

**The Role of Public Administration in Providing Information**  
*Information Offices & Citizens Information Services*

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## Introduction

The past decade has witnessed a dramatic change in society's expectations of what information -- and how much of it -- Europe's public institutions should make available to citizens. Demands for greater accountability and transparency in government have dovetailed with new technologies that make it much easier for governments to rapidly disseminate vast amounts of information. The result is that there is more public information at people's disposal than ever before. In a dramatic change from just a few years ago, many Europeans can now review licensing rules, ask questions about public services, apply for government jobs, learn about procedures for income tax declarations, peruse official statistics, and comment on legislative proposals at any hour of the day without leaving the house.

While no country has yet to make full use of the rich possibilities of the Internet to communicate with (and better serve) its citizens, the march towards on-line government is inexorable. The implications for civil servants and political leaders are profound. Individuals wishing to do business with the government will have more and more opportunities to do it when it is convenient for them, and not only at bureaucrat's hours. The scope of the changes underway is not limited to the medium for communication -- traditions and mindsets are changing too and the balance of power is shifting from government buildings to the mouse-clicking masses.

In today's climate, public officials find it more difficult to justify keeping information from those who put them in power. While most public officials accept the principle that government should in general operate openly, debate over the caveats to and limits of such openness is becoming heated. As the old adage goes, the devil is in the details. Witness the vivid exchanges between Commission President Romano Prodi and the European Ombudsman, Jacob Söderman over what documents the Commission should make public<sup>1</sup>.

European citizens feel emboldened to demand more information, and they are getting it. And what they do with such information is affecting debates on topics such as multilateral trade and investment rules, third world debt, and genetically modified food. It is not an exaggeration to say that the meaning and organisation of democracy is beginning to undergo fundamental change -- some argue a rebirth. One can imagine eventual shifts in the set up and framework of state structures as citizens seek out more rational structures in government for information and service delivery.

It is in this context of greater openness in government that this paper reviews the role of public information offices and citizen information services in Europe's national administrations. It also

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<sup>1</sup> Commission President Prodi stated in January 2000 that "transparency is vital for the democratic health and accountability of the EU," and committed to make publicly available the register of his incoming and outgoing correspondence (*The Guardian*, 26 January 2000). A little over a week later, though, the European Ombudsman, Jacob Söderman, attacked the European Commission for allegedly renegeing on pledges to give the public better access to documents of EU institutions. While welcoming the inclusion of incoming mail among the documents to be made available for public scrutiny, Söderman objected to proposals to deny public access to texts for internal use, such as discussion documents, opinions of departments and informal messages. In February and March, Prodi and Söderman exchanged their divergent views in the *Wall Street Journal Europe* and before the European Parliament, and the Commission's proposals remain under deliberation. The text of these exchanges can be found at: <http://www.statewatch.org/swreg.htm>, while the Commission's draft regulation can be viewed at: [http://europa.eu.int/eur-lex/en/com/dat/2000/en\\_500PC0030.html](http://europa.eu.int/eur-lex/en/com/dat/2000/en_500PC0030.html).

aims to provide a foretaste of the new possibilities afforded by the Internet, and implications of the IT revolution for government-citizens relations.

## **The Trend Towards Transparency**

It is a fundamental right of citizens in a well-functioning democracy to know what their public officials are doing. What policies public offices are pursuing, what laws and regulations they are preparing, what programmes they are running, how they are raising and spending money and what international agreements they are negotiating. Such information helps to curtail arbitrary use of government power, increases accountability of public officials, assists the private sector in economic decision making, and aids citizens in formulating opinions on public policy issues.

In the present era of dramatic economic, political, social and technological change, the importance of effective government communications is even greater. When the public is allowed to understand the development of a policy, it is then easier for government to build support for implementing it and achieving the underlying objectives. It is no wonder that declining enthusiasm for the European Union – both in current Member States and candidate countries – has drawn attention to the need to bolster Europe’s communication capacities and to improve information services concerning the Union.<sup>2</sup>

Public expectations for “open government” are perhaps higher today than ever before. The reasons for this are manifold. One could argue that the collapse of communism weakened the case for shielding information from the public eye on “national security grounds.” While national security exceptions remain in the information-access policies of all governments, the excuse provided by the Cold War to define such exceptions rather broadly has dissipated. Citizens see a greater risk in *not* having access to information than the possibility of information being used for dangerous purposes.

