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Working Paper

How the EU constructs the European public sphere: seven strategies of information policy

TranState Working Papers, No. 19

Provided in Cooperation with:

University of Bremen, Collaborative Research Center 597: Transformations of the State

Suggested Citation: Brüggemann, Michael (2005) : How the EU constructs the European public sphere: seven strategies of information policy, TranState Working Papers, No. 19, Universität Bremen, Collaborative Research Center 597 - Transformations of the State, Bremen

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TranState Working Papers

HOW THE EU CONSTRUCTS
THE EUROPEAN PUBLIC
SPHERE: SEVEN STRATEGIES
OF INFORMATION POLICY

Michael Brüggemann

No. 19

Universität Bremen • University of Bremen
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Staatlichkeit im Wandel • Transformations of the State
Sonderforschungsbereich 597 • Collaborative Research Center 597

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No. 19

Sfb597 „Staatlichkeit im Wandel“ – „Transformations of the State“

Bremen, 2005

[ISSN 1861-1176]

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(TranState Working Papers, 19)

Bremen: Sfb 597 „Staatlichkeit im Wandel“, 2005

ISSN 1861-1176

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How the EU Constructs the European Public Sphere: Seven Strategies of Information Policy

ABSTRACT

If there is no such thing as a European Public Sphere (EPS), why don't we construct one? The answer seems to be obvious: There is no way one could construct a public sphere top-down since it depends on the active participation of speakers, the media and audience. In a democratic society they are free to deliberate with whom and about what they want. This article does not challenge the Habermasian notion of a public sphere evolving from the free discourse of the citizens. Nevertheless, the evolution of a public sphere is also structured by incentives and constraints imposed from above. The European Union structures the EPS - as a polity as well as through its policies and politics. While it is true that different policies such as media policy and all cultural policies matter for the public sphere, this paper concentrates on the Commission's information policy as it constitutes the most direct link between the institution and the EPS. Seven different strategies of information policy will be presented which vary in their potential of creating or suppressing the evolution of a democratic public sphere. The extremes are marked by propaganda and arcane policy on the one hand and dialogue and transparency on the other hand. While the Commission pursued arcane policies for a long time, its approach to information has changed during the last decade. A change of paradigm might be under way but the legacy of European policy without "Öffentlichkeit" constraints all attempts at pursuing more democratic information policies aimed at strengthening the public sphere.

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How the EU Constructs the European Public Sphere: Seven Strategies of Information Policy

INTRODUCTION*

During the last fifty years the European nation states have transferred much of their power to common supranational institutions and to mechanisms of intergovernmental decision-making. At the same time, the European Union still lacks democratic legitimacy. Attention has therefore shifted towards the crucial link between the EU and its citizens: a European Public Sphere (EPS)¹. This has led to the discovery of a new black hole in the EU universe closely linked to the legitimacy deficit and the democratic deficit of the EU: the “communication deficit” (Meyer 1999).

The public sphere is generally seen as something that evolves from the free discourse of citizens. This article looks at the incentives and constraints imposed on the public sphere from above through the nature of the European Union as a polity and a number of its policies drawing on the most recent literature as well as various policy documents and more than 30 interviews conducted in Brussels and with the offices of the Commission and the European Parliament in several member states. While different policies such as media policy and all cultural policies matter for the public sphere, the Commission’s information policy shall be analyzed in more detail as it constitutes the most explicit link between the institution and the EPS. Seven different strategies of information policy will be presented which vary in their potential of creating or suppressing the evolution of a democratic public sphere. This framework will be applied to the information policy of the Commission in order to locate it between the poles of propaganda and arcane policies on one hand and transparency and dialogue on the other hand.

The Commission’s information policy turns out to be not static over the years but rather shifting towards a new policy paradigm. This is to be explained against the background of a gradual transformation of the state as it is analysed at the Collaborative Research Center in Bremen.² As the EU shifts towards statehood it is confronted with

* I would like to thank Prof. Dr. Hans J. Kleinsteuber, Ralf Bendrath, Balthas Seibold, Matthias Leonhard Maier, Katharina Kleinen v. Königslöw and the anonymous reviewers of this article for helpful comments and constructive peer reviewing. The manuscript was completed in May 2005.

¹ This short form will be used in the text for European Public Sphere which is understood as a set of interconnected Europeanized public spheres.

