

EUROPEAN COMMUNICATION IN THE DIGITAL ERA. A CASE STUDY ON THE AUDIOVISUAL SERVICES OF THE EUROPEAN COMMISSION.

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Abstract: The European Union's media communication system has been changing rapidly during the latest years due both to new trends in media industry and also due the euro-scepticism wave expressed by some EU member states. The paper first provides a background on the main perspectives of media industry and public communication. Further, the paper refers to EU's communication strategies, with a focus on the recent digital initiatives. As for the case study, the authors will conduct an analysis on the Audiovisual Services of the European Union (the video, photo and audio services), in terms of identifying the updated approach imposed by professional media industry and by the consumption preferences of the new segments of audiences in the digital era.

Keywords: *public communication, media industry, Audio-Visual Services, video, photo, audio.*

1. Introduction

Recent theories acknowledge that lately key areas of human existence have converged in and through our concurrent and continuous exposure to, use of and immersion in media, information and communication technologies, as explained by Mark Deuze in his article titled "Media Life" (Deuze, 2011). The author is citing the concept of mediapolis – a comprehensively mediated public space where media underpin and overarch the experiences and expressions of everyday life, and he considers that this perspective on live lived in, rather than with, media could be the ontological benchmark for the 21st century media studies ("we are living a media life, and multi-tasking our media has become a regular feature of everyday life", according to Deuze).

Recent studies indicate major changes within the media industry landscape where the fast development of digital technology has determined a real shift in terms of public communication, media production, media consumption and the needs and behavior of media consumers and public institutions. More and more, public communication is being put into practice via sophisticated gadgets, dynamic multimedia platforms and social channels that actually allow communication in real time at a global scale (a press conference of a national public institution streamed LIVE on the Internet, for example).

2. Perspectives on Media Industry and Public Communication in the Digital Era

The last editions of the Reuters Institute Digital News Reports analyze the growing number of ways of consuming news and of locations where consumers have access to news, alongside with the revolution caused by the mobile devices. When asked about the sources for accessing news, respondents indicated traditional news brands, but

also referred to aggregators and social media and blogs in significant percentages (Nistor, 2014). The latest report, from 2015, indicate “a quickening of the pace towards social media platforms as routes to audiences, together with a surge in the use of mobile for news, a decline in the desktop internet and significant growth in video news consumption online” (<http://digitalnewsreport.org/>).

Consequently, classical tools of public communication like news releases, reports, conferences have been supplemented by interactive radio, television, computer networking, e-mail, blogs, podcasts, live streaming, tweets, alongside with the results of the geometrically expansion of the communications technology – user generated content, on YouTube, blogs, or government websites, has finally become the major wave anticipated in e- government (Perry; Christensen, 2015, p. 556-557, Cernicova, 2013, p.80-81). Eventually, in this new general communication framework, “public administrator will need to be increasingly flexible about communicating through unconventional, more creative forms, such as drama, poetry, fiction, symbols and humor” as stated in the recent volume “Handbook of Public Administration” coordinated by James Perry and Robert Christensen.

From an administrative perspective, a professionalized administrative system, such as the European administration for example, must take into account the perceptions of target groups and the level of trust of the beneficiaries (Hosu; Deac; Mosoreanu, 2012, p. 74), therefore communication is one important element in the management of public administration. Basically, “in practice, public management aims to ameliorate the quality of actions by employing new administrative procedures, to mitigate certain inflexibility in organization and to improve the communications with the environment” (Hințea, 1998).

The standard structure of any public communication system is centered on the idea of editing and transmitting the appropriate messages to targeted audiences, in order to best answer the objectives and the goals of the communication strategy. The idea of “segmentation” of the general audience is exhaustively explained in the volume “Handbook of Public Administration” – “segmentation avoids the shotgun approach of sending the same message to everyone using the same medium, a tactic that is often inefficient, ineffective, and even disastrous”. Further, the authors agree that segmenting may require more effort and expense than disseminating an all-purpose message to the public at large, but the final results of the communication campaign have stronger chances to be positive.

Finally, the strong argument for the segmentation thesis is that this can also contribute “to avoid information gaps selective attention (the tendency for people to seek out or to be receptive to only those messages that interest them or coincide with their preferences) or selective perception (the tendency of people to interpret messages based on their own positions, experiences and preferences)”, (Perry; Christensen, 2015, p. 552).

According to “The Public Relations Handbook”, “good media relations can contribute to longer-term strategic objectives, such as: ‘improving company or brand image; higher and better media profile; changing the attitudes of target audiences (such as customers); improving relationships with the community; increasing market share; influencing government policy at local, national or international level; improving communications with investors and their advisers; improving industrial relations” (Theaker, 2004, p.148-149). Bernard Miege (2008), based on Habermas’s theory of

public space, demonstrated the complexity of the contemporary forms of public space, explaining that it is organized as follows (Nistor, 2014):

- The actions that are taking place within the public space are related to the four communication patterns from the history of democratic societies: opinion press (especially in the eighteenth century); commercial press addressing the general public (beginning with the late nineteenth century); audiovisual media and especially mainstream television targeting general public (mid-twentieth century); and general public relations.
- Alongside the dominant model, the author also identifies the communication strategies of the companies. Miede mentions the role of opinion polls in the activity of media organizations and in shaping public opinion.
- Individualizing social practices that are being reinforced lately due to communication technologies which is specific to a marketing phenomenon of information, culture and communication. And others.