Market pressures on governments to encourage national competitiveness through their fiscal and economic policies has focused attention on public expenditures. In addition, the Maastricht criteria for the common currency has promoted belt-tightening across Western Europe. Resulting limits on government spending have spurred greater public vigilance towards the use of taxpayers monies. Further, the international crusade against corruption has also spurred demands for greater transparency in public institutions as a check against bribery and other unethical behaviour.

## **Legal Guarantees**

The new constitutions of central and eastern European countries often include rights of access to public information. These provisions reflect a reaction against the secrecy practised for decades under one-party rule. Even in traditionally open societies there are calls for constitutional rights to public information. Norway, for example, is giving consideration to strengthening its already liberal stance towards public access to information by updating and expanding constitutional provisions concerning freedom of speech (dating back to 1814). In particular, a government commission set up to examine policies regarding freedom of speech has recommended adoption

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<sup>2</sup> Illustrating this point, the European Commission intends to spend nearly 150 million euros over the coming seven years to raise awareness among Europeans about EU enlargement (*European Voice*, 4 May 2000).

of an amendment giving citizens the explicit constitutional right to demand and receive information from the public administration.

In recent years several European states have debated the introduction of laws guaranteeing public access to information, or liberalising current legislation. Among the countries that have passed freedom of information laws since 1997 are Czech Republic, Ireland and Latvia. Other countries, including Estonia, Germany and United Kingdom, are drafting or deliberating bills. The newly created Scottish Parliament is also considering adoption of a very liberal freedom of information bill applicable to that region's institutions. In addition, at the supranational level, the European Commission delivered the "Proposal for a Regulation of the European Parliament and of the Council Regarding Public Access to European Parliament, Council and Commission Documents" on 28 February of this year.

A freedom of information law usually identifies the public institutions to which it applies, and contains exceptions to protect, for example, "the rights of others" and "state secrets."<sup>3</sup> In addition, such a law typically requires implementing legislation setting forth the procedures for availability of information and defining the scope of exemptions. Some countries have also set out principles regarding public information in formal policy documents<sup>4</sup> or in service charters.

Use by public officials of exceptions, or improper implementation of freedom of information rules, means that individuals are sometimes frustrated in their attempts to obtain documentation from the authorities. For example, the European Commission refuses 10-20% of requests for documentation, although codes of conduct authorise public access to internal documents. Research conducted last year in Latvia showed that one-fifth of written requests to public institutions for information have gone unanswered. Although oral requests for information are foreseen by the country's freedom of information law, it is said to be nearly impossible to obtain papers from state institutions without a written request.<sup>5</sup>

Perceived bureaucratic resistance to releasing information may not always be a matter of secrecy or ill-will. Lack of compliance with freedom of information legislation, particularly where it has only recently been adopted, is also connected with insufficient investment in training of public servants. Further, the time and resources involved in fulfilling particularly large demands for documents can also prove difficult for some offices in the administration (e.g. if files are not well organised or if the offices are understaffed).

## **The Managers of Government Information**

A key figure in government's provision of information is the public (or "government") information officer. His or her title varies from place to place, as do the specific tasks carried out. For the present purposes, an information officer is considered to be a public sector employee

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<sup>3</sup> Latvia's Law on Freedom of Information (adopted 29 October 1998), recognises two categories of information: "generally available information" which can be shared with the public and "restricted-access information." The latter is defined as "information ...intended for a restricted group of persons in connection with their work or duties and the disclosure or loss of which, due to the nature or content of the information, burdens or would burden the work of the institution, does or could do harm to the legally protected interests of persons" (Chapter II, Article 5(1)).

<sup>4</sup> For example, see Norway's "Central Government Information Policy: Main Principles", Ministry of Government Administration, Oslo, 1994, 20 pages; and Denmark's "Action Plan for Transition into the Network Society," December 1999 (<http://www.fsk.dk>).

<sup>5</sup> "Information Lost in Lats and Documents," *The Baltic Times*, 13-20 April, 2000.

whose primary responsibilities are to facilitate the flow of public information, usually between state bodies, on the one hand, and the media and public, on the other. The largest EU Member States employ several hundred information officers in their ministries and agencies.

In most European administrations the dissemination of information is quite decentralised, which while practical and efficient in some ways can also contribute to the delivery of mixed messages if internal co-ordination mechanisms are weak or function poorly. Other persons serving in state institutions, such as trade negotiators, department heads and technical experts, also speak to the press or give presentations to the public. But their main duties tend not to be communications-related and they often rely on the administration's information specialists to guide them in making external contacts, particularly where they involve the media.

