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The Great Non-Communicator? The Mass Communication Deficit of the European Parliament and its Press Directorate*

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Abstract

This article was prompted by the poor turnout for the 1999 European Parliament elections and the failure of MEPs since to address effectively key causes of electoral apathy. It focuses on the extent to which the Parliament's press and information directorate, DG-III, and to a lesser extent, MEPs, are successful in handling their relationships with the mass media, given that the latter is a crucial means of communicating images of the Parliament to the electorate. Having unearthed serious inadequacies in the communication performance of the Parliament, the article investigates the causes of these and the likelihood of their being addressed. The article largely reflects the situation with regard to press and information policy as far as it could be discerned up and until March 2002 (with the exception of the website and external office updates which were undertaken during 2003). Among other things, it paves the way for further studies of the relationship between the European Parliament and the media which will focus on the recent 2004 elections.

Introduction

The claim by the European Parliament (EP) to be a crucial representative of the people of Europe on matters discussed and decided at the EU level is built on the assertion that it fills some of the most important gaps in the Union's

* Interviews are the basis for most of the sources for this article, and requests for anonymity have been respected. Any opinions expressed by Aileen McLeod within this article are made in a personal capacity and are independent of organizations for which she has worked.

democratic process (cumulatively amounting to the 'democratic deficit'), created by:

- the inability of national parliaments to represent effectively and adequately all of their voters' interests relating to EU issues;
- the tendency of the Council of Ministers frequently to reach compromises that are more the result of inter-state *realpolitik* than of any direct representation of many of their voters' concerns;
- and the continuing unelected nature of the Commission.

But if it is truly to fill these gaps, it must be able to connect effectively enough with a sufficient number of its electorate to make the citizens of the EU as a whole feel that they have an institution which they can use. They must believe that, through it, they can try to promote and protect those of their interests over which it now exercises real influence and control. In the media-dominated world of the early twenty-first century, a crucial part of its ability to make such connections is dependent on the quality of its own press and information services, as well as on the efforts of MEPs themselves to become fully media-literate. If it has serious deficiencies in either or both of these areas, then it must expect to do poorly at European elections. This is irrespective of whether it is faced with the obstructionist tactics of Eurosceptic media organs (Anderson and Weymouth, 1999; Anderson, 2004), or rivalry on the part of other EU institutions which might wish to steal all of the 'glory' concerning EU policy successes for themselves. It is no good claiming to have a good story to tell if there is a shortage of effective storytellers to spread the message.

As has been pointed out many times previously by politicians, the press and academics alike, there are a number of factors that make it difficult to interest the press and the public in states like the UK in the EP's affairs. These include: the complex nature of the Parliament's own decision-making procedures; the substantial length of time which it generally takes to reach decisions via those procedures; the fact that it lacks any single interest-focusing individual with the power of a head of government within it; and the fact that it still remains without any significant power in key policy areas such as defence. This is even before the complex technicalities of many of the issues it discusses are considered. While a minority of issues laid before it are contentious enough to attract significant press interest on their own (the Buttiglione affair in 2004, for example), for the most part the EP needs a truly outstanding media and information operation if it is to succeed adequately in communicating its importance and relevance to voters *throughout* the EU.

One of the things this article will do, therefore, is to investigate in much more detail aspects of a question that was asked originally in Anderson and

Weymouth (1999). That focused on the extent to which EU institutions such as the Parliament were to blame for limited and adverse media coverage of their activities, as opposed to the media themselves.

In other words, the intention is to investigate the strengths and weaknesses of the provider side of the EP's communication relationship with the media and public of the EU. As will be explained later, the other side of the equation – that of the *receivers* of the Parliament's attempts to communicate – suggests that for the most part it is notably ineffective in persuading the media in 'problem' states like Britain (and even in historically pro-European Germany) to run more than a small number of stories relating to its activities. There is not the space within a single article to analyse in detail the receiver side of the equation as well.

The primary focus here will be on the effectiveness of the EP's press and information service as a means of trying to communicate with its voters. The article will focus to a lesser extent also on the distinct role of MEPs. In addition, an attempt will be made to assess the extent to which bodies other than the Parliament may impact positively or negatively on its attempts to convey information effectively about itself.

Finally, where relevant, remedies for defects in Parliament's efforts to communicate will be mentioned.

I. Methodological Approach

This article is based very substantially on a series of semi-structured interviews with senior and middle-ranking DG-III personnel and MEPs conducted by the CPLE[1] in Brussels and elsewhere (DG-III was the Parliament's press and information directorate during the interview period). These took place between December 2000 and October 2001 and were supplemented by subsequent data updates. While there have been some changes within the press and information services since that time (the former head of the Rapid Response Unit has now moved over to head up the Visitors' Service, for example), most of what is revealed here remains directly relevant. There is no evidence to suggest that the dominant mindsets of MEPs or officials have been altered in any serious way by those changes that have occurred.

