

"THE ROLE OF COMMUNICATION IN THE DEVELOPMENT OF  
SUPRANATIONAL COMMUNITIES: THE EXPERIENCE OF THE  
EUROPEAN COMMUNITY"

In these days of mass communications, no organisation can survive without the deliberate, planned and sustained effort to establish and maintain mutual understanding between itself and its public. Any organization or firm which neglects this will do so at its own peril. May I recall for a moment that historically the tremendous expansion of business and commerce brought about by the Industrial Revolution vastly increased the need for more efficient communication, particularly for the sale of products. This was the beginning of large scale advertising and publicity centered on printed material and later on radio as well.

World War II and the post-war period have witnessed a veritable revolution in the techniques of informing the public. Marshall McLuhan pointed out that this is the first generation of the electronic age. In television everything is happening at once, instantaneously and enveloping not just one thing at a time as was the case with the printed word for centuries. The growth in communications technology has put at our disposal a vast range of new techniques, including short-wave radio, STD telephone and telex, color television, videotapes, computers, transistors, tape recorders, instamatic cameras, photographic printing, photocopying, use of coaxial cables, satellites and so on. But the fruits of materialism and advanced technology have not solved more basic problems. There is need for more recourse to the social sciences and communications psychology to find out what people think and why,

what they really want from life, why they react in the way they do and what can make them change their opinions. The importance of attitudes rather than just products has indicated the need for more attention to and research on the processes of the human mind and spirit.

When it comes to political systems, and the EC is a complex political entity, legitimacy is a vital factor. Unless it is perceived and accepted, it can hardly be said to exist - whatever the lawyers may say. To maintain favorable attitudes towards its legitimacy, a political system - once constitutionally established - has, among other things, to (i) be visible to its citizens and (ii) be capable of making its activities intelligible to them.

In both of these respects the European Community today is not in the strongest position. The EC groups together nine proud and old nations with their national and linguistic identities, with their own systems of historical reference and image building with widely different cultures, dialects, religions, ways of life, of dressing, of entertaining, with their own work ethics and inbuilt systems of social reward and punishment.

Americans, on the contrary, speak the same language, they communicate dress, have fun in the same way. A whole system of national symbols strengthens the American citizen's natural identity: the flag, the anthem, the nation-wide news networks, common national leaders and institutions.

The nations of Europe, the member states of the European Community, are so ancient, their identity is so deep-rooted, that the material symbols of nationality (flag, anthem etc..) have been thoroughly internalized by their citizens or subject. You do not have to play the national anthem in Europe before every sports event, you do not need to sing an equivalent of "God Bless America" when our professional or business associations meet. You do not see any flagpoles in front of European houses. A 20-generation deep cultural socialization has profoundly engrained the seeds of national identity in our peoples. Our neighbors are geographically and historically close enough so that we don't have to be reminded we are different. The single national images of our nine member states have been fully socialized into the collective historical and political consciousness of their populations.

These complex factors make an image-building effort by the EC, a most difficult task. The idea of a United Europe, while enjoying the passive sympathy of the majority of the population in most Community countries, is not one which carries force. The good will with which it is generally received is usually accompanied by scepticism.

While the legitimacy of the Community is not seriously questioned, it remains for the majority of its citizens remote, intangible and bureaucratic. One major reason for this is that there are few occasions when they come into direct contact with it, or feel themselves directly and personally affected by or involved in its activities.

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Another reason for this is that most of the decisions of the Community are executed by agents of the Member States.

Moreover, the direct demands the Community makes on individual citizens are very few: the same is true of the services it offers.

Another reason is that even in those cases where Community action has been taken - through the Social Fund, the European Investment Bank, the Regional Fund and so on - it is often not apparent that the Community has been involved. In some cases bureaucratic practices forbid full information to be given about the destination and amount of financial assistance. And on the spot, a conspiracy of silence often surrounds the facts about Community intervention. We are actively endeavouring to remedy this state of affairs.

All this is in marked contrast to the way in which national and regional political and administrative systems make their impact felt in the daily experience of citizens in our Member States. These systems have a tangible existence in the terms of those who work for them (armed forces, policemen, civil servants, etc.); the demands they make on us (taxes, military service, etc.); and the services they offer (physical security, social and health services, etc.). We are, moreover, constantly reminded of their existence by a whole range of visible symbols: coins, postage stamps, identity cards, passports, soccer teams and so on. They accompany us from the cradle to the grave.

