Information Policy as an Instrument of International Relations

Address by

Dr. Beniamino OLIVI

Official Spokesman of the Commission

of the European Communities

to the European Federation of Public Relations

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1.   In order to examine how the technique and philosophy
of political information has developed over the years, the pressures
that have conditioned its functioning, and the problems which it
has to face, I think we must lay down first of all three major
concepts - concepts which are closely linked with each other.
Stated briefly these are :

1. Information policy is a function of the centre and
   shape of power.
2. It has a recipient - or rather a more or less readily
   definable scheme of recipients.
3. It is conditioned by a continually changing set of
   socio-educational relationships - the growing levels
   of universal education, the rapid development and
   extension of the mass media.

Here then is an introductory approach towards the
"philosophy" of my subject. A little "history" may now help me
to become more concrete and start broaching the subject not only
of how information policy has evolved into an international
function and the new problems involved with this widening of
scope, but how indeed it has become a conscious instrument of
policy in the first place. I hope also to indicate two other
inter-related trends of capital importance. Firstly, how it is
that information policy has become a markedly crucial instrument
for new international organisations in particular and secondly,
how it is in the field of international relations that its growth
towards sophistication has been most forcibly accelerated.

Seventy years ago there was hardly such a thing as
organised and methodical information policy - unless you include
newspaper censorship, or even public hangings as a form of
advertising the law ! What there was was directed overwhelmingly
to the home market and by and large towards limited social strata
within that market. The first world war saw the real birth of
political information - the second world war saw further breakthroughs.

Let us, therefore, look for just a moment at what developed within the framework of the more or less democratic "western" nation states alone. This will be our basic model.

Educational standards improved; industrialization bred new social group consciousness. Politics developed a broader base and the search for wider and more popular influence in the structure of power and decision-making. Telecommunications provided a technical breakthrough increasing the flow of information. Standards and techniques of journalism have developed greatly and most notably the growth of mass-circulation popular newspapers and now television.

Both of these aspects - educational growth linked with increased widespread political awareness and increasing popular demand to be taken into account in decision-making processes, plus the allied growth of media of information - have together combined to compel decision-making bodies to make more serious and technical efforts to give account of their actions. Silence is no longer efficient. Information has had to become consciously an activity of policy. The phenomenal growth this last seventy years of both government responsibility and involvement in society and technical complexity of matters at stake, has made information become not only a policy instrument, but one has had to become more technical and professional if the broadest possible understanding of the subjects is to be attained.

So far I have examined a limited model - the framework of the nation state on its own. I have done this for convenience sake to try and show how information work has become infinitely more complex and technical on the scale of the nation state and how the need for it as a fully fledged political instrument has grown. These complexities and the need for information policy become really marked when one draws into the international context.

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2.   Before getting into the rough and tumble of information policy in international organisations, please bear with me once more while I try to examine a "middle stage" — how national governments have been compelled to set their sights on public opinion outside their own borders.

Seventy years ago any information effort by a national government was almost exclusively directed towards its own subjects. The recipient was limited in definition and readily recognisable. This is no longer sufficient. Public opinion in developed states has taken increasingly detailed interest in their and other governments' foreign policies. Hence governments have found the need to have their own direct information links to the people of other states that are objects of their particular foreign policy actions. And it is not enough just to lobby so-called leading figures. The second world war witnessed quite spectacular operations in the radio-war which persists today, particularly between East and West Europe.

Information departments of diplomatic missions have assumed proportionately increasing importance in those missions. As traditional secret diplomacy, its reliability and usefulness, have decayed the information activity of diplomatic missions has frequently increased — postboxes with loudspeakers ?

Governments, particularly those of countries prominent in major international developments, have become increasingly aware of the need for a direct approach to the citizens of another country or countries with which they have dealings. Above all they have to be on their guard against letting appraisal of their actions go by default. Information has indeed come of age and become an instrument of policy. At its best it is probably attempting to achieve a "balance of prejudices" in a world where the average citizen is subjected to such a mass of information and opinions. It is a classic case for competition — and as you all know — we in the European Community pay a great deal of attention to competition! And the European Community has its particular competition problems in Europe's political information rat-race !