Extended interviews were conducted with the directors responsible for press and audio-visual, and the national offices of the Parliament, which are responsible for locally based press and information operations. The overall Director of DG-III was not available for interview, but his opinions on the appropriateness and effectiveness of the specific jobs that his directorate were

[1] The acronym CPLE stands for the Centre for the Study of Popular Legitimacy in Europe, which is a small specialist research unit run by one of the authors.

doing were noted during December 2000.[2] In addition to these senior officials, a variety of middle-ranking officials was interviewed, including the then heads of the Rapid Reaction Unit, Audio-Visual Unit and the national offices in London and Edinburgh. A number of more junior officials were also interviewed. The number and range of those interviewed was sufficient to obtain a clear and detailed picture of the views and performance of the senior management of DG-III. It was sufficient also to detect the presence of any significant dissenting views within other key levels of the organization. A number of confidential views were offered which inform the judgements made within the article, but which are obviously not quoted. Some relevant officials from other directorate generals were also interviewed confidentially.

While DG-III for the most part made itself very open to interview, MEPs proved to be a very different proposition. On a previous occasion during spring/summer 1999 one of the authors had contacted 87 members with a short survey. This asked them to detail the extent to which voters felt sufficiently connected with the European Parliament to contact them for assistance on EU-related matters. Despite the help of parliamentary officials, who provided an internal posting box for the return of the questionnaires, only 22 were returned, of which four were spoiled. Of those members allegedly most interested in the Parliament's communications policy, very few agreed to be interviewed during 2000–01, and not all of those who did subsequently turned up.

Ultimately, the team managed to speak to only ten of the most relevant members and only three key members provided lengthy interviews. Other interviews, though short and to the point, were nevertheless useful. In the case of one key member who successfully avoided being interviewed, the team were able to secure a detailed statement of his views through other legitimate means. Comments made by some of those MEPs who did agree to speak to the team led to the conclusion that the apparent evasiveness of many members was representative of the Parliament's unwillingness to face up to the most serious deficiencies in its communications policy. This conclusion was supported by some DG-III officials. As will be shown later, MEPs' behaviour during key debates on communications matters further confirmed this impression.

Interview results were combined with the Parliament's own documentation (as listed in the references) to provide a full picture of its current efforts to communicate with the electorate. The press and information directorate's description of its strengths and weaknesses was compared with documentation produced by MEPs analysing the same, for example. In-house views on the European Parliament's communication performance were further

[2] They were revealed when, along with one of the authors, he gave oral evidence to the European Parliament's Committee on Culture, Youth Education, the Media and Sport.

compared with those of senior Commission officials, which were canvassed via semi-structured interviews. Five Commission officials with important roles to play concerning information strategy were interviewed. They included the then overall head of the Commission's press and communications operations in Brussels, the then head of the Commission's London representation, and the official responsible for monitoring the information provider networks within the UK. Additional perspectives on the matter were analysed within relevant Commission documentation.

The effectiveness of the Europarl website was assessed via detailed testing of its ease of use, attractiveness of site design and the extent to which it is likely to invite regular story uptakes from journalists in busy and pressured newsrooms. Five experienced print, broadcast and online journalists updated this testing in March 2003.

The UK is often cited as the biggest problem for the Parliament to tackle in getting its various messages across to the electorate, and the figures on electoral turnout certainly support this view (see below). For this reason it will be taken as the primary reference point where Member States are considered within the discussion. However, in focusing on the UK in this way, it should not be forgotten that, as Media Tenor (1999) points out, opinion polls conducted after the 1999 elections to the European Parliament exposed widespread ignorance across Europe 'about the composition, personalities and influence of the European Parliament'. For example, one poll, conducted by FORSA, revealed that only 16 per cent of Germans interviewed were able to remember any political activity engaged in by the European Parliament. Looking at the situation in 1999. Media Tenor noted that:

> Two important features common to the reporting on domestic politics in all European countries – i.e. continuous information and personalisation – are lacking when it comes to the European Parliament.[3]

The overall performance of the European Parliament as a communicator within a significantly Eurosceptic state like the UK was assessed simply but effectively. First, the substantial scale of the improvements needed within the current operation was demonstrated by showing: the extent to which voters chose not to turn out in 1999 in the UK and other Member States; and the results from detailed sample monitoring of European Parliament coverage in the UK media shortly before the election and subsequent follow-up monitoring, which showed that the EP was achieving very little coverage in the UK (McLeod, 2003). Second, the extent to which the European Parliament's communications efforts were falling short of the scale of improvements needed was

[3] The relevant section of the article can be accessed free of charge at «http://www.mediatenor.com/index.html».

exposed through the process outlined above of interviewing and documentary analysis.

The article largely reflects the situation with regard to press and information policy as far as it could be discerned up to March 2002 (with the exception of the website and external office updates which were undertaken during 2003). Its findings offer some significant insights as to why the European Parliament attracted so low an electoral turnout in 1999, and as to why its prospects for improving this situation in time for the 2004 election appeared slim.

II. A Summary of the EP's Press and Information Activities

The European Parliament attempts to convey information about itself, its activities and its relevance to people's everyday lives via a number of channels. At the time of the interview programme these principally comprised:

- its information services provided on the Europarl website;
- press briefings and statements to the press by the Brussels arm of the press and information directorate, DG-III, and by its national and regional representations within the Member States;
- its Visitors' Programme;[4]
- events organized within Member States by the external offices to help increase public awareness of the European Parliament;
- assistance with and encouragement of broadcast media coverage of the EP's work that DG-III's specialist audio-visual unit provides;
- and the press, PR and representational functions undertaken by MEPs and their political groupings.

