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EU communication to the public: Exacerbating mistrust instead of bringing Europeans together

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Abstract:

Mistrust of the European Union is increasing—but why? EU officials claim it is because insufficient information is creating a gulf between EU institutions and citizens. However, we argue in this paper that citizens mistrust the EU because it has sacrificed the will of the people on the altar of governance. If this is the case, there is little point in trying to convince citizens that a union built up without them is democratic. On the other hand, if we look at the lessons from the debate on the 2005 EU referendum, and if we therefore accept that democracy is an integrative battle that demands citizens’ participation, then we can put forward a different communication policy for the EU. We refer to this new approach as institutional communication, where the aim is to produce conflict, which we consider to be a “deliberative” approach, in contrast to the “marketing” approach where the aim is to produce consent.

According to Eurobarometer surveys¹ commissioned by the European institutions themselves, 67 percent of citizens think their voice is not heard in Europe.² As a result, only 43 percent of the electorate voted in the 2014 European parliamentary elections.³ The skeptical indifference of the 1980s has gradually given way, on one hand, to a reasoned protest that was expressed during debates on the European Constitutional Treaty—which is good for the democratic life of the European Union (EU) because there is no such thing as a democracy without opposition. However, on the other hand, it has also given life to movements that reject the very idea of Europe and are demanding the dismantlement of the EU. Brexit is the most visible sign of this.

Communication—A democratic issue

¹Eurobarometer surveys consist of asking the same questions (but in translation) to representative samples in each country of the EU. Like any survey, they are not irrefutable proof, but are the record of a response to a question that interests the European institutions at a given time. Moreover, because of their European dimension, they produce an average that does not mean very much because there are large disparities between countries. Nevertheless, the repetition of the questions can sometimes allow trends to be observed over time (for example, the increase in mistrust of the institutions).

²Eurobarometer survey 79, conducted in spring 2013.

³The official EU turnout figure was 42.54 percent (more than 74 percent in Malta, less than 24 percent in Poland).

Against this backdrop, why are we interested in communication? Would introducing an effective communications policy in Brussels not be enough to suddenly reconcile citizens with the European framework? No, of course it would not. Communication is not propaganda and European citizens are not sheep who can be won over simply by cozying up to them. Is this crisis the symptom of a generalized showbiz society, of a society where direct access to facts is blurred by access through digital tools that eliminate the barrier between the virtual and the reality, creating a sham that dispossesses the citizen of their critical capabilities? No, that is not the case either. The growth of extreme right-wing parties as well as social movements such as the Indignados and Nuit debout indicates that citizens are not suffering the crisis without protesting. So why should we be interested in communication? In simple terms, we should be interested because communication and modern democracy are connected. Both of them seek to create meaning between humans who are equal, free, and radically different from each other. Both reject violence and aim to build a common reality. Furthermore, in very concrete terms, the democracy of the masses (millions of citizens) is simply not possible without a form of communication that makes it possible to address all of the people. The fact that the written press, television, the Internet and so on allow politicians to address their electorate and enable community activists to engage the institutions is what enables democracy to exist. European democracy is therefore fragile. Unsuitable communication can only weaken it further. Already, 60 percent of citizens do not trust the EU⁴. Faced with this crisis of legitimacy, the EU is seeking to “bring Europeans together,” entrusting this task to communications specialists who endeavor to use marketing tools to achieve this goal, based on the understanding that marketing is a technology conceived to match supply and demand. But this strategy is ineffective. Since 2001, Euro skepticism has not decreased, but grown. Why?

Two fundamental weaknesses in EU communication to the public

There are undoubtedly dozens of possible explanations, but two are evident to us: the inappropriateness of the methods used and strategic blindness.

– *Marketing: an unsuitable method.* The Directorate General Communication is an EU service with 500 full-time employees and an annual budget of approximately 100 million euros. It uses the full range of contemporary communications tools: electronic communications, audiovisual methods, paper, events, and so on. (Dacheux 2016). In simple terms, these tools are being used to implement a method, marketing, that is not an intellectual form of communication technology, but an art of persuasion. The aim of persuasion is to convince, to make people think like the persuader. By contrast, communication seeks to preserve the difference in a spirit of equality and liberty. Persuasion is legitimate and necessary during an election period, but it is dangerous the rest of the time because it aims to build a consensus, whereas the essence of democracy is “dissensus” (Mouffe 2016). The public and legitimate expression of disagreement is the hallmark of democracy (Lefort 1986) and it is the pursuit of a single, unique opinion that signals undemocratic regimes. Furthermore, persuasion relies on the credibility of the originator of the message (the persuader) and on the knowledge of those decrypting it (the persuaded). Just as you cannot persuade a fisherman that fish live in the sky, you cannot persuade citizens who are increasingly well educated and informed that the European framework is developing under the best possible auspices in the best of all worlds. At the start of 2015, all citizens saw how the EU imposed an austerity policy on Greece that the Greek people had explicitly rejected in a referendum.