Many governments establish guidelines to help ensure that public information officers deliver factual, non-partisan information befitting a civil servant's role in the administration. Yet governments also provide a place for specialists who engage in the political interpretation of government policy. These individuals typically carry the title of "spokesperson" or "press attaché".<sup>6</sup> They speak for the *person* rather than for the *institution*. Spokespersons working for the highest ranking officials frequently find themselves in the limelight, occasionally even becoming the subject of newspaper articles and commentary.

In some countries – particularly in Europe's transition countries – the distinction between an information officer performing a civil servant's role for a state body and one acting as spokesperson for a political figure is blurred or even eliminated through an effective merger of functions. Yet failure to define and enforce a difference between the political and non-political roles may a) make it difficult for information officers to resist political pressure from above, and b) undermine the credibility and the perceived objectivity of disseminated information.

The profile of an information officer varies from country to country and from position to position. Some serve as senior experts on communications policy and strategy, and others carry out largely clerical tasks of disseminating brochures and reports upon demand. Perhaps not surprisingly, information officers who are in regular contact with the media are often former journalists themselves (this is, for example, the case in the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia and Spain). Such a background helps them to understand the outlook and psychology of reporters. On the other hand, it does not necessarily prepare them to shift from a mode of asking pointed and probing questions on sensitive issues to providing straightforward answers in an accommodating way. Many jobs in government information offices require new recruits to have studied or worked in publishing, communications, marketing or public relations. Some information officers have previous experience in conference and event organisation, or library and information sciences.

The skills profile of a typical European information officer includes multilingual capacity (at least in countries with more than one official language, or where regular contact with foreigners is part of the job). Other characteristics considered important are the ability to communicate effectively orally and in writing; good organisational skills; ability to react quickly; the tendency to remain cool under pressure; and diplomacy, patience and tact. Information officers also need to know the organisation and operation of public institutions. Many persons operating in the government

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<sup>6</sup> Although it should be noted that not all spokespersons/press attachés serve a political role; some information officers serving in a non-partisan capacity also have this title.

information field bring specific technical skills to their work. Indeed, communicating through multimedia requires that public administrations employ (or contract out to) sound engineers, film directors, photographers, lay-out and design specialists, artists, translators and interpreters.

## **Information Offices**

Every large organisation requires a professional unit to manage the flow of information to the citizenry, both directly and through the filter of the media, and to advise decision makers on relations with the media. This applies equally to private as well as public entities. Most European states maintain an office situated at or near the centre of government acting as the primary provider of citizen information services and fulfilling the general information needs of the media. Examples include the Federale Voorlichtingsdienst (Service Fédéral d'Information) in Belgium, Bulgaria's Government Information Service, France's Service d'Information du Gouvernement, and Italy's Dipartimento per l'informazione e l'editoria.

This central office of information usually serves as the primary point of contact for providing details on governmental organisation, laws, plans, social services and benefits, statistics, etc. In addition to the central office of information, individual ministries, agencies and other state bodies have an office responsible for fielding questions from the media and general public, and for managing external communications related to the particular institution's purview. The central office of information and its ministerial counterparts carry out at least five functions: 1) Conducting Research & Analysis, 2) Advising Senior Officials, 3) Managing Media Relations, 4) Informing Citizens; and 5) Co-ordinating Communications Policy & Promoting Internal Information Flows. The work of information officers in these bodies is described briefly below.

### ***Conducting Research & Analysis***

It is only through regular monitoring of newspapers, magazines, Internet news sites, radio and TV that the government can know what topics interest the media, the perspective taken when reporting on different issues, editorial opinions, and the particular journalists active in covering specific subjects. Information officers need to know the nuances of a newspaper or TV news programme's coverage in order to target reporters that may be interested in a planned information activity, and to frame issues in a way that will make them attractive to the media.

In addition to keeping tabs on media reporting, information offices measure and evaluate public opinion. Reviewing correspondence and comments received by telephone, conducting polls, distributing questionnaires, holding public hearings and roundtable discussions, and organising focus groups can yield useful information regarding public perceptions, needs and desires. Feedback generated through these various methods can be shared with decision makers to help them shape public policies in tune with the public's priorities. Apprising the government of public opinion and media reporting is one of the mandates of France's Service d'Information du Gouvernement. Information offices also conduct surveys and undertake studies to determine what kind of information is important to what groups of people, and how the targets of information activities would prefer to be informed.