Above all, each member state of the EC has established a long time ago its own system of mass communication through a written press and a network of electronic media.

Apart from ITV in the U.K. the European TV networks are public and national - there is rather little regional television in Europe, although in recent years in a number of countries, small, private local stations have attempted to compete with the national networks at least as far as local news are concerned.

Local or regional news programs, unlike in the U.S., are not a big item in Europe. The attention definitely focuses on the national capital with its familiar, well internalized national symbols and institutions. Foreign news are given a decent amount of play on European TV, much larger for instance than in the U.S. But most often news from the Commission of the EC in Brussels, or from the European Parliament in Luxembourg or Strasbourg are just treated as another foreign news item. For an Italian viewer, news from Denmark (a member of the EC) are still as foreign and perhaps even more foreign than news coming from Austria (a non-member), a country which for historical reasons carries more identifiable characteristics and signals to an Italian mind.

The Community itself is usually not a very attractive or sexy item for a general audience. This situation is clearly reflected in the great bulk of the messages transmitted by the mass media. It is not generally through lack of goodwill toward the Community on the part of those who work for them. When they look around for suitable material, they often find it difficult to find. This is particularly true of television. Given the importance of the visual image in our society, the fact that the Community is so rarely visible is a very severe problem.

The communicators also have the problem of the receptive capacity of their audiences. They, too, have been so conditioned by their national environment that messages have to be put through a series of national filters if they are to be readily understood. Not the least important of these is the language filter. So it is wholly understandable that each journalist should seek the views of "his" national Minister on a Community event; assess its importance in terms of "his" national situation, and so on. Again, efforts are being made to change this situation. The Commission itself has set about a major re-orientation of its information policy and is now placing much more emphasis on the need to reach the general public. A substantial number of new initiatives have recently been taken, particularly in the audio-visual field, by radio and television authorities and by those concerned with the production of audio-visual teaching materials, with the aim of bringing much more information about the Community to the mass of its citizens. We have been able from the beginning to use a number of channels of communication at the European level. These channels however, although technically adequate to operate on a Europe-wide basis, are not specific enough to include a large amount of EC topics.

Eurovision is a good example of that situation. Eurovision is not an organization, it is rather a system or process of TV program exchanges within the framework of the European Broadcasting Union (E.B.U.) which includes all the countries of the EEC plus a large number of others in Europe and North Africa. The system

which was inaugurated in 1954, faced and still faces a number of technical difficulties which are a good example of the diversity of solutions that European countries have adopted for their media networks. Most of the European TV's use a 625-lines-per-picture system for broadcast. The 405-line system is still in use in the U.K. and Ireland. France and Luxembourg use the 819-line system. (In the U.S., by the way, the NSTC color system is used, with 525 lines per picture.) There are also two systems in Europe for transmitting color television, SECAM, in France and eastern Europe and PAL elsewhere. People who want to watch the French speaking channels out of Paris and Brussels need expensive sets that can convert PAL into SECAM and vice-versa. These are the technical problems. Language problems are also a formidable obstacle in making Eurovision an efficient system to use for building up the image of the Community. Sports, soccer in particular are the main item transmitted on a Europe-wide basis, followed by ceremonies (coronations, royal weddings, funerals, space shots and song contests) etc... It is pomp, excitement, and immediacy rather than Europeanness which qualifies an event for Eurovision treatment. The event has to be mostly graphic to be intelligible to all audiences. Anything that involves speech (political events, theater, etc...) is extremely difficult and unattractive to transmit all over Europe.

The Community however has been increasingly aware of a need for the Europeans to cooperate very actively in the field of television and communication in general.

By 1985 a common system of satellite television will operate in the Community. Two Franco-German satellites will be launched in 1983 by the French carrier ARIANE. Followed by others, they will add to the presence of the "symphony" satellite which was launched in the mid-1970's. This satellite system could be an ideal vector of communication for the Community but it is still today at an essentially Franco-German bilateral state.

Cable-TV is also an area which is fast developing in Europe. But it is confronted with the problem that in a number of countries the state has a monopoly on TV transmission. Some tough legal problems definitely lie ahead in this area.