⁴Eurobarometer survey 79, conducted in spring 2013.

– *Strategic blindness*. Wanting to bring European institutions closer to the citizens of Europe is an objective that is impossible to achieve. If Europe is democratic, it will be the citizens who make Europe effective, and as a consequence, there is nothing to be gained from getting closer to the citizens themselves; if Europe is technocratic, it will be the elected representatives and officials who make Europe, and publicly setting the objective of getting closer to the citizens is a fundamental error that shows everyone that Europe is being created without its citizens, without democratic legitimacy, while efforts are being made to convince them that the opposite is true. In this situation, far from reinforcing the legitimacy of the institutions, current communication to the public is only making them weaker. A new approach must therefore be developed in order to avoid the rejection of democratic institutions.

Two models of communication to the public

In this respect, the EU is, in effect, uncovering a phenomenon that affects all European democracies: the growing ineffectiveness of communication to the public in legitimizing the institutions carrying it out. As Mergier (2014) explains, an institution's communication is not merely an instrument for accompanying public policy, it is an institutional act in itself. In other words, when an institution's communication is no longer effective, it is the institution itself that loses its effectiveness. It is not simply about understanding what institutions do in terms of communication, but understanding the impact that communication has on the institutions (Ollivier-Yaniv and Utard 2014). At European level as well as at national and local levels, marketing-guided communication to the public results in two reactions that are weakening democratic institutions: mistrust and disconnection. In seeking to make citizens endorse decisions that have been taken without them, institutional communication feeds the irritation of educated people who have multiple information sources at their disposal to form their opinions. By not covering the different positions and not publicizing the political conflict in the general interest, communication to the public settles on reporting only the final decision. In doing so, it proceeds with a naturalization of the decision, which no longer appears to be the legitimate outcome of the political debate but the inevitable outcome of an administrative process that totally eludes the citizen. Feeling only the recipients and no longer the authors of the law (Habermas 1997), citizens will mistrust a political institution that shuns democratic debate. Likewise, by breaking down a heterogeneous population into homogenous target groups, the marketing conducted by European public policy adds to the distension of a civic link created by communitarian allegiances. It appears that this policy is essentially - the opposite of marketing: a move away from differences to find common ground. The strategy therefore needs to be changed - but how? Perhaps by identifying two opposing forms of communication to the public (table 1):

- the *deliberative approach*, which is a form of communication to the public that seeks to find common good and consists of making information publicly available (access to information is essential for good debate), constructing disagreements, and the dialogical approach (once points of agreement are identified, a rational debate can be developed that seeks to find consensus on these points);
- and the *persuasive approach* to communication to the public, which aims to find political consent and consists of political symbolism (which aims for cohesion), negotiation (which seeks a common agreement that maintains the singular interest of the negotiators), and political persuasion (which seeks adhesion in the same way that political marketing does).

Table 1 – Two approaches to communication to the public

French	English
L'approche délibérative	Deliberative approach
L'approche persuasive	Persuasive approach
Composantes	Characteristics
– La publicité de l'information	– Publicizing information
– L'approche dialogique	– The dialogical approach
– La construction des désaccords	– Construction of disagreements
– Négociation politique	– Political negotiation
– Marketing politique	– Political marketing
– Symbolique politique	– Political symbolism
Objectif	Objective
Faire émerger une culture commune	Draw out a common culture
Obtenir un accord	Gain consensus
Stratégie	Strategy
Créer un conflit intégrateur	Produce an integrative battle
Valoriser son point de vue	Promote a point of view
Vision de la démocratie	Vision of democracy
Participative (les citoyens doivent être associés à l'élaboration des normes qui les gouvernent)	Participatory (citizens must be connected to the setting of the laws that govern them)
Technocratique (la démocratie est un ensemble de dispositifs – dont certains peuvent être délibératifs – pilotés par des élites choisies par les électeurs)	Technocratic (democracy is a set of measures—some of which may be deliberative—driven by an elite chosen by the electorate)

