutions and bodies, as well as all "interested parties" ("NGOs, corporate associations" and other "special interests groups") through "a series of consultative forums". The White Paper stipulates: "At the end of this period, the Commission will summarise the replies and draw conclusions with a view to

scheduling problems explain the reception given to the "basically new approach" to communication as proposed in the text. A close examination of previous information and communication policies reveals that the White Paper on Communication represents a paradigm shift both in terms of designs and practices of the past. The remote hope of the media acting as mediators of a transnational Europe was explicitly jettisoned in favour of direct forms of information based on organisational networks, such as representations and Internet services and portals. The Commission equally abandoned the old dream of a European public opinion, replacing it with a pragmatic strategy supposed to shape a "European public opinion" within local and national spaces. As a matter of form, both the arrangements and the formulas proposed in the White Paper on Communication clearly demonstrate a willingness to transpose participatory marketing technologies into political discourse (e.g., quality forums on brand sites, consumer blogs, and "one-to-one" communication). This is similar to the introduction of commercial communication methods in the 1990s, such as organisational marketing methods, preparing and broadcasting messages in the mass media. Although the white paper was officially aimed at "improving civic education", it views citizens as consumers. As such, the political supply must relate to their expectations, opinions, and behaviour.[78] Based on the observations of the Eurobarometer, the White Paper on

Communication considers communication as a regulatory instrument that helps reduce the apparent paradox of maintaining on the one hand, positive attitudes vis-à-vis Europe; and, on the other hand, the increasing abstention and mistrust of Europe from citizens. The novelty here lies in the highly instrumental conception of the propositions designed to "bring about a more effective participation of the media in communication relating to Europe". Indeed, the White Paper on Communication encouraged public bodies on European, national and local levels to "supply the media with high quality information and current affairs material" and "work more closely with broadcast houses and the media", and "create new links with regional and local communication systems" (p.10). In its desire to improve upon available tools, the White Paper also proposed the "modernisation of *Europe by Satellite* (EbS)", a service which provides journalists with free pictures of EU activities, "with a focus on producing high quality audiovisual content which is user-friendly for the media and relevant to the citizens, and to explore the desirability of having an inter-institutional service operating on the basis of professional standards" (*Ibid.*).

In what constitutes a fundamentally new approach, the White Paper states: "a decisive move away from one-way communication to reinforced dialogue, from an institution-centred to a citizen-centred communication". Arguing incontestably that "peoples' support for the European Project is a matter of common interest", the Commission states that "communication should become an EU policy in its own right, at the service of the citizens" (p.4). Furthermore, one of the strongest proposals in the White Paper was to

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proposing plans of action for each working area". (WPC, p. 3).

[78] As from the late 1990s, and more systematically after 2001, the Commission sponsored "qualitative" opinion studies based on the focus group method. On the construction of a social demand through political instruments, see the introduction in Anquetin/Freyermuth 2008.

formally define a single framework for EU communication:

"The common principles and norms that should guide information and communication activities on European issues could be enshrined in a framework document – for example a European Charter or Code of Conduct on Communication. The aim would be to engage all actors (EU institutions, national, regional and local governments, non-governmental organisations) in a common commitment to respecting these principles and ensure that EU communication policy serves the citizens' interest. This commitment would be made on a voluntary basis. The Commission will launch a special web-based citizens' forum to seek views on the desirability, purpose and content of such a framework document" (p.6)

This proposal constitutes a double-break from the traditional institutional compromise of European communication: first, because it foreshadows a hardening of the standards binding the various European actors charged with communicating with the public and the media; and, second, because it imposes the principle of publicity, giving citizens the possibility to make their voices heard during interinstitutional discussions. The centralising, restricting and "proactive" nature of the Commission's proposals departs considerably from existing inter-institutional routine and compromise and accounts for the severity of the criticisms levelled at the White Paper. The first reactions came from journalists. Immediately after the presentation of the White Paper, the president of the International Press Association, Michaël Stabenow, expressed his "concern" in a letter to Mrs. Wallström in which he pointed out that "the replacement of EBS with a news agency would jeopardise the distribution of our respective

jurisdictions".[79] In the face of the massive criticism and disquiet caused by the White Paper, the DG-COMM quickly posted online further explanations meant to be reassuring. In this communication exercise, the questions raised by the officials themselves are an indication of the general upheaval generated by the proposals of the White Paper.[80]