On the other hand, when communicating to media, to finally reach the target communities, is recommended that all the public actors that communicate understand the specific features and principles of professional journalists. In the summer edition of 2001 from the Nieman Reports from The Nieman Foundation for Journalism at Harvard University – “Essays about the Elements of Journalism”, the nine essential principles of journalism established by Bill Kovach and Tom Rosenstiel are presented and commented. We will briefly mention the nine elements:

1. “Journalism’s first obligation is to the truth – rather adding context and interpretation, press needs to concentrate on synthesis and verification;
2. Journalism’ first loyalty is to citizens – a commitment to citizens is more than professional egoism; the allegiance to citizens is the meaning of the journalistic independence;
3. The essence of journalism is a discipline of verification – the discipline of verification is what separates journalism from entertainment, propaganda, art, fiction;
4. Journalists must maintain an independence from those they cover;
5. Journalists must serve as an independent monitor of power – in the next century, the press must watchdog not only government, but an expanding nonprofit world, a corporate world, and the expanding public debate that new technology is creating;
6. Journalism must provide a forum for public criticism and comment;
7. Journalists must make the significant interesting and relevant – storytelling and information are not contradictory;
8. Journalists should keep the news in proportion and make it comprehensive – journalism is our modern cartography; it creates a map for citizens to navigate society;
9. Journalists have an obligation to personal conscience” (Bill Kovach and Tom Rosenstiel in “The Elements of Journalism”).

In spite of the visible changes in professional media communication, in media production and consumption, over the time, scholarly literature has classified the functions and roles of media in many ways, but the main functions are considered to be the ones briefly described in the following lines (Nistor, 2014). Exercising its function of information, information is being distributed by media organizations to large numbers of citizens. The intensity of the media coverage usually determines the level of concern and reaction among targeted audiences. This explains the low impact that poorly publicized services or events have. The attention paid by the media can

influence decisively the evolution of a subject. Coverage of any kind (negative or positive) is an essential condition that an event or a public person must meet to count in the public competition. In the long term, as demonstrated, ignorance is more disastrous than negative publicity. One natural consequence of this situation is that public actors are permanently trying to create interesting events so that they get intense media coverage. The function to entertain – the most frequent reasons for consuming media content are information and entertainment - media participate in reducing daily stress by offering a show built with characters that are not necessarily part of the sphere of entertainment, but in all areas (political, sporting or other). The media function of compensation – media eliminates frustrations, as it happens in of soap operas, where consumers transfer in virtual reality provided by a continuing TV program, thus compensating their own failure from the real life. Other media functions refer to education, social integration, culture, explanation, integration etc.

Nowadays the practice of public relations may no longer be limited to press releases, events and media interviews (Cernicova, 2015). Idil Cakim in his study titled “Digital Public Relations, Online Reputation Management” makes a strong point and explains that in the digital age of communication news immediacy is as important as accuracy; audiences have access to numerous sources, and therefore corporations must take the lead in providing clear and sufficient information (Duhe, 2004, p. 135). Cakim highlights the huge importance of organizing an online communication channel such as a website where companies have the chance to share their side of the story. The author also mentions the user-generated media that is increasingly becoming a trusted source of information for audiences (Duhe, 2004, p. 141). Further, Cakim identifies a set of new public relations skills in the digital era of communication (Duhe, 2004, p. 141-143); we will briefly mention some of these skills:

1. Online audience statistics – professional communicators must understand the importance of assessing the value of a story placed online; therefore, they must pay attention to the number of visitors on their website, the time they spent, their geographical location and their main interests in the website content.
2. Search engine optimization – in order to reach target audiences online, company websites need to rank among the top listing of the most popular search engines; so, communication specialists should pay attention to the content of the stories, to the key words etc.
3. Online media relations – digital public relations do not limit to the existence of a website; media relations specialists must also identify the key online journalists;
4. Online crisis communication – in spite of all the sophisticated tools linked to the online communication, during a crisis communicators must first focus on delivering a clear, concise and relevant information, paying attention to the amount and the frequency of delivered information.
5. Digital public relations tools – professional communicators must always pay attention to the latest technologies that can help distribute online information to the right audiences.

3. The Audiovisual Services of the European Commission (video, photo and audio)

European Union has been constantly developing its communication strategies and policies during the last years. In 2005, the European Commission elaborated the *Plan-D for Democracy, Dialogue and Debate strategy* that followed other communication policies such as the *White Paper on European Governance*.

