

Institution: King's College London
Unit of Assessment: UoA 21
Title of case study: EC External Communication
<p>1. Summary of the impact</p> <p>Research undertaken by Christoph Meyer has had a direct impact on the European Commission's external communication policy, structures and capacities, particularly in 2008 and 2009. Policy recommendations from this research were adopted by the Commission in May 2008 and influenced its first Corporate Communication Statement of 2009. In sum, the research had a significant impact on the communication activities of more than 1900 officials, spending more than 250 million Euros annually and targeted at more than 500 million citizens of the EU, as well as foreign publics as part of the EU's external relations.</p>
<p>2. Underpinning research</p> <p>The majority of the research was undertaken by Meyer as the lead author of a major study after arriving at King's in January 2007, although it benefitted from his previous doctoral and post-doctoral research going back to 1998. The main study was commissioned by the European Commission's Directorate-General for Communication (DG COMM) and took place between May and October 2007. It gave Meyer and his co-authors, Kurpas and Brüggemann, extraordinary access to internal documents and officials in Brussels and key national capitals. The study proceeded on the basis of a rigorous methodology reflecting the state of the art in evaluating communication activities. Amongst the study's 25 separate findings, the following are the most significant:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - The EU Commission suffers from a legacy of institutional neglect for external communication visible in resourcing, recruitment, training and career progress of officials working on communication. The quality of the staff active in communication is key to working efficiently with resources and maximising impact, but the institution is suffering from a skills gap in areas such as marketing and PR, planning, web-design and web-journalism. There are hardly any officials with a background in communication studies widely defined and those who do work in this area cannot use their skills to the best advantage given considerable administrative duties. Finally, communication skills and performance are not yet sufficiently recognised and rewarded by DG and the institution, leading to recruitment and retention problems. - The institution suffers from an overly cautious approach to external communication shaped by defensive attitude towards political discourse and advocacy, rather than engaging in supposedly neutral technocratic information of citizens and stakeholders. In many cases, DGs formulated their objectives in terms of uncontroversial communication output or activities ('to communicate', 'to inform', and 'to publicise') rather than in relation to intended effects on particular target audiences. - The report noted the fragmentation of communication activities between DGs and Commissioners, aggravated by insufficient coordination and strategic guidance from the College of Commissioners. There are too many and too unspecific annual communication priorities. When comparing the alignment of DGs communication objectives with the Commission's overall priorities, the study found that some thematic priorities were oversubscribed, while others were hardly covered at all. This meant that the priorities of the individual DGs and of the Commission as a whole were not sufficiently in sync. - External communication was insufficiently tailored towards national/regional audiences, raising the risks of messages being misunderstood and problems for policies not spotted early enough in a diverse Union of nearly 500 million citizens. Generally, resources for "going local" were inadequate and spread too thinly across DGs. There was too little reflection on whether and how "the general public" can be targeted with the resources available.

3. References to the research

(a) Christoph Meyer, 'Political Legitimacy and the Invisibility of Politics: Exploring the European Union's Communication Deficit,' *Journal of Common Market Studies* 37(4), 1999, pp. 617-639.

(b) Christoph Meyer, 'Towards a European Public Sphere? Transnational investigative journalism and the European Commission's resignation,' in Baerns, B. und Raupp, J. (eds.) *Transnational Communication in Europe: Practice and Research* (Berlin: Vistas, 2000), pp. 107-127.

(c) Christoph Meyer, 'Europäische Öffentlichkeit als Watchdog: Transnationale Journalistennetzwerke und der Rücktritt der EU Kommission,' *Forschungsjournal Neue Soziale Bewegungen* 4, 2001, pp. 42-52.

(d) Christoph Meyer, *Europäische Öffentlichkeit als Kontrollsphäre: Die Europäische Kommission, die Medien und politische Verantwortlichkeit* (English title: Towards a European Public Sphere? The European Commission, the Media and Political Accountability) (Berlin: Vistas, 2002), 230pp.

(e) Christoph Meyer, W S. Kurpas and M. Brüggemann, *The External Communication Activities, Tools and Structures of the European Commission: Lessons Learnt and New Avenues* (Brussels: Centre for European Policy Studies, 2007). Originally classified report to the Screening Working Group of the European Commission, 31 October 2007, published 15 December 2011, 153 pp, available online [here](#).

(f) Christoph Meyer, 'Does European Union Politics Become Mediatized? The Case of the European Commission,' *Journal of European Public Policy* 16(7), 2009, pp. 1047-1064.