² The Collaborative Research Center (CRC 597) “Transformations of the State” in Bremen sponsored by the German Research Foundation (DFG) analyses this structural change transforming the “Democratic Constitutional Interventionist State (DCIS)”. One dimension of this research program is the democratic quality of the state and the question of legitimation. Attempts to construct a European public sphere should also be seen as a tool aimed at a

doubts about its legitimacy and demands for more transparency and openness. National media are looking much more closely at the EU, its policies and institutions.³ This happens in the context of the alleged evolution of an information society.

THE EU – DISCOVERING AN “UNPUBLIC” SPHERE

In order to tackle the questions of constructing a public sphere, the term *European Public Sphere (EPS)* needs to be defined. This article follows the widely accepted suggestions of Gerhards (1993) that the EPS, if it exists, can only take the shape of an Europeanization of the national public spheres. Following a Habermasian understanding of the public sphere⁴, I suggest to analyze the EPS as *network of Europeanised public spheres connected by information flows*.⁵ The base of this network is the distinct space of communication that Europe has been for ages (Kleinsteuber / Rossmann 1994). The hypothesis of Europeanization implies that the process of European integration has led to a re-orientation of the relevant actors in the public sphere (speakers, audience and media).⁶

Much of the debate still centres around defining the necessary and sufficient conditions for measuring the existence of an EPS. Three schools of thought can be distinguished. Firstly, what I would call the “*impossibility school*” applied the model of a unitary national public sphere to the European arena: A European Public Sphere cannot exist because there is a lack of common language, European media, European civil society, European identity and demos (Grimm 1995; Kielmannsegg 1996). A transnational public sphere was seen as “a contradiction in terms” (Kunelius/Sparks 2001, 11). A second group of researchers attacked the conditionality (common language etc.) and - borrowing from Habermas – demanded the EPS to fulfil the following conditions: communication in different countries about the *same topics at the same time with the same frame of reference* (cf. Kantner 2004; Eder and Kantner 2000). A third group of researchers

reduction of the perceived legitimacy deficit of the EU. For more information see: <http://www.staatlichkeit.uni-bremen.de>.

³ This is one of the results of the research project directed by Bernhard Peters and Hartmut Wessler at the CRC 597 on the transnationalization of public spheres in Europe with the collaboration of Stefanie Siffert, Katharina Kleinen v. Königslöw, Andreas Wimmel and the author of this article. See Peters et al. (2005) or Brüggemann et al. (2005) for a full account of the results from this research.

⁴ Cf. the definitions of the public sphere by Habermas (1992, 436); Peters (1994, 45) and Gerhards (1998, 694).

⁵ The network metaphor has become quite common to describe modern society in general. Schlesinger e.g. sees the EU as a “Euro-networking polity” (Schlesinger 2003).

⁶ „Europeanization is an incremental process reorienting the direction and shape of politics to the degree that EC political and economic dynamics become part of the organizational logic of national politics and policy-making” (Ladrech 1994, 69).

(e.g. Risse 2003; van de Steeg 2003; Peters 2002; Eriksen 2004, 14) does not feel comfortable with this *public sphere light*. They stress that a closer analysis of the *explicit links* between national public spheres is needed to show that transnational communication actually takes place, for example, in the form of direct references to speakers from abroad. Peters suggests to think of the Europeanization of public spheres as a *multidimensional process*. The different dimensions comprise more talk about the EU, converging national agendas, frames and camps in the debate about political issues, the transnational circulation of arguments, the development of a European identity and the development of transnational media and transnational speakers in the political debate.⁷ This article will analyse how EU policies pose incentives and constraints on all of these dimensions e.g. by aiming at drawing attention to EU issues or fostering transnational media.

These policies are all the more relevant as the citizens refuse to participate in the *European multi-level-democracy*⁸: The turnout at the elections for the European Parliament came down to 45 per cent in 2004.⁹ Behind this lack of participation, lurks a lack of information and knowledge about the EU. While the Convention developed its draft for a European constitution, less than 40 per cent of the citizens had ever heard of the Convention (Flash Eurobarometer 142/2 2003). Most people cannot name the countries that are now part of the enlarged Union and only one per cent believes that they are very well informed about the EU (Eurobarometer Special Edition 2002). From this perspective, the EU does not necessarily lack support but first and foremost awareness among its citizens.