Many MEPs see themselves very clearly as the primary communicators with the electorate, with DG-III being required largely to act as a facilitator (Office of the Secretary General, 2000). They continue also to see the Commission as having an important role to play in communicating information about the EU to the citizens of Europe. For this reason, together with preoccupations with budgetary restraint, the funds made available to DG-III are small relative to the size of the information communication task that confronts the EU currently. It has to compete for parliamentary funds for press and information policy with both the Commission and the political groupings. Most of DG-III's funds are spent on its Visitors' Programme, as the pie chart showing the distribution of expenditure for the year 2000 illustrates (Figure 1).

[4] A long-established programme of the European Parliament, which provides for the financing of visits to the Parliament by EU citizens in order that they can see the institution at work.

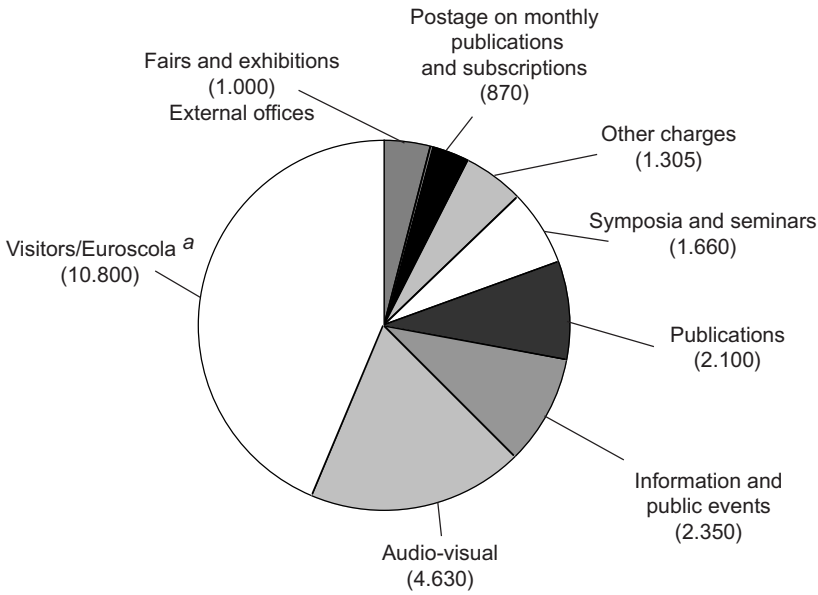

Figure 1: The Distribution of DG-III's Budget for the Year 2000 (€'000)
Source: Office of the Secretary General (2000).
Note: [a] Euroscola is a role-playing game organized by the European Parliament to promote the idea of the European Union among high-school pupils.

The extent to which the European Parliament successfully performs the various communication activities for which it is responsible via DG-III and other means is evaluated in the discussion that follows. The structure of DG-III as at June 2001 is shown in Figure 2, which is based on a diagram supplied by its Director of Press and Audio-Visual.

III. The EP's Press and Information Policy: Weaknesses and Constraints

Introduction

One of the many problems that the European Parliament has is that, prior to and during the period of study, some key newspapers were withdrawing correspondents from its Brussels operation. This reduces the opportunities it has to secure publicity for its decisions within the media concerned. It means also that the roles of the national European Parliament offices and of the internet press service become even more crucial. Unfortunately, during the period of this study, the European Parliament was found to be significantly deficient in both its internet press service and, even more so, in the way in which it runs