During the 60s, in most developed countries, the faster rate of industrial, economic and social evolution has put more emphasis on the need for adequate information to know the facts, to understand, to manage and to decide.

About ten years ago, the pressing demand brought about in Europe the creation of numerous information services making considerable use of advanced technology and mostly of computers; these services were independent as, more often than not, they had been set up to answer isolated and specific needs and they showed a tendency to create a multitude of small networks in order to disseminate information.

It was only in June 1971 that the notion of a Community policy was formulated in a resolution of the Council; this resolution, assuming an exponential growth of on-line information processing - that is to say by means of a true dialogue between the user and the computer - recommended the implementation of a first three-year plan of action with, as one of its major objectives, the creation of a European network for scientific and technical information and documentation "by the most modern methods" and "under the most favorable conditions as regards speed and expense". This led to the creation of a common network for information processing and communication. The system is called EURONET-DIANE, the creation of which was officially opened on February 13th, 1980 and which is the logical result of the main tendencies which have appeared in Europe during the last ten years. Numerous factors, together, have created a situation in which the cooperative effort as foreseen in the



framework of the project, must of necessity lead to a rational solution for serving correctly the interests of a community of users (deciders, managers, research workers, engineers, etc...) and for utilizing public funds efficiently; in particular, a study carried out on behalf of the Commission showed that if three or four individual networks cover the same geographical area, the telecommunication costs alone would oblige the European tax payer to pay from three to ten times more than with one single network; savings of the same order of magnitude could also be effected through a sharing of management and staff costs and through the implementation of integrated management methods.

This common system now operates out of one network management center in London and four switching nodes in Frankfurt, London, Paris and Rome equipped with European designed and produced computers. User terminals are operating in Amsterdam, Brussels, Copenhagen, Dublin and Luxembourg.

When the direct popular election of the European Parliament was scheduled for June of 1979, the European Broadcasting Union (EBU) began to plan a common European coverage of the campaign and, of the election night. Technical and above all political difficulties made it impossible to produce a joint program. But Eurovision operated in relaying news live from the 9 countries.

I had the opportunity to watch the election night on both the Italian and French national networks. It was clear that despite the efforts of the respective news teams, the attention focused essentially on the results coming from the national arena. There are many reasons why this had to be so.

-First, people are naturally more interested in results from their own area.

Second, the debates that sprinkled the European election night had to take place in the language of the station.

-Third, the political labels of the parties running in different countries were often not intelligible to most viewers. Political denominations often do not coincide in the Nine.

-Fourth, the strange system of representation adopted by the U.K. was so different from the ones adopted elsewhere that nobody else understood why with 40% of the vote, the Labor Party was getting only about 10% of the seats.

In the end, what this reflected was the extreme difficulty for the media to relate to a 9-country European audience.

The comments everywhere concentrated less on the shape of the new European Parliament than on the local (i.e. national) beauty contests going on in the 9 countries.

In Italy and most of the U.K. the question was: Will the national elections that were held just before see their results confirmed in the European contest?

In Northern Ireland, it was Protestants vs. Catholics, Ian Paisley vs. John Hume.

In the FRG, people were looking for a preview of the 1980 general elections, etc.....

The European Community periodically polls its citizens through a system we call "Euro-Barometer". Some of the results we have obtained recently tend to show that if the European elections had an impact on public opinion this impact was not as profound as one would have hoped or expected.

55% of the Belgians still had heard nothing about the European Parliament after its election. This was also true for 45% of the British, but only for 24% of the Luxembourg people and 23% of the Germans.

Among "opinion leaders" the ratings were obviously much higher.

In Denmark, France, Ireland, U.K., Belgium and Luxembourg, a majority of the people polled thought that the European MPs should promote their immediate national interests. Only in the Federal Republic of Germany, Italy, and the Netherlands did public opinion put Community interests first.

However, 75% of all Europeans supported the unification of Western Europe in October, 1979, the highest figure since 1952. The lowest amount of support was in Denmark (46%). The highest was in Italy (85%) and Luxembourg (89%). Again, this support was even higher among opinion leaders.

In the UK a majority of the population was still thinking that Community membership was a bad thing. The percentage rose from 35 to 41% of dissatisfied voters after the election of the European Parliament in June 1979.

These figures tend to show that despite an unprecedented communication effort centered on the democratically elected Parliament, European public opinion did not react very clearly to a rather intense media campaign which had made an extensive use of attractive colorful posters, brochures and above all newspaper, radio and TV ads.