### ***Advising Senior Officials***

Top government officials rely on the communication specialists of the administration's information offices to inform and interpret media reporting upon which the officials may be expected to act. Information officers also counsel them on the communications component of policy proposals, including how to address different topics (e.g. how to frame an issue, when and where to raise it, with what journalists to speak about it, and on what terms). Information officers help ministers to face the media in awkward or uncomfortable situations (when they might prefer not to answer questions), and attempt to judge how different communication approaches would be perceived by the public. One of the tasks of the Information Unit of Finland's Council of State is to inform ministers about accidents and other events that may develop into special situations.

Information officers often find themselves in the position of encouraging their ministers to have greater contact with the media. Although such contact is never free of risks, it does diminish the threat of journalists turning more aggressive in their investigations and negative in their reporting when denied access to officialdom. It is important for senior information officers working in ministries to be in regular contact with their institutions' top officials, and to be recognised as trusted, knowledgeable advisers on communications matters. Where this is the case, they are more likely to enjoy the respect and support of other public servants, whose co-operation they need to properly serve their information-seeking clients in the media and population at large. Information officers also assist public servants below the highest-ranking levels, counselling subject specialists and mid-level managers on institutional policies and good practice concerning external communications (e.g. preparing them for television appearances or radio interviews).

Communications advisors should be part of the policy making process right from the beginning. Yet full integration of policy and communications remains an unattained ideal, with advice on communications often sought as an appendage during the implementation of decisions. Information offices are often seen by political leaders as just some kind of a mailbox for delivering messages. This simplistic view overlooks the key role of communications in promoting society's understanding of, and support for, public policies.

### ***Managing Media Relations***

Although new technologies are beginning to weaken its intermediary role, the traditional media remains an essential vehicle through which governments communicate with the public. Ministry-based information officers may spend the bulk of their working day on the telephone or in meetings with journalists. They attempt to nurture positive relations with the media's representatives, learning their interests and providing where possible the information requested by reporters. The central information offices in several countries (e.g. Belgium, France, UK) produce media guides to assist journalists in country-specific government offices, accredited foreign correspondents, embassies, political parties, business associations, trade unions, international organisations, etc.

It is only natural that in a well-functioning democracy, where the media plays a vital oversight role, there will be tension between reporters and public officials responsible for providing information. Information officers need to work continuously at building a relationship of trust between the two parties, in part by nurturing mutual appreciation of the fact that reporters need information officers and vice versa. Information officers also need to be aware of the range of media entities, including not only daily papers and the broadcast media, but also, for example, weekly news magazines, e-bulletins and special-interest periodicals, and newsletters.

Information offices use a variety of techniques to transmit information to reporters, including telephone calls, news conferences, interviews with specialists and senior officials, letters to the editor, press releases and briefings (both formal and informal in nature). Increasingly, they are making use technologies that have come into vogue in the 1990s, including multiple faxing, e-mail, and World Wide Web pages. Information officers must regularly solicit information from other public servants. Thus it is also important for the officers to maintain healthy relations with these internal suppliers of data and details to be passed on to the media.

Naturally, information offices must modify the way in which they approach the media depending on the urgency and importance of the information with which they are treating. Informing on the release of census data, publication of a critical audit report, a declaration of war, hospital closures, new tax rules, a flu epidemic, road closures, and flooding cannot be treated in exactly the same way.

### ***Informing Citizens***

As noted previously, the central information office in many countries serves as the first stop for citizen queries about government services, and a clearinghouse for public information. In this capacity it fulfils the State's obligation to not only make material available in a passive way (allowing citizens to view unclassified documents), but also to actively disseminate information to help citizens fulfil their legal and civic obligations (register to vote, pay taxes), conduct other business with the administration (renew a passport, apply for a drivers license), and become aware of laws, trends and facts that could affect their lives.

In addition to working with journalists, information officers also use more direct means to reach the people and to respond to their queries. Common tools include: mailings, pamphlets, posters, printed and broadcast public service advertisements, toll-free telephone lines, the official gazette, lectures, community meetings, presentations at schools, and exhibitions. Public buildings (post offices, libraries, local branches of ministries, educational institutions) are often used as distribution outlets for documentation. In addition, many governments maintain information centres where citizens can not only request information and pick up flyers, but also purchase official publications and videos. The advent of the "connected society" provides governments with an attractive option to reach large parts of the population quickly in a cost-effective manner by loading information on to the Internet (see page 9).