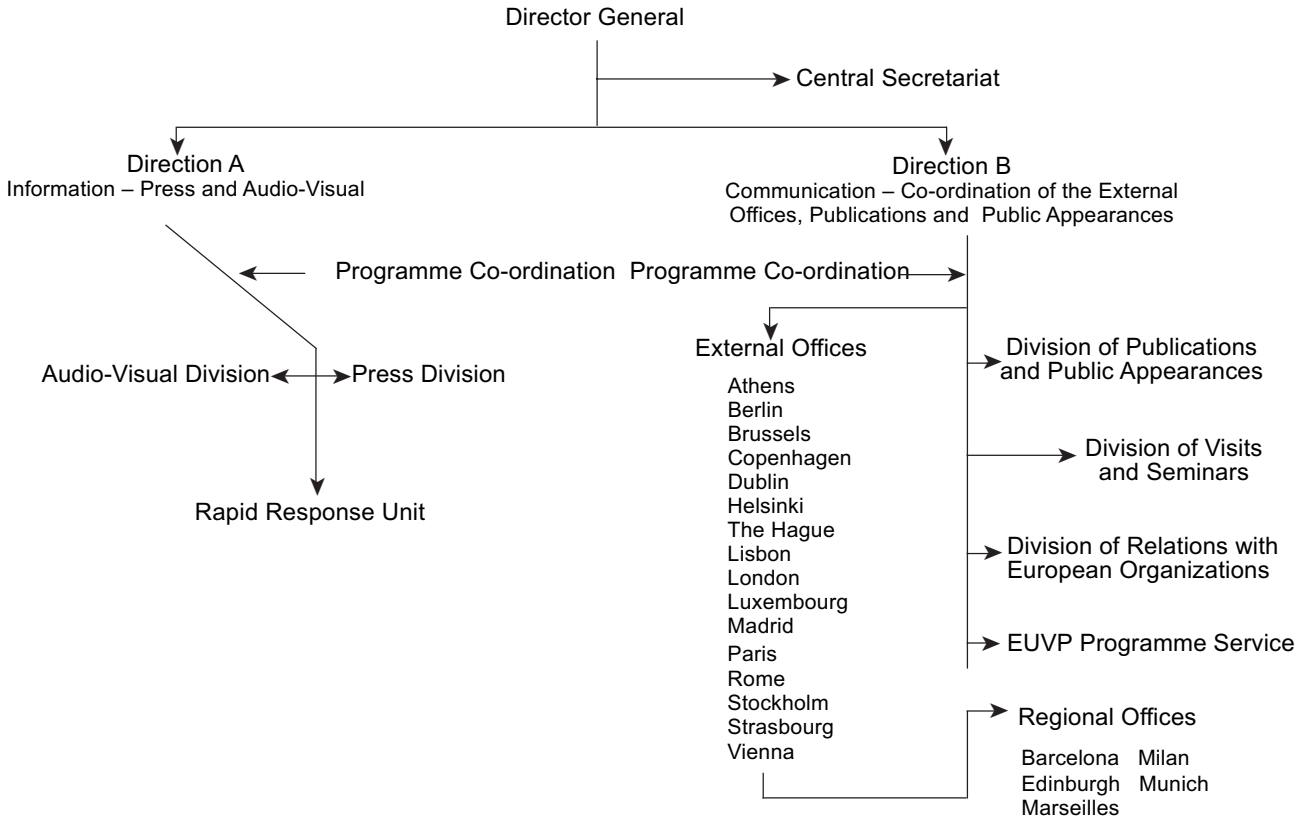

Figure 2: DG-III's Organizational Structure as at June 2001
Source: Based on a Diagram Supplied by DG-III

its national and regional offices. A selection of the faults in each is outlined below.

In considering the information that follows, the scale and general adequacy of the EP's press and information activities has always to be considered in relation to the massive amount of 'catch-up' that needs to occur in terms of successfully communicating the Parliament's actions to the more sceptical parts of the EU's electorate. This is most particularly the case in the UK, where the turnout at the 1999 European elections fell to a dismal 24 per cent. Turnout in Finland and Holland was not much better at 40 per cent or, for that matter in Germany, where the figure was only 45 per cent.[5]

The Website

The Parliament's website pages are one of the most obvious means by which it communicates with the EU public and the media. However, it should be remembered that generally, but not exclusively, regular use of such websites tends to be the preserve of specialist minorities and those within adequately resourced and enlightened educational institutions. EU officials informed us that the contents of the EU websites are primarily conveyed to the public through the print and broadcast media within the various Member States. In March 2003 we asked the editor of the Europarl site for figures on the number of hits that it receives on a weekly basis, but received no reply.

The pluses and minuses of the internet web service, provided within the Europarl site, can be summarized very briefly. The site has improved greatly in recent years, but still has significant problems. Our most recent period of monitoring was March 2003. We asked eight experienced journalists who are working currently (or who have worked) for the UK print, broadcast and online media to evaluate the site. We were interested specifically in their opinions on site design, ease of use and the extent to which information was presented in a form that would be likely to appeal to journalists working under pressure. We received detailed evaluations from five of the individuals concerned. These are reproduced in summary form in Box 1.

The National and Regional Offices

In the absence of a truly media-friendly website, one might hope for a second line of attack, insofar as the Parliament has press and information offices in the capitals of each of the Member States, including London, and even a small number of regional offices (see Office of the Secretary General, 2001). It might be hoped that these also would make it their job to try to bring stories that are important (to the electorates of the various Member States) to the

[5] European Parliament, *Election Facts*. Available at «http://www.europarl.eu.int/election/uk».

Box 1: Evaluation of the Europarl Website by Five Experienced Journalists, March 2003

Positive Comments

- Two liked the site design. One felt that its lack of sophisticated graphics was an advantage, insofar as this made it quicker to use. The other felt that it was both simple and attractive.
- All five found the site easy to use with regard to current news and three were satisfied with the facility with which they were able to navigate their way back to older material.

Positive Comments that were Qualified

- All five agreed that information is provided in a satisfactory form for use by specialist interest groups and other professionally interested parties. However, they felt that the manner of its presentation frequently is not inviting from a press viewpoint.
- Four were satisfied with the detail provided in press alerts, etc., but again none found the information to be presented in a form that the media would find enticing.

Negative Comments

- All five agreed that too many stories seemed to be written for EU insiders. One advised that the European Parliament should 'get rid of jargon, acronyms and impersonality and bring in more quotes from named spokespeople'.
- Two felt that they would be more inclined to phone a press officer rather than navigate their way through the site to older material.
- Three disliked the site design. One felt that it compared unfavourably with the «gov.uk» site, which he found to be much more visually appealing. A second felt that the design was 'bland, inoffensive and unimaginative'.