After several months of debate by the Committees, the Parliament issued an official response which confirmed the hostile reception given to the White Paper in Community circles. MEPs have expressed their reticence in the report submitted by the Culture and Education Commission and adopted by Parliament in October 2006.[81] The political importance of communication was made obvious through their recommendations, slightly "rectifying" the logics and

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[79] *Cf.*, « Nouvelle stratégie de la Commission pour expliquer l'Europe. Les associations de journalistes reprochent à Bruxelles de vouloir compliquer leur travail d'information », *Le Monde*, 5 février 2006.

[80] Here are a few selected questions*: Does action not speak louder than words? Is the term communication not just a new word for EU propaganda? Why should regional and local authorities make Europe known? Surely, that is not their responsibility. The white paper talks about collaboration with the media. Does that mean that the Commission wants to control what the media says? What does the White Paper mean by " modernising" Europe by Satellite service? The White Paper talks about a "charter" or "code of conduct" on European communication. Does it mean Brussels is going to impose new rules? Does the Commission want existing media, parliaments and educational systems at national level to be replaced by a "public sphere"?*
Cf. http://ec.europa.eu/communication_white_pa per/question_answer/index_fr.htm.

[81] European Parliament, *Report of the Committee on Culture and Education on the White Paper on a European communication policy* (rapporteur: Luis Herrero-Tejedor) 16 October 2006 (A6-0365/2006). Hereafter referred to as *EP/WPC.*

rhetoric of the White Paper. First of all, the role of communication was put into perspective in relation to the effects of public policies themselves: "…better communication cannot compensate for insufficient policies but can improve the understanding of conducted policies", states the rapporteur who, "welcomes the Commission's recognition of the fact that communication can never be divorced from what is being communicated", in this case, the policies themselves. However, the MEPs' tone quickly turned into one of warning, when they "urged the Commission to support the creation of a European public sphere" and not to leave information about Europe to the exclusive care of local and international media, but to work with them "as intermediaries, opinion-makers, and carriers of messages to the citizen in the European public sphere". In this regard, they demanded greater efficiency and less bureaucracy from the "myriads" of information centres. They also urged the Commission not to overestimate the participatory role of citizens with regard to available information about Europe, encouraging it to keep the programs and communication support which convey, with loyal support of governments, this information to the citizens:

> "The idea of citizens becoming drivers of participation and dialogue does not seem reasonable, since it is not citizens who should seek out information, but rather information that should seek out the citizens. (EP/WPC, p.5) National politicians often taking credit for European success stories, while, conversely, being quick to criticise the EU, often for failures in policy that arise at national level" (Ibid., p.5)

This is a thinly veiled disavowal of the logic of participatory democracy proposed by the Commission, and by the same token, a preference for a more functional representative democracy in

which each institution must preserve its independence and assume the responsibilities conferred by its own legitimacy. The "code of good conduct", supposed substitute to legitimacy based on the clarification of the "legal basis" for the information policy, was thus rejected.

> "The Commission has proposed to establish a code of conduct on communication, that is to say, to draw up common rules for the European institutions, national bodies, and so forth, thereby laying foundations on which to cement communication policies. The rapporteur considers that this idea is not only fundamentally mistaken, but also undesirable to the extent that it would create a poor substitute for a genuine legal basis. In point of fact the European institutions have no legal basis for Community reports given over specifically to information and communication. As a result the Commission too often lays itself open to the charge of meddling in an area outside its responsibility or even of disseminating propaganda. The best way to avoid this pitfall, however, is not to base a communication policy on a code of conduct, but to seek a unanimous decision of the Member States in the European Council, thereby affording a means, under Article 308 of the Treaty, to provide a legal basis in the full sense." (EP/WPC, p. 12)

