

THE COMMISSION'S INFORMATION AND COMMUNICATION POLICY:

RELAY AND NETWORK POLICY

**Draft Communication from
Commissioner João de Deus Pinheiro**

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Relay and Network Policy

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SUMMARY AND PROPOSED DECISION

The Commission adopted on 30 June 1993 the principles of a new approach to information and communication (SEC(93) 916/9). This new approach included a more systematic and coherent approach to networks and relays as important instruments of information and communication strategy.

This communication recommends more effective coordination and enhanced synergy between relays. It presents operational proposals for the management of relay and network policy subject to regular review by the new information and communication Steering Committee.

COMMUNICATION FROM

Commisioner João de Deus Pinheiro

The Commission is asked to approve the attached text (The Commission's Information and Communication Policy: Relay and Network Policy) implementing in this policy area the new approach to information and communication already agreed in its strategic document of 30/6/93 (SEC(93) 916/9) and its decision on the re-organisation of DG X of 17/11/93 (SEC(93) 1662/2).

THE COMMISSION'S INFORMATION AND COMMUNICATION POLICY: RELAY AND NETWORK POLICY

1. INTRODUCTION

A relay operation in the context of information and communication policy means working with partners prepared to disseminate information, thus amplifying the information process. Where such relay partners link with other relay partners a network is created.

It is not easy to characterise a typical relay and network operation because organisational patterns differ so widely within the Member States. Experience shows that the most usual characterisation is in terms of administrative structure or the type of information activity targetted. They may be run by public or private structures. Their information priorities may range from the provision and dissemination of basic general information to the targetting of specific sectoral audiences. In some cases the Commission may be directly responsible for the initiative leading to a relay partnership or network, in others an existing relay or network may seek to work with the Commission. Networks can cover the territory of the Union, or a specific member state or have a regional dimension. Some relays have their own a specific sub-network.

2. CURRENT SITUATION

The Commission has been working with relay partners and networks over many years. Examples of important networks established through the Commission's own initiative are the European Documentation Centres in Universities and the Euro Info Centres specially targetting SMEs. Agriculture, regional development and social sectors also have well established networks. Indeed there has been a widespread tendency by Commission services to create relays and networks, either for general or specific proposes. A study made two years ago identified 54 networks linked with the Commission in one way or another.

This is a consequence of the general move towards decentralization, recognition of the impossibility of reaching micro audiences from the centre and of the general acceptance that relay and network information activity is particularly effective because it involves audiences already receptive to information regarding the Union and addresses them within an organisational framework with which they are already familiar.

In this context the trend mentioned above is in itself a positive one. Citizens have a right to expect ready access to whatever general or specialised information they may seek regarding Union matters and it is a responsibility of the Union to try to respond to such expectations. The Commission's information response will thus support the sense of citizenship envisaged in the framing of the Treaty of European Union.

In fact, even if Union Institutions seek either through representative offices or specific relay contacts to be active throughout the Member States, they can never have the resources of themselves to reach out and communicate with people at a truly local level. "Partenariat" operations represent the best way to achieve information policy objectives.

It is nevertheless indispensable that the whole relay and network investment should be seen to be the coherent expression of a shared commitment to Union objectives under a single banner.

Services have been autonomous in taking initiatives to create such operations and there has been no coordination between them in the past. It is not sure that all such existing operations are really necessary or are working adequately. Cases have been reported, for example, about regions of the Union where there are complaints that too many information agencies are in "competition", while in others there may be no adequate Union information source at all. Some confusion can also be the consequence of an insufficiently clear definition of what kind of information general and specialised partners can or should deliver.

This situation generates a fragmentation of the information process which is very negative for the image of the Commission and the Union.

Evaluation and coordination at the appropriate level are therefore needed to achieve the best use of resources and maximise effectiveness. It must be done in the context of clear and accepted goals. This paper sets out the framework for a drive both at Union level and within the Member States to enhance existing operations and to create new partnerships for information purposes.

3. OBJECTIVES

Effectiveness

For the policy to be effective, information must reach the citizens and respond to their information needs. Then the ultimate aim must be to create a situation where each citizen can feel an information source is accessible without unusual inconvenience. The networking of such sources can then give access to a full range of information, from the general to the highly specialised.

For a concrete operation to be effective, it must be conceived to achieve maximum input and added value. Terms of reference must then be clearly defined.

Objective evaluation of each one will be done, by all means available, and on the basis of a cost/benefit approach.