We have looked at the problems and tasks of information in two dimensions - one-dimensional, the nation state, and a second dimension, when the nation state broadcasts its point of view to citizens of neighbouring states.

When we come to consider international organisations we enter a third dimension - and a veritable complexity . Or as some of my colleagues would say when under pressure during negotiations with Britain and Ireland, or currency crises, - "all hell breaks loose!"

When a national government attempts to inform merely the subjects of its own nation state, it is a talk now only in one language but in the terms of one defined set of cultural values, common, readily identifiable institutions whether these are contested or not. In fact it contains the useful effort-saving factor of being able to take a very great deal as already understood. But when one is talking to another society with different pre-conceptions, a completely new effort of interpretation and explanation is required.

3.   Increasingly, international bodies and organisations have assumed to a greater or lesser degree aspects of what was hitherto called individual nation states' sovereignty.

International bodies are now entering into public debate and that this is combined with a public need for these bodies to have an identity, to be described. The European Community now finds itself the subject of a series of "great" debates. In the classical form of international relations, nation states bargain directly with one another. Those involved in the bargaining process are also classical, therefore, and they are instinctively and easily recognisable cultural and political units. This is a bilateral process - a political football match with organised supporters.

But when nation states start to conduct some of their relations
with each other through a common channel such as the United Nations
or say NATO, and draw up certain common rules of conduct within
these organisations, these bodies begin to appear as a part of the
decision-making process to the recipient public in all the countries
concerned. Immediately these bodies begin to assume an <u>identity of
their own</u> there is a public demand for knowledge of them.

China has just joined the United Nations. The news-
papers are full of it. But what is the United Nations ? What does
it do ? I am sure that a world-wide quizz on the subject would
bring forth enough material to write a highly entertaining best-
seller.

The question that is now posed is - should information
on the activities of these bodies be left to their individual
members, or should these bodies speak for themselves ?

When it comes to annual discussion of the budgets
of international organisations one always notices particular attention
being paid by national representations to information activities.
Cuts are inevitable ......

It is no good taking a decision or - as is particularly
the case with many international bodies - for a group of countries
to pledge themselves to a common course of policy, unless these
decisions are to have a chance of being effective. They cannot
hope to be effective unless they are understood by all concerned.
The link-piece between these two stages is information policy.

4.   If I choose the European Community as a test case for
my thesis it is not only because I am its Spokesman. I also believe
that objectively it is a unique example of information as an
instrument of policy. And I am not, I hope, just trying to justify
my own job !

For it is when we approach such organisations as the
European Community that the problem emerges in full. Here is a
very clear case of an erosion of national sovereignty which is being
gradually assumed by an entirely new body in a manner which vividly
affects the everyday lives of the individual citizens within the
new unit. Therefore we do not see ourselves as an "international
organisation" in the classical sense. This is an open-ended political
commitment to integration, a Community whose law in the fields
it increasingly covers, takes precedence over national law.

This new body had had to learn to speak for itself.
It is compelled to do so because it has assumed a certain amount
of sovereignty already and is steadily assuming more. It must
therefore be ready to face interrogation on its activities if these
are not to be thwarted by misinterpretation or uninformed opposition.
Informed opposition is another more serious matter.

The European Community has constantly to explain itself from first principles. It is an entirely new political and economic concept – even though "Common Market" has become a household phrase, which is sometimes dangerous. It is atypical. It risks being misunderstood and not accepted as a real authority because it is unfamiliar. The national government in the nation state does not have to tell its own citizens from scratch what it is – or hardly. The citizens know this; all their education, upbringing and cultural background combine to give them a second sense of what the national political unit is in which they live. It has immediately human connotations of familiarity even when contested – but of course contestation often reinforces familiarity. But the Community institutions are not strictly speaking a government, for the time being – at least, not in the normally accepted sense. A major task of an information policy for the European Community therefore is to state why it is there, what it is, and <u>how</u> it functions and all this <u>in relation</u> to the lives of the citizens of the member states. Imagine for a moment briefing journalists (most of them experts) on a stage in the enlargement negotiations. You are talking about tariff quotas, corrective coefficients for financial contributions, adaptation of secondary legislation concerning trade in zinc oxide, and suddenly someone asks: "Waht are the basic political reasons why you want us to join the Commone Market?"....