Overall Verdict

While most were happy with the site's ease of use, they felt that the non-user friendly nature of the jargon within the grey text was a substantial problem. In desiring to avoid the negative consequences of 'spinning', the European Parliament seems to have gone too far in the opposite direction.

attention of the relevant media, and in a manner that would maximize their potential interest. One would expect especially that they would have experienced, well-connected, top quality press officers available to them with a network of links across national, regional and local media to facilitate this.

Unfortunately, during the period of study, many of the national and regional offices, including those in the UK, appeared to be of little use in this respect. Why this is so can be usefully illustrated by looking at the main UK office of the Parliament.

The Role and Effectiveness of the London Office of the EP

The London office of the EP illustrated neatly the scale of the problems that exist concerning the institution's press and information policies, insofar as they affect the UK. As London is one of the capitals in which the institution has a proverbial mountain to climb if it is to succeed in communicating a positive image of itself to the electorate, it would be reasonable to expect that the Parliament would invest substantially in its media operation there. However, during the period of the study, the office had only one press officer, who was running it on an acting basis (a permanent head of office, with no media background, and a single press officer have since been appointed). He was responsible for a wide range of other activities of a time-consuming nature, leaving him with little opportunity to develop an effective media strategy. It was clear that he had no time to pursue targeted press campaigns, much as he would have liked to do so. A considerable amount of his time was spent organizing platforms for MEPs to meet the public or the regional media. On the surface these might appear to be a useful means of promoting increased media coverage. However, he pointed to the difficulty of projecting a coherent image of the European Parliament within these contexts, given the disparate nature of the UK contingent of members. The Eurosceptics within one of the parties presented him with particular problems.

In short, the London office at that time took the media and general public image of the EP extremely seriously, but had few resources to do anything effective in pursuance of this concern. Its one proverbial 'ray of sunshine' at the time of the team's visit took the form of a temporary freelance radio journalist for whose services it had six months funding. The journalist's job was to produce short news reports for UK local radio on the EP's activities. It was stated that the individual concerned had had some success in this activity. However, it was not guaranteed that the period of funding would be extended.

The acting head has since left DG-III and moved to another EU institution. The new permanent head of the London office was interviewed by the CPLE when he was head of the Parliament's Edinburgh office. It was noted then that the Edinburgh office seemed to give little attention to the media and that it saw its responsibilities primarily as lying in other directions.

The Network as a Whole

During the period of the study there were 21 national and regional offices of the European Parliament responsible to a senior DG-III director. Overall, as far as the specific matter of policy on national offices is concerned, the senior management of DG-III claims that they are allowed to tailor their activities and practices in a manner that is appropriate to the cultures of the different

Member States within which they operate. From one point of view this seems quite sensible.

However, some middle-ranking officials provide a different perspective, arguing that the management of the local offices is being conducted in a manner that leads to a significant lack of basic co-ordination. They state that this is a fact that the 'cultural diversity' policy seems conveniently to be masking. The reasons for this will become apparent as the discussion progresses.

An even more serious problem manifested itself when a senior official made it very clear that, whatever the problems with the local offices, in his view, it was the Brussels operation in the centre that mattered most. This seemed to be at odds with a new emerging reality that senior officials had earlier acknowledged and complained about, namely the fact that (as pointed out above) some newspapers have been removing correspondents from Brussels. It seemed to be a considerable overestimation also of the compensatory powers of communication of the website with its off-putting use of jargon.

On the record remarks made by the same official concerning the challenges facing some national-level operations were particularly interesting. When asked about the underfunding of the Parliament's London press and information office, given the massive scale of the task confronting it, he stated that, 'while the poor old UK may have its problems we have fourteen other Member States to worry about'.

The network of offices as a whole is seriously underfunded given the scale of the public relations task confronting it. This, together with the network's co-ordination problems, is a serious weakness at the heart of the Parliament's communication strategy.

The Rapid Response Unit

The Rapid Response Unit was set up during the late 1990s by the Presidency and Secretary General. It was seen initially as a means of trying to deal with the large number of factually inaccurate reports concerning the European Parliament that had been appearing within the media of the UK and the 14 other Member States. This part of its overall role was to be performed by the provision of correct information through such means as supplying fact sheets, etc. It was charged also with the job of providing journalists with correct information on topics of enquiry within as short a period as possible from the time when a request for such information was received. It was claimed that this part of the operation was being 'colonized' by another office during March 2001.

During the period of study, it was clear that the office was being starved of resources. Despite the fact that it had the national media of 15 Member States to deal with, during March 2001 the head of the unit had to assist her only one

secretary, one permanent administrator, one fixed-term administrator, two documentalists (employed entirely on internal parliamentary information matters), one person covering agency despatches and one person dealing with informatics.