The central office of information -- and to some extent their ministerial counterparts -- regularly develop broad-based public information campaigns to raise citizen awareness of social issues and to change behaviours (e.g. preventing AIDs, curtailing smoking, encouraging recycling). These campaigns also are used to educate the public and encourage citizen support for major government plans. In recent years, such campaigns have frequently been connected to European integration, explaining referendums on EU treaties and the implications of adopting the euro as the Union's common currency.

Information offices often recruit private public relations firms and advertising agencies to assist in the formulation of large public information campaigns. Preparing campaigns involves several components, including not only identification of themes, principles, partners, target audiences, channels, and costs, but also testing campaign ideas and carrying out follow-up actions such as



monitoring, fine-tuning, and evaluating. Experience has shown that efforts to reach a mass audience are more effective if intermediaries and communication partners -- such as non-governmental organisations, professional associations, and trade unions -- are drawn into the process of preparing and implementing a campaign.

Annex II features an example of a public information campaign in the United Kingdom.

### ***Co-ordinating Communications Policy & Promoting Internal Information Flows***

In addition to communicating with the media and public, the central office of information often serves an active role in disseminating information *within* state institutions. Many distribute daily or weekly bulletins with a calendar of upcoming government meetings and events, as well as news of appointments, visits of foreign delegations, developments in the European Union, new government policy initiatives, and legislative action. Ministerial information offices also carry out internal information activities targeting their institutions' personnel.

The central office of information usually manages co-operation among information officials from around the public administration. In many countries this office takes the lead in organising regular meetings of information officers to consider government themes, priorities and events, and possible mass media campaigns. Such meetings help to ensure that information officers at the different ministries are aware of key initiatives around the administration, that communication techniques and creative ideas are shared among colleagues, and that the presentation of government is relatively consistent. In addition, regular meetings contribute to a sense of *esprit de corps* and professional community among public information officers.

The central office of information also may advise ministries and other state bodies on their communication activities, and organise conferences and training sessions for information officers. In the Netherlands, the Information Council -- comprising the heads of ministerial information offices and chaired by the Managing Director of the Government Information Service -- carries out the abovementioned co-ordination tasks (see Annex II).

As European integration has deepened over the years, central offices of information have stepped up collaboration with counterparts in other European countries and with the public affairs and communications divisions of European Union institutions.

## **Government Goes On-Line**

Perhaps the most significant development in the provision of public information in recent years has been government's expanded use of Internet as a medium for communications between public officials and the citizenry. All European governments have an official Internet site, and nearly all ministries and major agencies have their own as well (not to mention all parliaments, and many regional and local governmental bodies). Estonia already requires its ministries to maintain and update web sites, and Switzerland has set five criteria to which their presentation of government on-line information should adhere (reliable, useful, complete, objective and easily accessible). Through the portal "@mtshelper online," the Austrian Government guides citizens to the official Internet pages where they can find information and forms relevant to their day-to-day needs<sup>7</sup>.

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<sup>7</sup> <http://www.help.gv.at>.

Before long, European governments that have not already done so will post ministerial decisions, draft policy proposals, enacted laws, licensing and tax forms, sector-specific information, health and safety advice, citizen guides, and contact information for government departments on to the Internet. Citizens will soon be able to complete many basic transactions over the Internet, rather than printing off forms from their computers for manual completion and dispatch through the post. The “half-way” use of the World Wide Web will give way to fuller utilisation of its potential to facilitate delivery of public services and the dissemination of information. In some countries, like Ireland and Norway, individuals can already apply for job-related benefits on-line.

European governments are now devoting serious attention to preparing the legal and organisational framework for electronic signatures to support the delivery of on-line services. Once this framework is in place, governments will move quickly to enhance the fields in which citizens can complete transactions with the State electronically.

On 8 March 2000, Estonia’s Parliament unanimously adopted the Digital Signature Act, making electronic documents as official as those on paper. According to government spokesman Priit Poiklik, this measure contributes to the goal of making “more documents digital and accessible on the Internet.”<sup>8</sup> By 2001, Finland aims to provide the most important services for citizens and companies on-line, and to ensure that a significant proportion of application forms and requests can be processed electronically. Although Finland is at the forefront of Europe’s embrace of new technologies (as evidenced by very high rates of mobile phone use, dedicated servers per capita, and computer ownership), its neighbours to the south are following in its footsteps.