THE EPS: HOW IT IS POLITICALLY CONSTRUCTED

“The aim should be to create a transnational “space” where citizens from different countries can discuss what they perceive as being the important challenges for the Union. This should help policy makers to stay in touch with European public opinion, and could guide them in identifying European projects which mobilise public support.” White Paper (COM 2001/428 final, 12)

⁷ See the research outline for the project “Transnationalization of the Public Sphere – the European Union as an example” at the DFG’s Collaborative Research Center at the University of Bremen. For more information see URL: <http://www.staatlichkeit.uni-bremen.de>. (10.5.2005).

⁸ It has become consensus to see the EU as a multi-level-system. The EU also is multi-level-democracy as there are elements of democratic governance on all levels of the system since the introduction and gradual empowerment of the European Parliament.

⁹ The 1979 turn-out was 67 per cent and has been falling with each election ever since.

What can the EU do to change its *un-publicity*? First of all, it has to be aware of the potential impact that policy-making and “polity-making”¹⁰ have on the capacities of the EPS. On the one hand, structural changes in the polity “EU” evoke repercussions in the public sphere. On the other hand, a number of policies touch the public sphere, namely the information policy of the Commission.

“Polity-Making”: Institutional Reform, the Constitution and the EPS

Four instances of structural changes in the political set-up of the EU which have potential effects on the EPS are briefly discussed below: Constitutionalization, parliamentarization, personalization and localization.

As Habermas pointed out at several occasions, a constitutional act and the process of *constitutionalization* in itself provide a huge potential to initiate public debates (Habermas 2001, 7). The public deliberation of the US founding fathers at Philadelphia could be taken as the historical benchmark. The search for today’s Federalist Papers might be to no avail. The mass media did not particularly care about the European convention. The Commission’s substitute for a public forum was the website “On the Future of Europe”¹¹. It offered a forum to every citizen where he or she can present his or her vision of the EU. More than 2600 messages and contributions were exchanged within less than a year.¹² Nevertheless, the Convention has not generated the public awareness adequate to the significance of the enterprise of constitution-making: A big stone was thrown into the water but it created some rather small circles.

Making the constitution subject to referenda affects the EPS: supporters and opponents of the treaty speak up to convince the people of their respective goals. Nevertheless, referenda do only stimulate the public sphere *if* political actors pro-actively campaign for a certain outcome. This was the case in France before the referendum on the constitution but it was for example not the case before the first Irish referendum on the Nice Treaty. In Ireland EU- supporters failed to mobilize their share of the population and participation came down to the level of 35 per cent (Sinnott 2001).

The *parlamentarization* of the supranational power is another institutional reform model with potential leverage for the EPS. The members of the EP have a much greater impetus to make their work public than Commission officials since they need to mobilize their voters. So far, however, the EP has not succeeded in installing itself as the public forum and heart of the EU-democracy. Yet, there are examples of the power the par-

¹⁰ The term “polity-making” (in contrast to policy-making) is introduced to describe the process of constructing the European polity itself, i.e. the making of the constitution, institutional questions etc.

¹¹ <http://www.europa.eu.int/futurum>

¹² Information Note by the Commission (5.12.2001): “Actions taken by the Commission in Respect of the Public Debate on the Future of Europe”. URL: http://europa-eu.int/futurum/informations_en.htm.

liament might have to enlarge the public sphere: The fall of the Commission in 1999 as a consequence of the corrupt commissioner Edith Cresson became only possible when the EP and a group of journalists joined forces to bring the affair into the public arena (cf. Meyer 2002).

Quite a few topics discussed in the context of the European Convention bear importance for the development of the EPS. One of them is *personalization*: It has frequently been remarked that Europe does not only lack a phone number as Kissinger said, but that it also lacks a face (de Vreese 2003, 23) – a “Mrs. or Mr. Europe”. This will change if the constitution becomes effective: The permanent President of the Council, the European Foreign Minister, and the president of the Commission will make three potentially well-known faces for Europe and important speakers in the European Public Sphere.