The crucial business of picking up on factually inaccurate press reports across the various Member States is dependent on two main information channels: first, a special dossier on EU press coverage produced by the Commission; and, second, the Parliament's own national offices. The unit stated that the information provided by the latter source varies greatly across the Union in terms of quality and quantity, and that only a few offices provide a reasonably substantial service. This seems to be due to the lack of co-ordination of the national offices' activities and the scarcity of resources afflicting them. What is clear is that, this serious deficiency aside, the central Rapid Response Unit does not in any case have the staffing levels necessary to provide any reasonably substantial and impactful monitoring and response operation across the EU as a whole.

In short, aside from the problems of deliberate distortions and omissions in media coverage resulting from the activities of the Eurosceptic press, the Parliament is not maintaining a service that is sufficiently resourced even to deal adequately with the genuine errors that might well be corrected were they being picked up more comprehensively.

The Audio-Visual Unit

The unit sees its core role as that of facilitator to the EU's broadcast media. Its fundamental business is that of making appropriate resources available to television and radio broadcasters, providing what it believes to be high-class technical services. It aims to help journalists secure easy access to Parliament and to the people to whom they need to speak. It helps also in providing information in response to requests, advising when key debates or issues are likely to arise, for example, and offering tips on how coverage of them can be made palatable to a television audience and news editors.

The unit was completely frank about its deficiencies concerning radio coverage, with its budget in 2001 allowing for only one individual to cover the whole of the EU. It made it very clear that, while it believes that it is doing the best it can within available resources, like the Rapid Response Unit and the national offices, it needs far more staffing and funding if it is to be able to do the kind of job that the Parliament really needs. In addition, its work is damaged by a lack of senior-level co-ordination of its activities with other relevant areas of press and information policy. It finds that, while there is some co-operation and co-ordination with the national offices, overall this is very variable. What was surprising in March 2001 was the unit's revelation of the

degree to which other Directorates General remain ignorant about the importance of media coverage of the EU. It stated that it had stopped circulating details of the extent to which the Parliament was achieving broadcast media coverage to the heads of the Directorates General because they clearly did not understand the relevance or significance of what they were receiving, or why it should be of interest and concern to them.

But the unit pointed out that the problems that it faces are external as well as internal. It stated that there is a considerable problem with journalists being sent to report on the European Parliament with no detailed knowledge or understanding about it or the wider political framework of the EU. Surprisingly, they cited the BBC in this regard. They stated that they also have a considerable problem in trying to circumvent the commercial and political mindsets of some broadcasters. Britain's ITN was one example cited.

The dominant impression that the authors gained of the audio-visual unit's attitude and activities was that this was a group of people who were adaptable and open to new ideas. In order to secure a greater media impact for the European Parliament, they seemed prepared to stretch their remit as far as possible within the existing rules and policies. In short they appeared to be thinking and doing several key things that other sections of DG-III either were not being allowed to do, or were not prepared to do.

However, this finding must be treated with caution, as promised internal documentation that would have helped substantiate these conclusions was not subsequently forthcoming. What also has to be noted is that, as the unit itself would acknowledge, the overall deficiencies in the Parliament's performance as a mass communicator mean that it is unable to make much impact on the amount of European Parliament coverage provided by UK terrestrial television broadcasters, which remains extremely low. The team would have liked to interview some of the key broadcasters involved to discover their view of the unit's effectiveness. Unfortunately, the resources available for the project did not cover this type of exercise and it must remain a matter for further research.

A Combination of Internal and External Factors

The two most senior officials interviewed within DG-III during March 2001 were very much of the opinion that the various faults within the system identified above were not of their making. They stated that they were a result of the bureau and the members in general under-resourcing them in relation to the scale of operations necessary for an effective service. For example, one senior official stated that his staffing budget had been hit severely as a result of MEPs' pressure for the Parliament's overall budget to be cut back. Other problems emanated from the Commission's own press and information

service who were making co-operation and co-ordination between the two institutions extremely difficult.

However, some of the officials below the most senior levels of DG-III offered a different perspective, in which part of the blame did indeed lie with the sources identified by their superiors, but which also saw DG-III itself as being part of the problem. This was the result of two things, both of which echo observations that have been made already. First, a failure to organize and co-ordinate its various activities effectively. Second, a degree of over-centralization that was weakening the ability of, for example, the local offices and the Rapid Response Unit to deliver the kind of service that they would wish to deliver, even within the constraints of existing resources.

Another interesting line of investigation uncovered rivalry between Parliamentary Directorates General concerning press and information policy. This offered some crucial insights into the weaknesses that characterize the Parliament's ability to project itself. Evidence was found suggesting strongly that parts of DG-II[6] regarded DG-III with considerable disdain and believed that, at the time of the interview programme, it was providing an inferior service. Equally, it was clear that the Parliament's President at the time of the CPLE's interviewing, Nicole Fontaine, was handling her own press relations on occasions where she believed this to be necessary, rather than going through DG-III. In addition, evidence was found of DG-II having itself acted independently in issuing press releases on occasion. All of this added to the overall impression of a Parliament that needs to undergo 'root and branch' reforms with regard to its press and information policy.

As far as the MEPs themselves are concerned, there is frustration among some with the rivalry between the Parliament, the Commission and the Council of Ministers and their various press and information services. They worry about the negative impact that this competitive 'pushing and shoving' has on the ability of the EU to convey a positive and high-profile image of the Parliament to the electorate.