By repositioning the problem within the legal framework of inter-institutional relations, the EP/WPC recalls not only the independence of each institution in terms of communication policy, but also the need "to enhance existing mechanisms for inter-institutional partnership". This is a very explicit way of criticising the functioning of the IGI and reaffirming the need for the Commission to work in consultation with other actors in the EU decision-making process. In effect, it is a confrontation between two schools of thought: on one side is the WPC, which supposedly overestimates the role of

communication in solving the political problems of Europe and encourages the promotion of participatory democracy under the headship of the Commission. On the other side are MEPs who advance the time-tested virtues of representative democracy. By bringing the issue of "legal basis" for communication to the negotiation table, the Parliament was proposing an inter-institutional alternative to the Commission's normative proposals. In many respects, the WBC, by virtue of its formal and public nature, re-crystallises a long-standing point of disagreement between the two institutions; namely the concept of communication as a tool of political legitimisation. Championed by elected representatives, i.e., executives of national parties well-versed in the territorialised exercise of political mandate, the regulatory vision of communication as a vehicle of political consent[82] was a strange bedfellow of the procedural approach espoused by the Commission. This incompatibility was all the more enhanced by the fact that, in radicalising this approach, the Commission tended to marginalise, if not sideline, the role of traditional media and mediators, like elected representatives and civil society organisations.

It is the same fear of relegation of civil society organisations which underpins the criticisms expressed by the European Economic and Social Committee.[83] Both in its arguments and recommended solutions, the Committee's stand was very close to that of the Parliament regarding the pursuit of inter-

institutional co-operation and the mediation work of the representatives:

> *"The Committee, which strongly supports a decentralised approach, would urge the Commission to reflect further on how genuine synergies and interinstitutional cooperation may be facilitated at the decentralised level. The White Paper states that at the end of the consultation period, the Commission will 'present the results of the consultation and then consider whether to propose a Charter, a Code of Conduct or other instrument.' The Committee is concerned by this language and sees risks in what would appear to be the potential approach the Commission might propose. The Committee notes with concern the Commission's launching of a special web-based forum to seek views on the desirability of such a framework document. Not all European citizens have access to such a web-based approach. It would be essential to back up the consultation exercise through other, more traditional media."[84]*

The proposal making communication "a European policy in its own right", coupled with the desire to establish a "charter", was tantamount to putting the Commission in control of the means, and the driving, of the communication policy; thus reducing the latitude of the other partners in terms of being consulted and, in the case of Parliament, the voting for the budget. The quarrel over the "legal basis" for the communication policy would therefore crystallise opposition towards the WPC. Contrary to the Commission's often repeated claim to "exclusive authority" on the issue (linked to its right of initiative and to its role of custodian of the treaty, *see above*), MEPs claimed that the sharing of powers in terms of communication has never been clearly defined within the EU. A note posted on

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[82] On "the institutional economy of consent", see Gaïti 2006.

[83] Opinion of the European Economic and Social Committee on the White Paper on a European communication policy, *Official Journal of the European Union*, 16 December 2006 (2006/C 309/24).

[84] *Ibid*. pp.1-2.

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the Parliament's official website in January 2007 read:

> *"Legal basis for Communication Policy: Articles 21, 195, 211 and 308 of the EC treaty. Articles 11, 41, 42 and 44 of the Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union. The Treaty of Rome and the Amsterdam Treaty do not contain any particular chapter or article concerning communication policy. At present the EU's communication policy is based on the articles of the Charter of Fundamental Rights: Article 11 (right to information and freedom of expression, as well as freedom and diversity of the media), Article 41 (right to be heard and right of access to documents relating to oneself), Article 42 (right of access to the documents of the European Institutions) and Article 44 (right of petition). For actions for which there is no separate legal basis in the EC Treaty, a reference to Article 308 of the EC Treaty (extension of competence) is necessary."[85]*