In another respect the Convention drew surprisingly little attention to the effects that the constitution might have on the EPS, namely the “*localization*” of EU politics. The practice of a European circus camping in the capital of each country with the rotating presidency is costly and perhaps not very efficient. Nevertheless, it had a Europeanizing effect on the respective national public sphere as it is shown by studies of media content (de Vreese 2003, 30).¹³ The practice of “going local” (de Vreese 2003, 29) should consequently be maintained, e.g. by moving council meetings to different European cities from time to time in order to get closer to the citizens.

Policy-Making: The EU’s Approach to Culture, Language and Media

Any policy pursued in public may structure the public sphere since it might become a major topic, which is discussed in the media, or it touches the lives of the citizens and inevitably becomes a topic discussed in the streets - the best example of the latter being the Euro. Each policy might as well be accompanied by a strategically constructed policy narrative and information campaign. This notwithstanding, there are policies which are more explicitly linked to the public sphere than the classical sectoral European policies such as agriculture. All policies related to culture are closely related to the public sphere as will be shown below. Most obviously, policies fostering the knowledge of foreign languages and policies regulating the media or communication technologies are also related to the public sphere. One policy, however, is explicitly linked to the public sphere as it concerns the aims and means of institutional information and will therefore be in the centre of this article: information policy.

¹³ The research team of de Vreese finds that media coverage of the EU and popular attention for the EU increased extra-ordinarily in Denmark as compared to other countries around the summit in Copenhagen, December 2002.

It is common to all these policies that the Commission's scope for action is very limited since competences remain on the national level and the aims of the Commission's activities are only narrowly or ambivalently defined in the treaties.

Cultural Policy: Invention of Europeanism

The current version of the Treaty establishing the European Community states: "The Community shall contribute to the flowering of the cultures of the Member States, while respecting their national and regional diversity and at the same time bringing the common cultural heritage to the fore" (Art. 151). The Union's role consequently is to promote diversity and unity at the same time. The activities of the EU are limited to promoting cooperation among the Member States and to supplement national policies, also in the field of "improvement of the knowledge and dissemination of the culture and history of the European peoples". Funding is still very limited, the EU's significance for culture mainly derives from side effects from other policies such as market regulation.

Having said that, the EU pursues - at least to a certain extent - the "invention of Europeanism" by following the classical recipe of the "invention of Nationalism" as it was presented by authors such as Hobsbawm (1991) and Anderson (1983). This recipe comprises an elite-driven approach to invent symbols and traditions, promoting a common language and employing strategies of inclusion and exclusion to consolidate the group identity. "The new Europe is being constructed on much the same symbolic terrain as the old nation-states of the last two centuries" Shore writes (2000, 50). Cultural policy was installed in the mid-eighties after the "Solemn Declaration on the European Union" of 1983. The outward turn to identity-symbolism took place in the mid-eighties after the Parliament had suffered from low turn out in European elections. The European Council agreed to establish a "Committee for a People's Europe" which produced recommendations for symbolic measures. Establishing the European Council's emblem as the official EU flag and making Beethoven's "Ode an die Freude" the European anthem as well as rituals such as the annual nomination of a European cultural capital and the celebration of 9th May as Schumann Day originate from this time but also the idea of founding a "European University Institute" (Shore 2000, 45ff ; Mak 2001, 41).¹⁴ This is relevant for the EPS since a common identity and a growing intensity of com-

¹⁴ The new "European Anthem" is a good example of reinterpreting history. It was originally dedicated to Friedrich Wilhelm, the Third of Prussia. The German text by Schiller is left aside. For a detailed analysis of this kind of cultural politics see Shore (2000) and the research paper "The use of nationalist strategies by the European Union" by Balthas Seibold (1999) available at URL: http://www.webwort.de/index_texte_publicationen.htm (5.5.2005).

munication are two sides of the same coin (Cf. Deutsch 1953).¹⁵ Cultural and educational EU-programs such as town twinning, Erasmus and Socrates also are contributions to build up the social basis for a vivid public sphere: The Erasmus student of today may be paying much more attention to what is going on abroad tomorrow.

Language Policy: Pardon my French

Exchanging students also serves the EU's aim of fostering the knowledge of foreign languages. For the first time in EU history, there is even a Commissioner (Ján Figel) explicitly responsible for multilingualism. His job is all the more important within an EU which has 20 official languages but every second citizen does not know any foreign language (Eurobarometer Special 54.1b). Therefore besides improving the knowledge of foreign languages, it is EU policy, that all decisions and documents relevant to the outside world must be available in all official languages. This policy causes problems in the enlarged Union. Even before enlargement, the EP already spent an estimated third of its budget on translating (Hill 2002). Establishing English as official lingua franca at least within the political cosmos of Brussels would be the pragmatic but politically not feasible alternative to this policy.