The implications of this move of government to the Net are far more significant than simply enhancing convenience to the public. One need only look to the private sector to see likely trends. For example, in countries such as Great Britain, major banks have stepped up the automation of their services -- transactions by telephone, expanded automatic teller machine networks, Internet banking -- and simultaneously cut back on their physical branch networks. If public services can be delivered, questions answered, and payments made or received on-line, will it *really* be necessary to staff and maintain all existing government offices around the country?

One need not have a very vivid imagination to see that the very structure and organisation of democracy in Europe is likely to undergo major changes when Internet access becomes ubiquitous and less expensive, and further advances make the technology faster and more convenient (e.g. reliable access via mobile telephones). Several European governments, especially in well-wired Nordic region, regularly consult the public via the Internet, and senior officials in many countries (and in the European Commission) hold on-line chats with the public. Government-citizen relations are evolving towards a system where participatory democracy begins to overtake representative democracy, and where citizens increasingly become active partners rather than passive consumers in public governance. On-line voting is likely to become commonplace in the years ahead.

Yet it should be noted that the exciting potential of new information and communication technologies to radically upgrade and expand public information services is tempered by a few sobering realities:

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<sup>8</sup> “Law to Protect Electronic Information Passed,” *The Baltic Times*, 16-22 March 2000.

- Internet penetration rates and the number of secure servers also vary greatly across countries, with northern European states generally far better “wired” than those in southern or eastern Europe. In countries with lower access rates, fewer than one in ten households can presently log on to the World Wide Web at home. High metered telephone charges also discourage use of the Internet in many countries.
- Access to the Internet *within* countries is very unequal, with the poor, women and minorities enjoying lower access rates than men, the wealthy and the highly educated. It cannot be assumed that everyone will receive information put on to government web sites, and some target groups will be particularly hard to reach via electronic means. Measures to actively address an emerging “digital divide” are clearly in order.
- Giving citizens the option of sending an e-mail at any time instead of making a phone call or personal visit during regular business hours to seek answers to questions may cause unprepared administrations to be overwhelmed with easily dispatched electronic queries.
- The savings accruing to governments from being able to post information on web pages rather than distributing printed documents diminish quickly when one considers all the costs of supplying information on line: organising and managing huge volumes of text put on to the Internet, installation of new equipment and software, recruitment of web designers and operators, extensive training, etc.
- The well-travelled Internet-borne computer viruses that in the past month cost businesses and governments billions of euros world-wide can be seen as a warning of even more dangerous viruses that could infect public sector computer systems. Loss and misuse of information, as well as widespread service disruption, are among the real threats of over-reliance on new technologies to conduct government’s information work.
- If governments are compelled to expand transparency even further -- granting broad rights of public access to information in the administration (e.g. legal counsel, preliminary brainstorming of policy ideas, negotiating positions in the midst of delicate trade talks, personal correspondence, etc.) -- there is a real risk that public servants will shy away from giving free and frank advice. This could harm rational policy development and the exploration of creative solutions to societal problems.<sup>9</sup>

## Changing with the Times

Growing use of the Internet for communicating between the administration and population will also bring changes in the training, qualifications, and equipment of information officers. For example, more information officers will have to acquire basic skills in web design, development and maintenance. They will also have to modify writing and editing practices in recognition of the fact that material appearing in a hard copy format must be composed, structured and presented differently on a computer screen. They also will have to learn how to research on the Web and

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<sup>9</sup> “EU Warily Approaches Demands for Increased ‘Transparency’,” *International Herald Tribune*, 15 May 2000; and OECD Public Management Service, *Impact of the Emerging Information Society on the Policy Development Process and Democratic Quality*, Paris, France, 1998, pages 50 and 63.

learn the lexicon of today's electronic age. Although most European information officers have been assigned their own office computers, not all have the software and features that will enable them to respond promptly and effectively to citizen and press queries (including high-speed Internet links).

Beyond technology issues, the intensifying process of European integration will also spur changes in the skills set required by information officers. For example, the growing influence of European Union institutions will mean that information officers will not only have to be aware of the work of their own ministries, but also of related activities undertaken at the European level. Increased contacts with foreign public servants and reporters will make international language requirements more important, and not just at major ministries such as foreign affairs and finance.