Coherence

Coherence is achieved through agreed goals and improved co-ordination:

- the role of each relay must be clearly defined;
- each relay outlet must be an effective tool in terms of its ability to deliver a clear, direct message to the right audience;
- relays should also be encouraged to play a role in the debate on European affairs;
- new initiatives must be appropriate and respond to clearly identified needs. They must be clearly presented in terms of overall objective target audiences and the means to be deployed. Overlapping of effort or inadequate geographic spread must not occur;
- cohesion and synergy between relays and networks must be ensured. It is already clear, that within the information relay category there are relays intended to meet general information needs and specialised information needs. But these cannot be exclusive categories. A member of a specific audience may require general information. Likewise, a member of the general public may also, on occasion, require specific information. In both cases, individuals are likely to make use of the relay network with which they are most familiar or which is easiest to access. All information relays - general or specialised - must be equipped to provide a first response to core questions of citizen concern regarding the Union. The Commission can thus ensure that the end user is not left "hanging" between two or more information relays. Cooperation and partnership between relays and networks will be organised so that questions can be directed towards the most appropriate information structure.
- partnership has to be redefined. Information provision through relays is not a one-way process. Relay relationships must be organised on contractual terms so that the Commission receives feedback from the information users reached through the partnerships.
- coordination at the appropriate level must be ensured. If the decentralised approach is to have a clear sense, then one must recognise that all information and communication activities must obey a global strategy, without this affecting a service's capacity to create and run relay and network operations.

The Commission has already decided that at central level it is for DG X to coordinate the overall operations and that it is for the Offices in the member states to carry out this task at the national level. Commission delegations in third countries have the same responsibility, as may be appropriate.

4. OPERATIONAL PROPOSALS

A first inventory of Community Information Networks ("Symbiosis" September 1992, X/C/2)* gave a clear indication of the way in which recourse to networks by DGs and Services has grown in recent years. It identified network operations divided broadly into those which perform an information relay function and those which perform a programme function. (In this context a programme relay is one established specifically to function in a Union programme context and where a public information dimension is not the primary consideration.)

A revised inventory is required which takes account of the new operations launched since then.

DG X and Commission Offices, working in partnership with DGs and Services offering significant relay experience, and particularly DG XXIII, will immediately undertake the following initiatives:

- to review, with all DGs concerned, the relays listed in the inventory with a view to promoting synergy and economies in their operational effectiveness;
- to prepare a report on the current relay situation in each Member State;
- to examine new and pending proposals by DGs and Services wishing to create a relay information network. Each such assessment must include a cost/benefit and budgetary review. This assessment experience will provide the basis for an operational manual (see below). Before any decision on the opening of a new network, DG X will consult DG XXIII and other DGs and Services hosting existing networks to see whether they might appropriately fulfil the proposed role. If the proposed role cannot be met through such an existing network, a similar assessment should be made of external organisations with established networks which could offer effective partnership.

* Distributed to all DGs and services. For additional copies tel. 99129

This work programme and an updated inventory of Union information relays will provide the background for a first report to the Steering Committee spelling out how the operational initiatives proposed below are to be implemented.

DG X will further:

- provide general management of DG X relays such as Symbiosis, DEPs, CDEs, CREs, Rural Development Information and Promotion Centres (Carrefours), Urban Local Initiative Centres;
- prepare an Operational Manual on Relays, covering issues like the provision of clear policy messages through relays, the use of emblems and titles, the nature of relay contacts, etc.;
- ensure the constant availability of an up-to-date basic information file for citizens of the Union;
- monitor and evaluate the work of relays on the basis of regular audit reports and information from Commission Offices in the Member States;
- update and maintain the Relay inventory as a basis for an information database on relays and networking.

The Commission's Offices in Member States will assist DG X and other interested DGs and Services. They will

- play a leading role in the effective co-ordination of information relays at national, regional and local levels;
- produce for each Member State by mid-1994 a guide to Union information sources;
- advise how information networking can best be extended through partnership contracts designed to make the concept of a union information source a reality at whatever local levels may be most appropriate within their core of Member State or regional responsibility;
- promote training in networking in partnership with interested DGs and services, including DG IX.

5. CONCLUSION

The Commission is invited to confirm that the approach to relay and network policy defined in this paper in terms of strategy, co-ordination and operational initiatives provides a working basis for the implementation of the relay and network aspect of its new approach to information and communication.

The Commission will be given an opportunity to consider the development of this strengthened relay and network effort on an annual basis.