In what way does this impact on the public sphere? Communication across language barriers is already possible if the media serve as translators. This notwithstanding, transnational communication is much more likely to occur if people speak each other's language. Obviously, learning a language also means getting interested in each other's culture and ideas, - possibly also in each other's newspapers or radio stations. Therefore all policies fostering the learning of languages are also useful for the evolution of transnational public spheres.

Common media for all are more likely to be commercially successful if there is a lingua franca. Until now genuine transnational European media have either failed (The European), are limited to Brussels (Voice of Europe) or depend heavily on public funding (Arte). Even EuroNews, which is quite successful in terms of gaining a pan-European audience with more than seven million viewers per day, still is not commercially successful. Under the condition of an evolving lingua franca these media may get the chance for a wider audience: A good example of this is the Financial Times which addresses the economic elites in English.

Media Policy: Between Market and Culture

European media policy is another relevant factor shaping the EPS – but again supranational powers in this area are very limited. The fundamental normative base of all EU

¹⁵ Nevertheless, a common identity, a European “we”, is not a necessary condition for transnational communication as Kantner has pointed out (Kantner 2004, 85-88).

media policy will be the embodiment of the freedom of the media in the upcoming constitution (Art. II /11). The Commission regards - as a consequence of its mandate in the treaties – regulation of media essentially as internal market policy: It is not yet clear, however, whether the media should be primarily treated as commercial or cultural goods.¹⁶ The first understanding imposes the role of a market maker on the Commission who fights national subsidies for public broadcasting and puts emphasis on the private and commercial media market, while the second understanding demands concepts of cultural policy. Cultural policy would help to preserve high standards of information and pluralism, as well as quotas (e.g. for the percentage of “European” content on TV¹⁷) and possibly direct funding for European media projects aimed at enlarging the EPS such as EuroNews which received 3.6 Mio. Euro from the Commission in 2004 (Com 2004, 196 final, 19). Another idea that is currently circulating in Brussels is the introduction of a EU TV channel which is oriented at the American C-Span which reports live and real-time from Congress.¹⁸

EUROPEAN INFORMATION POLICY

Public Relations, Information Policy or Policy Information?

Information policy is the political activity most explicitly linked to the EPS and an area where research is deeply needed. Therefore an analytical framework shall be introduced before proceeding with a more detailed analysis. The term ‘information policy’ is used by the Commission itself but is not explicitly defined. The term might arouse suspicions among political *and* communication scientists since information is not one of the classical policy fields and it is not a priori evident why one should talk about information policy instead of public relations.

Information touches upon any policy since any policy is accompanied by its own “policy narrative” (cf. Radaelli 2000). Therefore, policy analysis sees information as one instrument of policy-making somewhere between strong regulatory and voluntary measures (Howlett / Ramesh 1995, 82). This article proposes to analyse information as

¹⁶ There is disagreement among scholars, whether the Commission is only interested in deregulation or whether the Commission actually cares about a public sphere which meets not only market but also democratic standards. The position of the Commission might be best described as swinging between the two poles (Cf. Kleinstauber / Rossmann (1994); Kleinstauber (2001); Ward (2001)).

¹⁷ The “Television without Frontiers Directive” (from 1989, amended in 1997) demands that TV broadcasters, in principle, reserve a majority of airtime for European programmes.

¹⁸ A basis for such a program would be the existing EU news service “Europe by Satellite” which offers daily coverage of EU events via satellite – but mainly as a source for other TV stations. The long-term idea of “Channel Europe” has already found its way into the Commission’s strategy papers (European Commission 2004, 18)

a policy: To give or deny information, to just respond to demands or to pro-actively inform the citizens, to guarantee a right to information, to advertise or to explain policies, to centralise information in an information office or to spread it over all government agencies – all of this demands political decisions. This set of decisions constitutes the field of information policy.