In developing workable information policies suited to each country's political climate, administrative context, and cultural and legal traditions, decision makers may wish to keep in mind that, despite the risks, greater openness of the administration can contribute to democratic legitimacy and to societal support for democratic institutions. As the first contact point for many seeking information from state bodies, the public information officer has the opportunity to contribute to such openness and to enable society to reap the benefits it yields.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Carsten Gronbeck-Jensen argues that the Scandinavia's liberal rules regarding public access to official documents to promote politico-administrative accountability offer a possible solution to the European Community's perceived legitimacy deficit in "The Scandinavian Tradition of Open Government and the European Union: Problems of Compatibility," *Journal of European Public Policy*, 5:1 March 1998, pp 185-199.

## ANNEX 1

# Case Study of a Public Information Campaign in the UK: “RAF: “Rise Above the Rest”

### *The Central Office of Information*

The Central Office of Information (COI) is a Department reporting to the Minister for the Cabinet Office in the United Kingdom. The Office is based in London, has eight regional offices, and employs just over 300 permanent staff. It provides government with consultancy, procurement and project management across all media. With staff recruited from the private sector, the COI combines public sector values with private sector skills. Project managers are specialists in their particular medium, and provide independent advice on the best way of achieving communication objectives.

The COI works with government clients to produce creative, effective campaigns that aim to meet and exceed objectives of ministers. One campaign highlighted by the COI on its website concerns promotion of recruitment for the Royal Air Force (RAF).

### *Overview of RAF Campaign*

In 1997, a brand new vision for RAF recruitment was developed with the aim of boosting the RAF’s public profile and keeping recruitment levels high. This vision included full strategic recommendations, a new creative strategy featuring a new endline, “Rising Above the Rest,” and a new look for the RAF roundel. COI set up a brand development group to ensure that the new brand vision was maintained across all areas and to give strategic support to the campaign. The COI also produced a five-year marketing strategy.

Pilots and planes are the popular public image of the RAF. However, the RAF provides over 70 different career opportunities. The new creative strategy focuses on the individual trades and how they work as part of a team. The new RAF website is playing a crucial role in attracting quality recruits. The on-line application procedure also benefits users. Now, a visit to the website will be like a visit to a recruiting office: potential recruits will be guided towards the most suitable careers, and then helped through the application process.

Endorsement: "With this innovative on-line application system, COI has helped put the RAF at the cutting edge of Internet technology. We're confident that the new site will be a great success." Air Commodore Cynthia Fowler, Director of Recruiting and Selection.
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### *Marketing*

New TV and cinema ads promoted vital RAF support roles using dramatic, grainy, air-to-air footage and realistic sound-effects. Two new radio ads raised awareness and encouraged immediate response. Each of the UK’s Armed Forces Careers Offices now has its own tailor-made RAF recruitment radio ad. Research shows that year on year, TV and radio ads have yielded a 30 per cent uplift in response.

COI has brokered a deal with Talk Radio for the RAF to sponsor the stations Formula 1 coverage. Cinema advertising around the new *Star Wars* film also was planned. The COI continues to produce new videos for use in recruitment offices. Three films are currently in production. Response-driven classified ads also

focus on individual careers within the RAF. The COI is running the response and fulfilment operation, and has also carried out a caller satisfaction survey.

### ***The World Wide Web***

The key to the website is the innovative electronic application process. This intelligent system will help potential recruits choose the right job for them, then take them step-by-step through the application form, making sure it has been completed correctly. Visitors can also try their hand at code breaking or refuelling an aircraft in interactive training missions based on the RAF's own aptitude tests. New missions will appear every two weeks.

Press and PR work attract visitors to the new site, while the on-line application process itself provides a selection mechanism enabling the RAF to maintain the highest possible standards among new recruits. Site visits increased by 22 per cent in the first week after the launch. The COI also will be encouraging young people to visit the site by placing banner ads on related websites.

### ***Press and PR***

The COI is generating interest in the new site all around the country. COI's Campaign Promotions team is working to secure extensive press coverage in the national, regional and ethnic press. The team is also setting up competitions and reader offers for RAF branded merchandise. To take part, readers will need to visit the site.

### ***The Words***

Brochures are a major part of the RAF's recruitment strategy. The COI designed, printed and distributed nearly 90,000 in 1998/99. This year, the COI will introduce a new brochure format with individual factsheets on each of the RAF's trades. That means each folder can be tailored to the exact requirements of individual applicants, making it both user-friendly and cost-effective.

### ***Regional Focus***

The RAF's Open Day at RAF Cosford in the West Midlands was a major recruitment opportunity. The COI Network made sure the event received press coverage, sending out information packs and press releases to the local media. They were also on hand to co-ordinate media presence and ministerial interviews on the day of the event.