This stagnation of pro-European attitudes (even if at a positive level) is in sharp contrast with the increasingly clear perception of Europe as a unit elsewhere in the world. It shows the difficulty one encounters when trying to re-direct public attention away from easily assimilable national messages and more toward a new supranational identity.

The written press has by no means been absent from the campaign to make Europe more accessible to the public. Four respected dailies, Le Monde from Paris, the London Times, Turin's La Stampa and Die Welt from Hamburg publish a very informative and sophisticated European supplement every month. An international edition of the London Times published in

Frankfurt, also gives added space to European affairs. The Financial Times and the International Herald Tribune are also very active in covering European Community issues.

These newspapers and a number of others which are very much Europe oriented reach mostly a group of well-informed readers who are themselves opinion leaders.

The popular press, like the Sun of London, Bild-Zeitung or France-Soir, is still very closed to European issues, perhaps reflecting the widespread feeling that these are complex, abstract and let's say it, boring. The European Community itself publishes in all the member states and elsewhere a number of newsletters and magazines, the latter being usually quite slick and attractive. Again they tend to reach a rather well-informed, well-educated public.

The EC also needs to keep communication flowing between its different institutions. The language barrier is here a major problem. The EC presently has 6 official languages (French, English, Dutch, German, Italian, and Danish). In January 1981, Greek will become the seventh language, adding an alphabet problem to our communication services. 20% of the Commission staff and 75% of the Parliament's staff are made up of translators and interpreters. 270 journalists cover the Commission in Brussels, only the White House gets more coverage and they need to be fed information preferably in their own languages. An American journalist recently described to me the atmosphere in Brussels the night of a Council of Ministers meeting.

"Journalistic ambushes are laid at the elevator doors on the ground floor of the Charlemagne building to catch the best sources of information. Some manage to escape further into the press area, sometimes as far as the bar, before a huddle of questioners surrounds them. Reporters who fail to spot their man in time find themselves at the rim of the huddle. There

questions and answers are hard to catch amid the surrounding noise, especially when the language is not the reporter's own.

One of the most humiliating experiences a foreign correspondent can have is to elbow his way to the core of the huddle and find that the briefing is being given in Danish!"

By 1983, Spanish and Portuguese will probably have been added to the 7 official languages. All major documents are translated in the official languages, Greece is right now translating the treaties and other legal documents into Greek, a very long and costly effort.

What are the prospects for the future?

Enlargement is on the agenda. 3 new countries, Greece, Spain and Portugal will join the EC, in the next few years. These are countries that just emerged from a long night of dictatorship and where, therefore, the media have not yet reached their full maturity, although in the last five years, remarkable progress has been made in this field. Europe is going to become part of the everyday life of the Greeks, the Spaniards and the Portuguese. There is no doubt that a tremendous communication effort will have to be made in these 3 countries to ease their entry into the Community.

European issues will have to be made intelligible for the wider public as political cooperation progresses. It should be easier to show to the Europeans how much Europe matters to them, how much Europe is part of their life. I believe agriculture is one of the issues, because of the Common Agricultural Policy, which has struck the imagination of the Europeans, the farmers in particular

Hence the frequent street demonstrations aimed at the Community itself or at foreign governments instead of at their own national governments. This is what happened yesterday in Boulogne, France. "French farmers protesting against Britain's stand over farming prices today burned an effigy of British Prime Minister Mrs. Margaret Thatcher," Reuters reported.

"Mrs. Thatcher was represented by a tailors dummy with a green gown and a yellow wig. The effigy was burned on a bridge leading to the maritime station and ironically called "the entente cordiale" bridge." The British wire-service went on saying:

"Before setting fire to the dummy, a farm union leader told the crowd, "The English burned Joan of Arc who was defending France. Mrs. Thatcher is defending England and we shall burn her." Not all European issues, fortunately, bring out that much belligerence but it is a good sign that increasingly European citizens understand that the solution to their problems might lay outside of their national territory.

Europe is going to need more tangible symbols to sink in the mind of its citizens: a flag, a passport, a European anthem, postage stamps, and why not, a European soccer team. Only when it will have acquired these will it become a kind of a second motherland for the Europeans with all the emotional and affective ties this implies.