It is not just a technical question of how to do professional and effective public relations work.¹⁹ To use the term information policy means putting public relations into a wider perspective. The term information policy is appropriate in that it admits that informing the citizens is not a technical exercise dominated by the instrumental question of “how to create support for my policies” but a field of policy which responds to the problem of how the government and the administration should contribute to inform the citizens. I use the term “information policy” to describe the *aims and means of information and communication of a political institution*. Information policy is comprised of three elements: The first one concerns rights and practical questions of access to information and documents which is basically discussed in the EU under the label of *transparency*. The second strand is *professional public relations*: strategic communication efforts on behalf of e.g. the Commission which may partly be outsourced to commercial PR agencies. A third source of public information and opinion are *political rhetorics*, i.e. the communicative activity of the political management floor of the Commission (speeches of Romano Prodi, interviews with Günther Verheugen or other well-known “EU-personnel” in the wider sense such as Valéry Giscard d’Estaing who presided the Convention).²⁰ Taken together these three elements form what I would call the information policy of an institution. In order to analyse the information policy of the EU one first needs to establish an analytical framework that goes beyond the definition proposed above.

¹⁹ Public Relations comprises all professional efforts to reach the public via the media (press work and advertisements) or directly (information leaflets, public discussions, etc.). The most prominent definition of PR sees it as part of the communication management between an organisation and its publics (Grunig / Hunt 1984, 6). This definition evokes the idea that PR is a politically neutral organisational task. The technocratic idea of “management” is not adequate in the context of political institutions: The Commission pursues an information policy and part of this policy might be hiring a PR consultant who serves a politically defined purpose.

²⁰ Bentele calls this “functional PR” as it is part of the job of a Commissioner to represent the institution while the spokespeople of the Commission perform “organizational PR” (Bentele 1998).

A Framework for Analysing European Information Policies

The model presented below (see figure 1) suggests to analytically separate seven strategies for information policy.²¹ These strategies differ on two dimensions: 1. Does information policy rather open up access to information or does it pro-actively reach out to people in order to give a political message? 2. Is the communicative and power relationship between the government and the people rather symmetric or asymmetric?

Information policy might vary in its democratic quality. In contrast to transparent policy and dialogue which would be components of a deliberative democracy, arcane policy and propaganda would be the methods of choice of authoritarian regimes. Of course, even in democracies there will always be issues that cannot be dealt with in public. There will also always be attempts to get away with propaganda. The question is which strategy of information policy is prevalent. The communicative power relation in between the institution and the public varies between being very asymmetric in the case of propaganda and symmetric in the ideal case of a dialogue.

On a second dimension, we can differentiate between information and persuasive communication: While transparency means access to information, political institutions might want to set the public agenda in order to show that the issues they deal with are relevant. Furthermore they might want to communicate their opinion using instruments of political marketing such as symbolic communication appealing to emotions or they might choose to publicly justify their policies by rational argumentation.

Figure 1: Seven Strategies of Information Policy

Propaganda Persuasion ignoring basic communicative norms	Marketing Using symbols in order to appeal to emotions	Justification Explaining policies and giving reasons	Dialogue Discussing politics	Persuasive communication ↑ ↓ Information
Agenda setting Raising awareness for issues				
Arcane Policy Silencing the public sphere		Transparent Policy Direct access to comprehensive information		
Asymmetric communication Authoritarian governance		Symmetric communication Deliberative governance		

²¹ This model develops further and systemizes the categories presented in the literature on PR in general (Grunig/Hunt 1984) and political PR for the EU (Gramberger 1997; Mak 2001).

Empirically *arcane policy* is characterized by politics behind closed doors. There is no information about the political agenda, no access to documents, no decision-making in public and the public relations function is systematically weakened. *Propaganda* means strategically misusing public relations for telling lies and manipulating the public. Propaganda does not admit mistakes of the institution, nor disadvantages of its policies. It does not care to deal seriously with counter-arguments. In contrast to *arcane policy* *transparent policy* describes an open door policy: The agenda, the decision making procedures, all documents are public. Public relations people prepare information that is easily accessible, comprehensive and unbiased. *Political marketing* describes efforts to sell politics through symbolic measures and appealing to emotions rather than rational explanation.²² The latter is true for *public justification*. A lot of political marketing combined with limited rational justification is of course a common practice of politicians supported by public relations professionals. *Agenda setting* aims at creating awareness for the importance of certain issues. Media attention is more important than convincing the public of a certain position. It might comprise efforts to Europeanize national public spheres and might precede strategies of persuasion. *Dialogue* means very generally speaking a communicative relationship of talking and listening. Applied to information policy, it might be just an interactive tool of political marketing (taking Socrates as an example who also used dialogue to teach lessons). Dialogue as an element of deliberative democracy, however, would also mean listening, learning and possibly altering policy decisions. A dialogue as discourse in the way Habermas would define it, would also demand the conversation to stand up to certain normative standards on how to communicate (e.g. giving rational justifications).