The persuasive approach of marketing communication currently being used by the EU and the majority of local authorities is dangerous for democracy. In effect, marketing communication “is distinguished from all other types of communication in its need for effectiveness. This need drives the creator to produce messages oriented toward the desired interpretation by multiplying the signs that form the most obvious pathway possible to it” (Coutant 2004). Seeking to limit the interpretation tends to discourage critical thinking. In a democracy, however, it is critical thinking that makes it possible to fight accepted notions, the creation of scapegoats, which can be so easy in times of crisis. Similarly, the intrusive nature of marketing communication poses a problem in the public space. It invades everything, from cinema screens to restaurant placemats and city walls. Marketing communication creates permanent background noise that we have learnt to zap away. In learning to no longer take account of the signs that surround us, we are, at the same time, becoming increasingly oblivious to our environment, and less capable of opening ourselves up to innovation. Furthermore, the use of marketing communication involves professionalizing the communication function of the organizations that adopt it (political parties, non-governmental organizations [NGOs], and so on). This professionalization transforms the communications policy into professional knowledge, when it is actually a vital civic competence. In other words, marketing communication is not poisoning political communication, it is suffocating the citizen. Persuasive, intrusive, simplistic, and professional, marketing communication tends to impose a model where citizens are no longer critical subjects who feed the political debate, but targets validating the ideas that others have for them (table 2).

Table 2 – Dangers and ineffectiveness of the marketing approach for European communication to the public

French	English
Les dangers	Dangers
Les raisons de l'inefficacité	Reasons for ineffectiveness
Séductrice, elle tend à limiter l'esprit critique	Seductive, it tends to limit critical thinking
Les citoyens ont appris à ne plus la percevoir (exposition sélective) et à s'en protéger (zapping).	Citizens have learnt to no longer see it (selective exposure) and to protect themselves from it (zapping).
Intrusive, elle conduit au repli sur soi, à une fermeture à l'autre	Intrusive, it leads to inward-looking attitudes and a closed attitude to alternatives
Les individus sont de plus en plus formés et informés donc plus aptes à développer une réception critique	Individuals are increasingly educated and informed so more capable of developing a critical eye
Simplificatrice, elle ouvre la voie au populisme et à la fabrication de boucs émissaires	Simplistic, it opens the door to populism and the creation of scapegoats
L'individualisation, d'une part, et la pluriculturalisation, d'autre part, rendent de plus en plus difficile une adhésion de masse à un même positionnement	Individualization, on one hand, and multiculturalization, on the other, make it increasingly difficult to bring about mass adherence to the same position
Professionnelle, elle transforme une compétence citoyenne fondamentale en savoir-faire monnayable	Professional, it transforms a fundamental civic competence into expertise with a monetary value
Elle n'est pas appréciée car assimilée à de la propagande	It is not well received because it is equated to propaganda

The target audience is uneasy as a result, not wanting to be used as a target, but seeking to be recognized as a complete citizen (Honneth 2002), distrusting marketing communication, and by extension the institutions that use it,⁵ and looking for forms of participatory democracy that include it in the decision-making process (Blondiaux 2008). It is therefore understandable why marketing communication is becoming less effective (it no longer leads to adherence in a multicultural and individualized society) and more of an irritant (it is viewed as propaganda that does not respect the engagement of the citizen). Conversely, the deliberative approach to political communication seeks to revive citizens' critical thinking. It comes back to the very essence of democracy: the permanent disagreement about what is the common good. It therefore pursues a totally different objective. Instead of selling a project, it creates a shared civic culture through the creation of conflict.