How in fact does the institutional mechanism of the Community work? Here I must beg your patience while I plunge into the Chinese puzzle of what you, I am sure, call "Brussels". It consists of two main elements. There is a Commission, a supranational body, which has the unique power to make proposals for action on a Community scale to execute many of these decisions once they have been taken and to watch over the proper execution of Community law. There is a Council of Ministers which has the power and function of actually taking the decision on the basis of proposals from the Commission. In French the division of powers has summed up by the phrase – "La Commission propose, le Conseil dispose" – the Commission proposes and the Council puts into force.

This institutional mechanism differs from any classical decision-making machinery. The Commission is not a secretariat in the traditional sense of the co-ordinating bodies of international institutions and the Council is not a traditional cabinet, neither is it a classical international conference. The Council too is a collegiate organ where the individual national political wills must come to a joint position. Between the Commission and the Council and within the Council itself, there is a process of constant dialogue and confrontation. It is a process of top-level decision-making debate which is dissimilar from that of any normal parliamentary, congressional or conference system.

Like the institutional mechanism itself this process of constant dialogue is atypical. Because it is atypical, unfamiliar, it risks being misunderstood and, worse still, not accepted. Being unfamiliar the Community institutions start with the disadvantage not having the immediate, conventional and accustomed prestige and authority of a standard national government body. They thus have a good deal more explaining to do. Not surprisingly the Commission has a reputation among journalists and others for its openness.

This is where information policy enters the scene as a vital instrument. Atypicality conditions the degree of acceptance of a decision-making body by the recipient public. Information's task is to make it familiar and to bring the public into close contact with its aims and activities - in fact to involve the public. I have mentioned that the Community system is a process of constant dialogue. The general task, therefore, of an information policy is to keep the public in touch with every stage of this dialogue. At times, it may be a slow dialogue, horribly slow -- which is one of the chief criticisms levied at the present Community mechanism. The Commission, for instance, makes a proposal to the Council. It may be some months before the Council starts discussing the proposal -- and discussion may continue sporadically for a long time. It is necessary at each stage of the dialogue for the information policy to pick up the threads and keep the public informed of the process as a whole in its fullest context.

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Here arises the question of "wood and trees". There is constant risk that the overall aims of the Community will be lost from sight under a welter of detail. The six member states have established gradual economic integration as their path towards unity, political unity. Inevitably, therefore, the Community's public image has been in danger of emerging as something econometric; mathematic, judicial – in other words soulless and a far cry from the supposed vehicle of political unity of European states and peoples. A basic task, therefore, of an information policy in the European Community is to make clear that the heavy diet of economics and legal phraseology does have a living, human context and that it is, after all dealing with human beings and a fundamentally new approach to their political organisation. When briefing people on tariff quotas, transport regulations or common motor-car exhaust requirements one is in constant danger of losing the overall objective even though these awfull details would only occur in a situation where economic integration was serious and not just philosophical hot air.

The Commission, as the part of the institutional machine which has the power of initiative, is the mobile element of the Community. And, significantly, it is the Commission which has the prime task of information. The basic job of this information policy is to explain <u>why</u> a particular initiative is being taken.

5– Let us take a test example of a proposal to harmonize the price of a particular agricultural product within the Community.

The first job of the information arm of the Commission is to state <u>why</u> the proposal is being made. The underlying aim the Community has before it is union of the peoples and states of the Six. The technique used is that of economic union – a common market. There cannot be a real commun market unless trading conditions in agricultural produce between the member states are harmonized. The only feasible way of doing this is by having common price levels.

It will then be asked <u>why</u> a particular price level has been proposed. This must be explained. It must then be explained <u>how</u> the proposal would affect farmers in each different part of the Community and <u>how</u> indeed it might affect other groups throughout the Community. For it is not only the farmers who must be told <u>why</u> and <u>how</u> a particular Community initiative is being taken but all others as well.