Then, in 2006, the *White Paper on a European Communication Policy* considered that communication has remained too much of a 'Brussels affair' and underlined the necessity of "using the new digital technologies, such as the Internet, since they can provide new channels for communication on European issues" (<http://europa.eu/>, accessed 2015).

Later, in 2007, the European Commission has launched a new Internet strategy embracing the Internet culture and aiming at making full use of the recent online developments in communication (<http://europa.eu/>, accessed 2015).

Finally, in 2011, EU has launched another strategy - *Rationalisation of the European Commission's public websites* that aimed to improve the quality of its online information and services.

Further in this regard, in 2014, The European Commission hosted "*#Talkdigital*" - an initiative through which the digital team of the European Commission gave the opportunity to citizens to present their ideas about institutional communication (<http://ec.europa.eu> accessed 2015). According to the website of the competition, the main objective of this campaign was to hear from people who connect online with the Institutions what they think of how the EU communicates digitally and what changes would be most welcomed. Finally, the winning ideas of this "*#TalkDigital*" campaign are:

1. *#Talkdigital* winner: *A permanent digital helpdesk service for the EU* – that suggested that EU institutions set-up a "permanent digital helpdesk service for the EU" and was highly appreciated because of the fact that the "world of digital institutional communication is increasingly moving towards real-time digital reliability" – "phoning the Commission or writing an email are good ways of getting in touch but in a world of digital communication we should think about more innovative methods that provide a more direct feedback experience", was explained in the proposal.
2. *#Talkdigital* 2nd place: *Connecting young journalists through EU blogosphere*
3. And finally, *#Talkdigital* competition 3rd place: *euStarter* – "an EU-specific crowdsourcing platform has the potential to be the next step in engaging with digitally with European citizens in a more interactive and locally impacting manner". (<http://ec.europa.eu> accessed 2015)

The Audio-Visual Services of the European Union is part of the EU Newsroom that is the official news website of the institutions of the European Union, providing online access to the latest official press material released by all EU institutions, as well as practical information for journalists, and functioning as a single point to all EU news (<http://europa.eu/newsroom/about/> accessed 2015). The Audio-Visual Services are the EU related news and archive service providing information for professionals in the media, as well as supplying up to the minute audiovisual news coverage to the media around the world and deliver unique archive on the history of the EU (<http://ec.europa.eu/avservices/about/> accessed 2015).



Figure 1. The Audiovisual Services Portal

The A-V Services are producing media content, in professional standards, in three formats: photo, audio and video, providing both LIVE transmissions (via the Internet) or archived material.

The LIVE coverage of EU events is provided by Europe by Satellite (EbS), (<http://ec.europa.eu/avservices/ebs>) that is “the European Union's TV information service, launched in 1995; the programming consists of a mix of live events, news items and stockshots on EU policies and issues”. Briefly, EbS transmits LIVE content from the main European Institutions (The European Commission, the European Parliament, the Council of Ministers and others), alongside with the press conferences or EP plenary sessions, European Councils. According to the home webpage, “the EbS site allows citizens to follow EbS programmes live or on demand for up to 7 days following the original transmission in all the languages available at the time of the broadcast”. These services are available in natural sound and in up to 20 languages, the only such a device in the world.

The Audio-Visual Services also offer a unique library of audiovisual documents on the construction of the European Union since the 1950s – images, sounds and photos with the founders of EU or from different historical moments of the Union.



Figure 2. Schuman Declaration 1950 (from the Video Archive Library of the AV Services)

The archive is structured on the three media formats (video, photo and audio), each one providing filters by topic (culture, economy, science and others).

- The video archive provides access to materials starting with the 1950s (for example the speech by Robert Schuman on the occasion of the first anniversary of the European Parliamentary Assembly, in 1959).

- The photo archive includes also categories like *European Commission since 1958, Barroso Commission I, Barroso Commission II, European Councils, Founding Fathers, Gallery of Presidents, Treaties*;
- The audio archive gathers recordings with important European Personalities and with Founding Fathers of the European Union (Robert Schuman, Jean Monnet, Konrad Adenauer and others);

Professional journalists also have the possibility to register for technical assistance in Brussels – “in the Berlaymont building in Brussels, there are two TV studios and two radio studios, plus editing and duplication facilities, ENG video crews, as well as archive and play-out services” (<http://ec.europa.eu/avservices/about/> accessed 2015).

In addition, the A-V Services are assisting reporters with useful contacts or may even accompany news teams within the European institutions buildings.



Figure 3. Technical assistance provided by the AV Services in Brussels

4. Conclusions

The spectacular revolution caused by the digital era and the mobile communication devices produces fast changes in media industry and in public communication. When it comes to the European Union, over the last years, it has continuously updated its strategies and policies in order to implement the most adequate communication system that could contribute to strengthen the European public sphere and, consequently, the construction of the European Union.

Due to its complex services and most of all due to its unique library with video, photo and audio material covering the updated history of the European Union, the Audio-Visual Services are a valuable instrument for any professional journalist, academic researcher or citizens interested in the communication and in the construction of EU.

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