*Source: COI website: <http://www.coi.gov.uk>.*

## ANNEX II

# The Netherlands Government Information Service

The Netherlands Government Information Service (RVD) was set up during World War II when the Dutch Government was in exile in London. After the war, the RVD, which had been set up along the lines of the British model for government information services, was adjusted in order to reflect the characteristics of the Dutch Constitution.

The RVD plays a central role in providing information on government policy, and in co-ordinating information from different ministries. The RVD forms part of the Ministry of General Affairs, which is responsible for co-ordinating government policy in general. The RVD employs about 135 persons.

A major activity of the RVD is informing on weekly Cabinet meetings. This requires a great deal of prior consultation with ministries. Emphasis is put on publicising and explaining policy through the independent media, especially journalists covering parliamentary affairs and foreign correspondents. The RVD also provides an information service for the Royal Household, providing details of official visits within the country and abroad.

One department of the RVD is responsible for communication on matters relating to state interests, as well as issues of a strictly private nature. The RVD provides facilities for journalists covering the public sector, and helps to organise publicity for major events, particularly when they involve a member of the Royal Family or the Prime Minister.

The RVD furnishes the Prime Minister and his advisors with information about developments and issues which may be relevant to policies adopted. It also provides the Queen's Cabinet, the Parliament, the Council of State, the General Accounting Office, the National Ombudsman and all the ministries with information from daily newspapers, radio, television and magazines. The RVD selects this information and uses computerised documentation systems.

The RVD also undertakes certain tasks under special circumstances, such as calamities, military matters, hostage situations, storm tide warnings and so on. By law, the Head of the RVD has wide-ranging authorisation to interrupt radio and television broadcasts to inform the public. Such a situation arose during the Gulf War. The RVD operates a 24-hour reporting system.

A group of consultants forming a separate department of the RVD are active in the area of research, audio-visual productions, printed matter and the development of mass media campaigns. This group assists the RVD as well as individual ministries and other state bodies.

### *The Information Council*

The Information Council co-ordinates the information activities of Dutch ministries and government institutions, as well as the use of the mass media for government information. It comprises directors of the information departments of the ministries, and is chaired by the managing director of the Government Information Service, which hosts the Information Council Secretariat.

In The Netherlands, each minister has direct responsibility for his/her policy towards the Parliament, and has his/her own information mandate and responsibility. All ministries maintain their own information department. These are responsible for:

- managing press contacts

- issuing press releases
- distributing information brochures
- organising mass media campaigns
- internal information
- developing other information activities in the policy areas of the ministry

The Information Council formulates recommendations for the Prime Minister, ministers or secretaries of state on subjects related to government information. The Information Council meets weekly to co-ordinate publicity about decisions of the Cabinet. It also helps to guarantee some degree of uniformity in the presentation of government policy, and to promote effectiveness of government information activities.

Direct public information by the ministries using their own information resources is becoming increasingly important in The Netherlands. Ministers carry out their own multimedia campaigns on specific subjects, using a combination of television, radio, advertising and leaflets. Under the country's Media Act, radio and television airtime is allocated to the Prime Minister for public information broadcasting. Information announcements are known as Postbus (P.O. Box 51) spots, named after the post office box number used by all ministries. These short information announcements usually refer people to leaflets available at post offices and public libraries.

Because there is a great deal of overlap between different areas of policy, ministries often operate a co-ordinated information policy. Ministries are also jointly responsible for operating the joint infrastructure and channels for dissemination of information to the press and public. The Council's activities also focus on the screening of large-scale mass media campaigns, which are to be executed by the ministries. Each year, a list of selected campaigns is submitted to the lower house.

The Information Council stimulates assessments and initiatives involving new electronic media, and explores possibilities for the provision of information to minorities, non-Dutch speakers and other target groups that are difficult to reach.

The Information Council also provides a platform for the promotion of mutual interests by a variety of parties involved in communications work. For example, meetings are arranged with municipal and provincial information officers, with members of major press organisations, and with consumer organisations and private associations whose activities extended to the area of information provision. The Information Council regularly organises conferences and training sessions for information officers.

Recent issues addressed by the Information Council include promoting The Netherlands abroad, the effectiveness of mass media campaigns, communicating on European integration, information policy on major accidents and disasters, and guidelines for co-productions with broadcasting organisations.

*Source: Postbus 51, Netherlands Government Information Service.*