In short, at the time of the interview programme, the public presentation of the image of the European Parliament seemed to be at the mercy not only of internal rivalries within DG-III itself, but of rivalries between it and other individuals and Directorates General within the Parliament as a whole, and of rivalries between the three main institutions of governance of the EU and their press and information services. This could hardly be described as an acceptable state of affairs.

[6] DG-II's work is focused on the committees and delegations of the European Parliament.

IV. The Role and Responsibilities of MEPs

As the above suggests, DG-III on its own cannot solve all of the Parliament's problems as it strives to make effective contact with as many of its electorate as possible via the media. The importance of the role of MEPs also needs to be remembered. It is clear that some MEPs would like to see the EU's success stories being sold more effectively to the voters. There are those who believe that the Parliament's own press and information service needs to be radically reformed, with, for example, the Visitors' Programme being cut back in favour of more resources going into the media units. At the same time, there are clearly also many who are not greatly interested in, or greatly motivated to do something about, the effectiveness of the services being offered. For example, most MEPs have been guilty of a failure to spot some of the most significant failings of DG-III, despite the relatively miserable turn-out achieved in a number of Member States in the 1999 European Parliament elections. Perhaps one of the most damning indicators of this lack of knowledge or interest was revealed at the December 2000 Public Hearing of the supposedly media-focused Committee on Culture, Youth Education, the Media and Sport. Not one of the MEPs present spotted or mentioned the fact that the Parliament was then funding only one person within DG-III to cover the whole of the radio services across all of the Member States.

It is notable also that, after it had been claimed in March 2001 that significant questions would be posed about DG-III at the next plenary session of the Parliament, all of the media-related questions raised at the session focused instead on the EU overall or the Commission. No attention whatsoever was given to the Parliament's own press and information service.

Some attempt to try and counter this poor record was made in December 2001, with the Parliament's Committee on Culture, Youth Education, the Media and Sport issuing a draft report on the Commission's communication on a new framework for co-operation on activities concerning the EU's information and communication policy. The report addressed many of the weaknesses in existing Parliamentary press and information policy and commented usefully on the need to focus more on issues that touch people's daily lives. It stressed the importance of the audio-visual unit and the need for greater use of its talents in getting news concerning the Parliament across to the electorate. It asked also whether the existing distribution of resources within DG-III was appropriate, and whether more funds ought to be channelled towards the audio-visual unit in particular.

The fact that the EP subsequently adopted the report might seem promising. However, what it clearly lacked was any framework for turning its good intentions into policy in time even to begin to have an impact on the next

election. The weak and decidedly 'low key' manner in which a number of the report's key questions were phrased suggests that it is not a document that is likely to stimulate radical change within a Parliament that has already decided to cut DG-III's budget for the next several years. Furthermore, while regretting those cutbacks, and pointing to their likely negative consequences, the report was able to do little but implicitly acknowledge the continuing short-sightedness of Parliament in the wholly inadequate funding of its press and information operation (EP, 2001, 2002).

Most symbolic of all of its likely fate, however, was the fact that DG-III did not even think it worth mentioning that the report had been adopted in its website summary of Parliamentary events at the end of the relevant day, and then subsequently buried the report so deep within the site that it proved difficult even for seasoned site users to locate. The same is not true of its February 2003 successor, but there is little in this on the media and most of what is said concerning information policy in general has been said before in one context or another (EP, 2003).

Training

The extent to which MEPs themselves act as effective communicators to the media and directly to their voters is crucial. One of the functions of DG-III, EU party groupings and national party organizations should be to help provide them with as much guidance and assistance as possible. If this is not happening, then it is the job of MEPs to complain strongly enough for the situation to change. In the case of the most problematical Eurosceptic Member State, both the London and Edinburgh external offices of the Parliament stated that it is not their job to organize training for MEPs in media communication skills. In addition, during the period of the study neither the UK nor the Brussels offices were even *aware* of whether MEPs were receiving such training from other sources.

A Puzzling Inflexibility

Overall, it seems astounding that members should continue to hold so inflexibly to current ways of doing things, and be so unyielding in their application of budgetary constraints to DG-III and its external offices. This is particularly the case when their poor performance in persuading the electorate to turn out for the 1999 parliamentary elections is recalled, as indeed one of Parliament's own recent reports has pointed out (EP, 2001). The proverbial image of the ostrich with its head in the sand seems most appropriately to fit the bill.

But poor electoral turnout is not the only indicator of the scale of the problem which the Parliament is so manifestly not addressing. As pointed out at

the beginning, it is useful also to look at the extent of media coverage that the European Parliament has been achieving in a 'difficult' Member State like the UK. Work done by McLeod, involving a nine-month detailed sampling period in 1998, showed that even in the pro-European UK press, the European Parliament achieved only 23 per cent of the papers' already less than generous EU coverage. This was despite the occurrence of a significant number of events in which the European Parliament played a major role during the sampling period. Similarly, detailed monitoring of the BBC was carried out between November and December 1998, a period during which a number of key items of European legislation were being debated by the Parliament. It was found that the number of news stories that were run on the European Parliament was so small as to be hardly worth recording. Monitoring during this and other periods reveals that there is no regular routine coverage of the EP by the BBC's mainstream channels, a situation that remained the same in early 2003 (McLeod, 2003).

