

**Communication Strategy to Build more Confidence
in the European Union :Some Reflections and Proposals
on Regional Communication**

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Some general considerations

The European Union is going through one of its most difficult moments in the history of the Integration process, with citizens having a low level of confidence in the European Institutions: a situation that is a threat to the success of the most important and fascinating political projects ever experienced in the Old Continent and the entire world.

The EU has produced, notwithstanding many difficulties, many important institutional structures, programmes and projects aimed at promoting peace, stability in the world and to creating better living conditions for its citizens.

After moments of enthusiasm during the Integration process, followed by declining interests and again new enthusiasm, citizens in all the member states are mistrustful and at best sceptical and indifferent towards the European Union, its Institutions and bureaucracy.

They feel distant from the EU Institutions which don't seem to be serving them and, what is even worse, not understanding them and working to meet their needs.

They see the EU flying high in a world that doesn't belong to them, while they are down on the ground dealing with their daily problems.

Even those who concretely gain from EU programs, like the structural funds, do not often feel close enough to the EU Institutions. Unfortunately it is also true that recognition is not something that belongs to this world.

For many Europeans, buildings they see on television like the Berlaymont or those of the European Parliament in Brussels or Strasbourg are “bunkers” protecting privileged politicians and civil servants who take decisions which are distant from the reality of daily life.

Europe is also a matter of the heart that must be able to generate passion and emotion: it did so in the past but now, people find it difficult to find the soul of Europe.

In such an environment European citizens can't even appreciate and properly take advantage of the great benefits produced by the EU.

In a certain sense the EU is at a crossroad: rising or declining!

We need, of course, to think positively and work with consistence and enthusiasm looking to the future of the EU with greater responsibility both within it and worldwide.

We need to transmit enthusiasm, hope and confidence to the citizens of Europe.

In doing this we need to make people feel that they belong to the EU and convince them that the EU is working for them and not for European politicians and bureaucrats.

From the European Union people want:

- to feel that they are an important part of it;
- to know what the EU Institutions are doing for them and how they are working;
- to see that the EU is really working for them;
- to understand and be aware that the “great policies” (foreign and security policy, international relations, etc) are really important, necessary and are generating concrete benefits for them and a better future for their children;
- to feel, to see and to understand that the EU is close to them and understands their problems and needs;
- to feel – and be convinced – that the EU is listening to them;

- transparency (institutions seem physically and psychologically rather very distant);
- to understand better where the EU wants to go, especially with the new entrants;
- to know which values the EU will stand for.

Euro

Following the exceptional increase of the cost of life after the introduction of the Euro, a wide section of European citizens feel “**betrayed**” by the European Union and have lost confidence and support for it.

Regional communication

Regional communication is a particularly suitable and effective means to involve citizens in European topics.

People identify in a particular way with the regional and local media: they report what happens in the area where they live and problems related to their daily lives.

The regional and local media report essentially on local incidents and consider the daily problems and concerns of the people, in-depth

Citizens have “**their**” local TV, Radio or paper and they trust them.

Integrated communication between national and regional media can produce a very important synergy.

My problems are your problems

Many citizens think that certain problems or concerns only affect their country or region and not citizens of other countries as well.

It is necessary to make citizens aware that many problems and concerns are common to most countries and that a united Europe can solve them better.

Present facts

Give facts, showing the many excellent projects realized by the EU which often remain undisclosed in the dark.

Regional and local communication strategy on TV: some points

Promote an intense communication strategy through the regional media at all levels.

More information about the activities of the EU Institutions, and related organs, in the frame of the "News".

Inform the media of the important historical and updated documentation available in the Mediatheque of the Commission.

Inform the media of the many possibilities to get updated information and pictures through EbS and Internet.

Five minutes a day

Transmission of topical information (5 minutes a day or every week), on regional TV, adapting the information -- as far as possible -- to regional realities;

Live debates

Organize monthly -- weekly would even be better of course -- a live debate with experts on European affairs in the TV studio making presentations, but mainly **answering questions** from viewers with the possibility for live calls.

During the program citizens should also have the possibility to put questions to EU political representatives or civil servants seated in Brussels or Strasbourg or Luxembourg or, for example, in one of the EU agencies located in the different EU countries.

To a greater extent EU institutional representatives and civil servants should be present in the studio to show people that they have come out of the "bunkers" to discuss their concerns with them.

During a live program, present some short films (2-5 minutes) related to the topic concerned.