For many months, the legal and political controversy surrounding the "legal basis" of communication was the subject of negotiations, albeit much less publicised than the Commissioned had originally hoped. As a follow-up to the WPC,[86] the Commission published a text whose objective was to bring an end to the controversy[87] by drastically reducing the number of proposals made by the Commission eighteen months earlier. It was a shift away from the approach championed in the WPC, which consists of adjusting communication to the public through a "process of listening to citizens" by means of local debates (with

increased use of representations in Member States), and qualitative opinion sampling arrangements and studies. Although the earlier participatory streak still features among the "concrete proposals" formulated by the Commission, the obvious objective was "greater co-operation and collaboration between EU institutions; and bodies and the Member States and association of these partners with the process of communicating on European issues". The inter-institutional agreement was presented to the public as a means of enhancing the "co-ordination of the communication activities of the various EU actors" and, basically, the solution to the conflict resulting from the Commission's attempt to regain control of communication policy and the common means thereof. In reality, though, it is a return to the principles of partnership (with institutions and bodies as well as States and local actors) adopted in 2001 and 2002 (*see above*). Basically, it is an extension of the PRINCE program, and the strengthening of its pilot committee (GH). The draft interinstitutional agreement drawn up by the Commission - and favourably received by the other signatory institutions (Council and Parliament) – signalled the decline of both the centralising pretensions and the participatory model initially advanced by the Commission.

> *"1. Information and communication on European issues should pursue the following objectives:*
> *– To give everyone access to fair and diverse information about the European Union;*
> *– To enable everyone to exercise their right to express their views and to participate actively in the public debate on European issues. All public actors in the European Union have a responsibility to pursue these objectives, observing the principles of inclusiveness and pluralism,*

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[85] Fact sheet on communication policy, available at:
http://www.europarl.europa.eu/facts/4_16_7_en.htm.
[86] European commission, *Communicating Europe in Partnership*, OPCE, October 3 2007 (COM(2007)569).
[87] On the day the commission published its proposals resulting from the "consultation" around the WPC, Commissioner Wallström released a press statement titled, "Stop the Blame Game!".

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participation and empowerment, openness and transparency.

2. While recognising the different responsibilities of each EU institution, this Interinstitutional Agreement highlights the need for and the added value of better coordination in the way EU institutions and bodies communicate on EU issues. It provides a framework for coordinated action to this end.

3. Together with the EU institutions and bodies, Member States have an essential role to play in disseminating information on EU issues at national, regional and local level in order to reach out to as many citizens as possible."[88]

The debate among the major EU institutional actors over the WPC between early 2006 and late 2007 heralded the end of consensus over the aims of EU communication policy. By proposing to break with inter-institutional routine[89] and reinforce the common constraint, Mrs. Wallström distanced herself from the habitual transversal role (Smith 2001) of Commissioners in the institutional triangle[90] in terms of preparing the Commission's proposals. The epilogue to this intra-Community conflict marks the return of European communication to the time-tested model of European consensus, akin to the Co-decision Procedure. In its relations with the public in Member States, the EU remains confined to its "diffuse democracy" (Lequesne/Costa/Jabko/Magnette 2003) perimeter, compelled to compromise with Member States and actors of the European Project. In the EU, which is a "regulatory state" of European societies (Majone 1996), the weightiness of the logics of compromise has imperceptibly prevailed over the Commission's attempts to make a Community policy out of communication, and confined its competences in that field to the co-ordination of the respective interests of EU institutions.

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[88] European Commission, *Proposal For An Inter-Institutional Agreement On Communicating Europe In Partnership*, Commission Working Document, October 2007.

[89] A few days before the presentation of the WPC, Heads of Cabinet various Commissioners had "withheld judgement" regarding portions of the WPC that mentioned "a charter or code of conduct", and the modernisation of EbS. See Report of the special meeting of chiefs of staff on January 26 2006 on the White Paper on a European communication policy. (SEC(2006)129).

[90] Our sources indicate that top officials of the DG-COMM did not support the "coup de force" staged by Wallström and her cabinet in announcing a new European communication policy.

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