It now becomes clear that this is a complicated information excercise across sectors and across member states at the same time, and an excercise which must constantly make certain of keeping the subject firmly in its wider, fundamental context - the basic aim of constructing a common market. And this continues throughout each stage of the "constant dialogue" which carries a proposal through to the final decision and execution stages.

In minor key, the task of those handling information policy is to ensure that a particular excercise in the Community is rendered as <u>comprehensible</u> as possible. With a great deal of the subject matter in hand the task is hardly easy - jargon has to be fought but often jargon is a temptingly facile shorthand. But to a great extent one is already forced to try and seek the necessary combination of clarity and accuracy by having to maintain the subject under discussion firmly in its basic context of the overall aims of the Community. In detail, there is the enormous variety of organisations, groups, journals etc., that require a ready flow of information from the Community on a wide range of topics differing greatly in the level of technicality required. Such an information instrument therefore must not only be systematic but it requires a high level of technical skill and appreciation to meet the requirements of a many sided modern community with a diffuse range of cultures, political and social structures, and habits which are all slowly being forged into one single Community.

I think I have made it clear that an international organisation, especially one such as the European Economic Community in which

there is a very real relation between the new centre of debate and decision-making and the man in the street, has a great deal more self-explanation to do than does any national unit on its own.

Like a national government, it must set out the facts and the aims. It must enter into discussion of debatable points and it must discuss how the aims are conceived.

But at the same time, the international body, and particularly the European Community, must be constantly on its guard against the dangers of atypicality. Not only must it make clear how its instruments of debate and decision function, and why they have been choosen, but it must make even greater efforts to ensure that the recipients of power is kept advised of all stages and nuances of the debate. But to a greater extent than a national government, it must always keep its recipients aware of the overall context of its work as an emerging force without a soft bed of tradition on which it can rely. A difficulty here arises from the fact that the Community system is one of constant and laborious compromises. Community decisions can easily appear to the recipient, the citizen of a member state, as less decisive and politically more lack-lustre which carries the serious risk of weakening the impact of its authority. An all night Council meeting in Brussels or Luxembourg is often taken as something of a joke - perhaps because this happens so often, more probably because people still have the reflex of saying: "it's just foreigners being awkward and holding things up". If a national government meets all night solemnity reigns.

The Community, after all, is at the moment a half completed house. The roof has not yet been put on and yet a good deal of the furniture has been moved in and a growing number of activities are going on in the house which give it a real, and not just symbolic responsibility in a direct sense over peoples' everyday lives. Life is uncomfortable when it rains. It is not yet a classical political entity - and quite probably it never will be.

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Undoubtedly, as the Community grows, and as it assumes steadily larger proportions of the national sovereignty of its member states, it becomes more and more familiar to the citizens of both its own member states and to those of the rest of the world. Indeed, information activity towards non-member states is taking on increasing importance as the Community begins to take on more recognisable shape as an international entity. In one sense the growth of the Community, and thus the growth of its familiarity and identity might appear as factors that should ease the task of information policy. Not necessarily. The process of growth and change must be carefully pointed out and explained and this increasing maturity confronts information policy with a subject of growing complexity and sophistication.

As I mentioned at the outset - "an information policy is a function of the centre and shape of power". It must above all be active and skilled when there is a really marked change in that centre and shape of power. It is just now at the "half-built house" stage that the political implications of the Community are becoming really increasingly evident. On the external scale, this is because external opinion begins to think increasingly in terms of the "Community" as compared with its six individual nation stage entities. On the internal side, this is so because we are moving into the really crucial elements of economic integration (not just liberalisation of trade) and these place greater demands on the political will of the member states to pool their sovereignty. Following the trend, information politcy starts to become a more obviously political instrument in the European Community - a reflection of the shift of degree of change in power and the demand for a new refinement.

It is rather like selling a product in a market which is really a collection of sub-markets with extremely exacting rules of product-description. To make things worse the product is absolutely identical in each market. And finally, to complete the challenge and thereby introduce a sure guarantee for ulcers, the zealots in charge of production are developing and refining the product every few weeks.