Among the debates young adults from different EU countries should be involved, all speaking the language of the country where the program is being broadcasted; two main goals should be aimed at: highlighting that the same problem is common to more countries and to show citizens of the country involved that young people of other countries speak their language.

Involve Eurobarometer and the new cell “planning ahead” in providing regional journalists with more relevant elements to present and discuss.

There are networks already doing such live programs; they should be intensify. It would also meet the request from the Commissioner for Communication M. Wallstroem: *not just to talk at people but speak with people.*

Europe in public squares

Regional TV live public debates in public squares (better if symbolic squares); both people in the public square and at home can put questions to journalists and guests. It would be good of course to give citizens the possibility to put questions directly to European Commissioners or EP members. In order to animate the event and to gain the audience’s attention during the program, folk, music or other performances should be presented. Better still would be something highlighting typical aspects from different countries. It will not be easy to bring back people into the squares; it will require great effort, but it is worth trying, because such events will have a great psychological impact too.

Involving the regional communication offices

All the regions have a press office, which normally has specific relations with the regional and local media of their territory.

They should be directly involved in cooperating with the regional media to give more information about Europe.

In several cases regions have special provisions to support European initiatives: cooperation between the EU, Regions and regional media can produce very interesting synergy.

To encourage such involvement, the EU should take the initiative to promote in the EU member states meetings with all the head of the press offices of the regions (directly or through the representations).

There are countries where the heads of the press offices of the regions (or of the institution of sub national levels) regularly meet, and wherever possible, depending on their dimension, this involves municipal press offices too.

Radio and television quiz

Encourage radio and TV networks to organize quizzes on EU questions, considering amongst others, visits to EU Institutions as prizes. There are so many TV quizzes dealing with futile questions.

The experience of “Qui Europa”

In May 1983, the journalist Paolo Magagnotti initiated a weekly TV program titled “Qui Europa” on a regional TV of the region Trentino-South Tyrol (Italy). This programme was broadcasted at the end of the prime time News with three minutes of information about the European Integration process, mainly explaining how the European Institutions and the European programmes and projects function.

From January 5, 2004 to January 2, 2005, following a call for proposals by the European Commission, the program became a daily episode, each episode lasting 5 minutes and broadcasted countrywide by regional networks of regional TV and via 5 satellites.

Each episode consisted of 3 parts: introduction of the topic by the journalist mainly recorded within or outside near a European Institution; presentation of the topic with

pictures and narration; closing by the same journalist of the episode while anticipating the topic of the day after.

During the year the entire range of aspects regarding the European Integration Process was presented: from the founding fathers, to the European programmes till the European Constitutional Treaty.

Each Sunday the journalist produced an editorial with insights about what had been presented during the week and factual questions.

At the end of the month a special programme in the series, on a special topic of more than an hour was added.

The program was very successful and gave special motivation to people to learn more about the EU.

This reflection refers essentially to regional TV information also considering the recent emphasis of the European Commission in regional and local communication.

Radio networks papers should be considered in the same logic of course, without neglecting the growing importance of the www programs.

A concrete action to involve and motivate regional media to inform on European affaires

Organization in all EU countries meetings involving journalists of regional and local media and journalists working in communication offices of regions and large municipalities. Meetings can take place in the Commission's representations, which should be instrumental in organizing the events and working for the follow up.

The meetings will be primarily devoted to:

- Presenting the principles and contents of the regional communication strategy.
- Informing the regional journalists of:
 - the various EU opportunities to provide free documentation about the European Union (e.g. Mediatheque, EbS) (the majority is not aware of this);
 - the equipment at their disposal at the Berlaymont and at the European Parliament both in Brussels and Strasbourg;

- the possibility to gather statements from Commissioners, MePs, EU's civil servants, and to receive them via satellite;
- the system of call for proposals;
- the EU-related information accessible online;
- the possibility to get information from the EU regarding special requests (*Europe Direct* and other special services for journalists);
- other facilities and opportunities to gather information concerning both EU in general and information more directly affecting the region involved.

European Journalists as speakers

Journalist specialized in European Affaires can offer interesting insight not just in writing or talking on TV and Radio but in giving public speeches.

A special contribution can come from journalists accredited to the European Institutions and having the opportunity to “breathe” what is going on around the EU building where decision are taken. Being aware of the limit imposed by financial means and language knowledge it could be interesting to organize visit of journalists of a certain nationality to different countries.

The Association of European Journalists – The Communication Network, in cooperation with members of the Association and other organizations of Journalists could be instrumental in promoting meetings.