A new approach to communication to the public is futile without a profound change in political practices

However, this deliberative approach to political communication cannot resolve all the problems of democracy. Saying that it is essential to take an interest in the problems around communication in order to understand the democratic deficit of European societies does not in any way mean this is enough to resolve the communication problems and end the democratic crisis. Communication is not limited to political communication and, similarly, politics are not resolved through communication, they also need action. This reminder is especially relevant

⁵ Seventy-six percent of French people consider advertising invasive. As a result, it has a poor image (average rating of 4.3 out of 10). However, the work on persuasive communication shows that the capacity of a message to be convincing also depends on the trust one has in the source of the message. As the trust in advertising is low, the chances of persuasion are low as well. Source: annual advertising and society study carried out by the Agence Australie advertising agency based on a 2012 TNS Sofres survey.

in the case of the European framework because not only does it suffer from growing misunderstanding between the Brussels elite and the citizens of the EU, but also, above all, from a critical political deficit marked by the absence of a broad and popular public sphere (Fossum and Schellsinger 2008). This fundamental weakness does not appear impossible to overcome, because while the EU does not have a European public sphere equivalent to the national public sphere of the members of the EU, there are European public spheres that are largely sectorial and dependent on institutions in which political stakeholders lead European debates on European issues: the Platform of European Social NGOs, the Permanent Forum of European Civil Society, and so on. There are also international media organizations that cover the European territory, some of which have been created and/or financed to promote European citizenship (Cafébabel, Euronews, and so on). As Habermas underlines and Ferry (1989) also points out, national public spheres are ultimately opening up to other public spheres, whether as a result of major events such as demonstrations against the war in Iraq or because of a gradual opening up of local media to EU issues, even though the coverage of Europe is still developing very much through a national prism (Stepińska 2011). Nevertheless, this gradual construction of a public sphere to the dimensions of the EU cannot on its own resolve the EU's democratic deficit, namely, the misunderstanding between the citizens and the European framework. This is caused by other political factors as well, for example, the blurred lines surrounding the geographic demarcation of the European territory of the future or the sacrifice, in 2007, of the will of the people on the altar of governance, which underpinned the Lisbon Treaty. Furthermore, reflecting on the conditions for realizing a fully democratic European Union, in addition to the creation of a European public sphere, Habermas (2011) highlights four conditions:

- a European constitution voted on by referendum. The failure in 2005 appears to have moved this prospect considerably further away;
- the creation of a common political culture. However, for the time being, the citizens greatly disregard the functioning of the European institutions;
- a cross-border system of party politics. At present, only the Greens and the Socialists are organized at European level;
- a European civil society. This is emerging because much of the non-profit sector has a European network: the European Women's Lobby, the European Migrants Forum, and so on. However, its emergence remains very much sector-based and limited to the top of the network, although the European Union is trying to accelerate this process through European Citizens' Initiatives (ECIs) (Dufrasne 2016).

The political conditions for resolving the democratic deficit are therefore far from being met. Crucially, this democratic deficit is not just a political one, it is also connected with economic and symbolic causes. From an economic perspective, the implementation of an ordoliberal policy imposed on the people (Greece, Italy, etc.) against their will has profoundly increased Europeans' mistrust. This is emphasized by the fact that European public opinion is two thirds in favor of more welfare state instead of the market, as underlined by the European Values Study⁶ (Gonthier 2015). On a symbolic level, the last utopia (Wolton 1993) that the EU represents is slowly turning into a globalized techno-liberal ideology (the knowledge society) challenged by a xenophobic nostalgia that seeks to compensate for the economic insecurity of the global market with the security of identity. By taking account of the complexity of the EU's democratic deficit, it immediately becomes clear that European communication to the

⁶ The European Values Study program facilitates the detailed analysis of the economic attitudes of Europeans and their development in the long term. This study shows that two thirds of Europeans are committed to the welfare state and this commitment, far from diminishing, is steadily rising (Gonthier 2015).

public is not the turnkey solution. Employing experts in the art of consent to devise eye-catching messages is not enough to spontaneously strengthen democracy. It actually has the very opposite effect. By insisting at all costs on imposing a liberal project put together without the citizens, the EU will only transform muffled hostility into open dissent, cautious mistrust into blind defiance, and enthusiastic support into rational protest. With such a profound and multidimensional democratic deficit, any communication policy that seeks to bring the citizens of Europe together is doomed to failure: it will only widen the gap that it claims to bridge. As a consequence, if the European institutions genuinely want to find a way out of the democratic stalemate, they must address the political, economic and symbolic roots of the evil from which the EU is suffering. To do this, they must change the methods they use. Instead of continuing to use the Monnet method of small technocratic steps to create a de facto Union, the only legitimate method in a democracy is to engage the citizens in the discussions on the envisaged solutions. The role that deliberative communication to the public plays in this participatory approach is a small but essential one: it encourages an integrative conflict scaled to the dimensions of the Union.

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