Whether an information policy rather follows the model of propaganda or dialogue obviously matters for a democratic public sphere. Citizens will be empowered by a transparent polity and political institutions pro-actively presenting their projects in public before the decision-making. The electorate has a better chance to cast an intelligent vote, when justifications are given instead of a merely symbolic representation of the political process. The following section will apply this analytical framework in order to explore the information policy of the European Commission.

Towards a Change of Paradigm

“The ignorance or lack of understanding typical of the public's relationship with the European Union is not inevitable. It is due largely to the complexity of the European process but also to the absence of an EU information and communication policy on the part of both the European insti-

²² Marketing shares with propaganda the extensive use of symbolism and appeal to people's emotions. In contrast to propaganda, however, marketing respects certain basic norms concerning the means and ends of communication.

tutions and the Member States.” Information Strategy for the European Union (COM (2002) 350 final, 7)

The quote above suggests, that there was no information policy before 2002 which is of course not true since even the act of deliberately refraining from any action is a policy decision. Following the framework established above, this policy of not informing the public may be called “arcane policy”. This used to be the predominant model for the European Communities information activities. These are mainly executed by the European Commission which will therefore be in the centre of the analysis.

Jean Monnet as Proponent of Arcane Policy

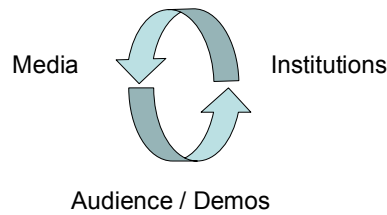
When Emanuelle Gazzo founded the news service „Agence Europe“ in 1954, Jean Monnet is said to have demanded that Gazzo should immediately stop this undertaking (Cf. Gramberger 1997, 100). Gramberger describes the history of the Commission’s information policy from Monnet to Santer as one from trying to silence the public to trying to start dialogue. It seems that the first approach was more successful than the latter. The Commission was quite efficient in managing European integration in silence and later on it failed to reach out to the citizens as practically all research on the topic concludes (Cf. Gramberger 1997; Mak 2001; Meyer 1999; Schlesinger 1999). The technocratic approach of integration seems to have started a *vicious circle of (non-)communication*: The public, the media and politics are caught in a self-enforcing circle of lack of interest to read, write and talk about EU matters.²³ At the same time economic and political integration proceeded and public opinion tolerated the transfer of more and more competences to the European level. This “public consensus” (Lindberg / Scheingold 1970) actually might still exist in many EU countries. Open protest against the EU still is the exception. It is apathy towards the EU which is common among citizens. Democratic procedures such as referenda and voting for the parliament, however, do not demand this kind of consensus but a minimum of activation – one that many people are not ready to deliver.²⁴ In this context the public sphere comes into play as a forum for political mobilization.

²³ Norris (2000) assumes that there is a “virtuous circle of political communication”: The media offer more and more information to those who are interested. The increasing knowledge, she assumes will eventually also spread to the wider public.

²⁴ Protest against the EU needs quite some mobilization too and therefore rarely occurs in most member states. However, to vote against an EU-treaty does not demand too much energy. The worst case scenario for the EU is that only the Euro skeptics vote while those still under the spell of public consensus stay at home.

Figure 2: A vicious circle of (Non-)Communication about the EU

Lack of interest to talk and listen among...



The Beginning of the End of Arcane Policy

The beginning of the 90s marks the beginning of the end of the phase of European arcane policies. The trigger for going public was the European Parliament, but not in the way to be expected, that a parliament sets off public discussion processes. Instead the EP caused worries about the European citizens who refused to vote for Europe. The first reactions were symbolic measures of European consciousness formation starting already in the mid-eighties (see above “Cultural Policy”). These measures belong to the strategy of political marketing which prefers symbolism to argumentation in order to convince people. Normatively, such measures are questionable since they rather seduce citizens than empower them. At the same time, any nation state uses the same means to strengthen its identity.