These findings suggest two things: first, that it is no surprise that the European Parliament achieved such a low UK electoral turnout in the elections which followed six months after the study period; second, that the Parliament's failure radically to improve the resourcing of its press and information policy since is even more baffling.

The Reasons behind the Low Rate of Media Take-up

When all of the foregoing is considered, the large number of the EP's activities that were not picked up in the UK and many of the other EU states' press and radio/television broadcasts (McLeod, 2003) is not surprising. To summarize briefly the discussion so far, the assumption is that some of the key reasons for this very limited take-up are:

- the continuing, previously mentioned remaining weaknesses in the Parliament's website and its consequent frequent failure as an 'attention-grabber';
- the seriously under-resourced, under-co-ordinated and often inappropriately focused press and information operations run by the Parliament's various national and regional offices;
- the presence of rivalry between different sections of DG-III for access to its scarce resources, which in turn leads to a distortion of priorities and under-achievement in the business of effective communication;
- rivalry between DG-III and other individuals and agencies within the European Parliament concerning press and information policy;

- rivalry between the European Parliament, the Commission and the Member States, and their various press and information services, over the presentation of EU success stories;
- over-concern with the centralization of press and information services on the part of some senior officials within DG-III;
- in the opinion of one of the authors, a lack of sufficient ability at senior levels of DG-III to pick up on, develop and spread good practice in the most effective use of limited image-presentational resources. This is most particularly the case with regard to some of the impressive activities and methods which its audio-visual unit has been pursuing;
- in the opinion of the authors, insufficient media and public relations training and background on the part of the most senior DG-III officials. This prevents them from realizing both the availability and importance of options for usefully improving the Parliament's success rate in persuading the media in the more Eurosceptic Member States to take up stories about it;
- a reinforcement of this tendency not to spot such options by the apparent disdain of parts of the senior echelons of DG-III for some Member States;
- a lack of interest on the part of many MEPs in the Parliament's communication strategy and a consequent failure actively to press for reform;
- inadequate communication skills on the part of some MEPs.

Conclusion

It is when the findings from this article are brought together, as in the summary above, that it can most fully be seen how the problems experienced by the European Parliament as a communicator with the citizens of Europe exist on every level of its political and bureaucratic structures. In the opinion of the authors, the press and information service contains a mixture of highly competent and less able personnel and is handicapped severely by being led by senior officials who have no professional background in press and public relations matters.[7] It is woefully under-resourced as a result of MEPs', and more specifically the relevant budget committees', failure to appreciate adequately the importance of, and the need for, their own information service. While some MEPs are acutely aware that the resources voted to the Commission for information activities are not going to be used adequately in support of the Parliament's interests because of institutional rivalries and cultures,

[7] The lack of such background was confirmed in a letter of 5 June 2001 from DG-III's Director of Press and Audio-Visual to the CPLE Director.

others seem ignorant of, or uninterested in, this fact. Even the resources available to DG-III at the time of the interview programme were, in the opinion of the authors, inefficiently focused as a result of vested interests, an ignorance of key basic principles of a successful press and public relations strategy, or bias against states such as the UK.

There is no doubt that, in terms of the measures of the Parliament's communication performance set out at the beginning of this article, it has seriously failed in recent years. But it should be remembered that a heavy responsibility also falls on Member States' governments, and on the various national pro-European party machines, to promote vigorously the role of the Parliament within their own territories. It is not only past and present governments in the UK that have chosen not to do this.

In short, as far as the Parliament itself is concerned, several things are very clearly necessary. Its existing communications structures and procedures must be strengthened considerably so that it can begin to promote itself effectively in the UK and other Member States where it currently has a low profile. This can only be achieved via a true 'root and branch' reform of its press and information services and the introduction of an experienced media and public relations directorate to achieve this in an appropriate manner. Second, MEPs need to begin to understand both the limitations of many of their number as communicators and the need for much greater expert help in dealing with this problem. Third, they need to recognize that 'you get what you pay for', and given that what they are getting currently in communication terms is lamentably short of what is needed, then this is one area of the Parliament's budget where they need to be rather less zealous in terms of cost-cutting. Finally, they need to recognize that the Commission has its own distinct agenda and that they should distance themselves from it in terms of press and information policy. They need to take full responsibility for selling to the public the achievements of what is supposed to be 'the people's representative in Europe'. As far as information policy is concerned, there is little evidence of the necessary change of view (EP, 2003).

Indeed, we see nothing to suggest that the woeful situation in general that has been outlined in this article is likely to change in any significant way within the foreseeable future. Ultimately, that situation could lead to the European Parliament's electoral support withering away to the extent that the institution loses all credible claim to legitimacy. In such circumstances, calls for its replacement with something more able to capture the popular imagination could become irresistible. An organization that acquiesced so readily in the fostering of the conditions likely to lead to its own demise would deserve to be abolished.

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