4. Details of the impact

The report was commissioned by DG-COMM for use by a cross-departmental Screening Group led by the General Secretariat, which is comparable to the UK Cabinet Office. It contained 25 key findings, which were the basis for 50 distinct recommendations (hereafter R01 - R50) (see source [1]). In response, the European Commission agreed on 15 recommendations in a Communication adopted in May 2008 [2] and whose implementation was monitored in a progress report (source [3]). Nine of these recommendations, including the most central ones, are virtually identical to the recommendations made in the report, three are closely related, while three are new (sources [3] & [4]). As discussed below, the report also influenced the Commission's first Corporate Communication Statement of 2009 (source [6]). This meant that the research had a significant impact on the communication activities of more than 1900 officials and €250 million annually spending on communication activities targeted more than 500 million EU citizens as well as some foreign publics. It also impinged at least indirectly on the intensified cooperation with member states as 14 new management partnerships were concluded between 2007 and 2009 (up from 3) (source [7]). Specific impact can be seen in the following areas:

(A) One central recommendation of the report was the creation of a communication steering board (R3) to address the problem of insufficient top-level coordination. In response, a communication steering board was created, which meets on a weekly basis and identifies the challenges at stake with a regular participation of the secretary general of the Commission (source [4]). More broadly, the Corporate Communication Statement of 2009 elevates the strategic importance of communication as integral to the institution's mission (reflecting closely the wording and thrust of the introduction to the recommendations R3 to R5) and clarifies the respective roles of the Commissioner's Cabinets, Spokesperson's service, DG COMM, the Representations and line DGs.

(B) The study also recommended reducing the number of annual Commission communication priorities, which amounted to 19 in 2007. It advised that "in an ideal scenario, the Commission would adopt no more than five communication priorities. A small number of priorities will make it more likely that the priority status can translate into a meaningful allocation of resources. Moreover, the objectives should be more clearly elaborated in terms of intended effects and based

on genuine research of stakeholders, including targeted surveys of the various publics' interest in and need for information about specific issues". The reduction of priorities was mentioned as a key goal in the implementation report [3] and was implemented gradually from 7 (2007), to 2 (2009), and 3 (2010), not counting inter-institutional priorities. The implementation report also echoes the report's language as the "definition [of priorities] should be based on research among stakeholders, including targeted surveys of the various audiences" (source [3]).

(C) Thirteen of the report's recommendations (primarily R43-50, but also R10-12) focused explicitly on different ways in which EU representations communication activities could be strengthened, most importantly by giving them additional resources for a range of tasks, some short, others more long-term. The report thus helped to make the case for continuing an already existing pilot-scheme for some key representations and extending it further political reporting level and contacts with the media (source [4]). The progress report highlights as a corporate objective to redeploy 10 percent of the posts currently devoted to communication activities and make them available to the Representations, to corporate communication activities, and to the general redeployment pool [3]. This resulted in the redeployment of 5 posts to representations and 25 translation posts to support the 'going local' (report's recommendations R2, R43 and R50).

(D) In order to address the substantial skills shortage across the Commission given the legacy of institutional neglect, the report made a number of recommendations (R27-30) to improve the professionalization of communication through training and career progression as well as through targeted recruitment of communication specialists. This translated directly into the Commission's overarching recommendation 9 "Develop Communication Skills" and specific recommendations focused on an increased range of tailored staff training with both short and long-term opportunities (e.g. 'part-time degrees') and the need to make training sessions sufficiently attractive in terms of career progression and time-management (source [3]). As a result a working Group within DG COMM has been set up to develop training paths per job function in the area of communication of DG COMM and to develop a 'communication professionalization programme' for the whole Commission. In order to recruit more communication specialists DG COMM organised a competition for a temporary posts (33T/COMM/08), and further competitions were run for a number of posts in 2008 on "Information, Communication and Media" (EPSO/AD/94/07) at AD5 level and in 2009 on "Communication et information" organised at AST3 level (Competition EPSO/AST/37/07).

5. Sources to corroborate the impact

- [1] Commissioned report available from [CEPS website](#) has been downloaded 1083 times up until 5 April June 2013.
- [2] Information note to the College from President Barroso and Vice-President Wallström on the Screening of Communication Activities, 10 March 2009, SEC(2009) 313/2.
- [3] A Commission working document from 17 September 2009, named "follow-up table to SEC 2008 541" summarises what action has been taken in response to the recommendations made by the screening group and contained in SEC(2008)541. This internal document is confidential, but available for audit purposes on request.
- [4] Email communication from Senior Official of the European Commission, DG COMM [confirms impact and breadth of Meyer's research].
- [5] Guidelines on Cooperation in the Area of External Communication (2009).
- [6] Corporate Communication Statement of the European Commission - SEC(2009)313 of 10.3.2009
- [7] Political declaration on "Communicating Europe in Partnership" signed by the Parliament, Council and Commission on 22.10.2008