Information policy became really important for the first time with the ratification problems attached to the Maastricht Treaty: the Danes had rejected the treaty and the referendum in France was nearly lost. While the Commission was blamed for the problematic ratification of the Maastricht Treaty by the national governments, the Commission’s internal scapegoat was failed information policy (Gramberger 1997, 224).²⁵

In response, the Commission produced the De Clercq Report which developed a marketing strategy for the European Communities. At the conference where the report was presented, journalists are reported to have “walked out in disgust” (Mak 2001, 47/48), as they conceived the strategy as propagandistic and following the logic of commercial publicity. The new Commissioner Pinheiro responsible for information formulated his own alternative approach which stressed the principles information, communication and transparency and condemned propaganda while the basic idea of persuasive communication, i.e. the wish to convince the citizens of the benefits of integration, was not abandoned. Pinheiro’s report presented a number of ideas with the aim to make information part of any political project of the Commission. According to

²⁵ The same phenomenon occurred after the crisis of 1999 (see below).

Gramberger (1997, 230ff), Commissioner Oreja who succeeded Pinheiro in office showed no interest in implementing the reform.²⁶

In the course of the 90s the information policy of the EU offered a mixed picture. Elements of all strategies presented above co-exist. However, a change of paradigm on information policies might be under way: Proof of this are a number of new instruments and procedures which show a more pro-active, professional and transparent approach towards information.

More Transparent Politics and New Instruments of Information Policy

The Commission offers insight into its agenda and policies through Green and White Books. Thanks to a regulation on transparency concerned citizens can demand to have access to any “written text” by the Commission. The first remarks on transparency were already included in the Maastricht treaty and a right to information is included in the constitution proposed by the European Convention.

Over the years the Commission has built up an extensive information network: A good example of the strategy public justification was the introduction of “Team Europe”: The Commission has set up a list of 550 people called “Team Europe” who come from different backgrounds and who are willing to explain European issues.²⁷ Apart from these informal spokespeople, there are of course the heads of the Commission’s Representations and regional offices, who publicly explain and justify European policies.

Information material is distributed through more than 500 Documentation Centres with official documents, Info Points Europe in more than 140 cities, three “Grands Centres d’Information” (Paris, Lisbon, Rome) and 129 rural Information Centres spread all over Europe.²⁸ The launch of the web site EUROPA²⁹ in January 1995 was indeed a “quantum leap” towards transparency (Kleinsteuber / Loitz 2001, 103). The citizens do not even have to visit a documentation centre in order to have access to practically all documents which the Commission considers as “public”. In addition to these decentralized information relais, there is the central Q&A – service “Europe Direct” which responds to questions of the citizens and adds to the transparency of the work of the institutions. While all of this basically comprises measures which allow access to information, they do not reach out to those who do not care about the EU and therefore do not visit “www.europa.eu.int”, nor call “Europe Direct”.

²⁶ Usually there was no Commissioner exclusively responsible for information. Therefore it was often regarded as an additional duty of lower importance (Research Interview with Commission Official).

²⁷ For more information on “Team Europe” see URL: http://europa.eu.int/comm/relays/teameurope/index_en.htm.

²⁸ European Commission (2003): Europe at Your Fingertips. URL: http://europa.eu.int/comm/relays/index_en.htm.

²⁹ See URL: <http://europa.eu.int>

Agenda-setting, Justification and Marketing through PRINCE

The quantitative and qualitative leap in the direction of pro-actively communicating policies came with the “Priority Information Programs for the Citizens of Europe” (Prince) in the second half of the 90s. This program was instigated by the European Parliament in the face of Council opposition (Upson 2003, 13). The EP has always been the institution most devoted to an active information policy. The European Parliament also decides about the expenditures on information (part B – “non-compulsory expenditures”). In 2003 it has allocated even more resources to the 2003 information budget than the Commission was ready to spend. In its comments on the new strategy of the Commission, an European Parliament Committee promised that it „will pay the greatest attention to the efforts of the Commission to implement these funds as established“ (EP 2003, 12).

The additional budget provided for the first Prince program was the same amount as the whole budget of the Directorate General responsible for information at that time (Gramberger 1997, 260). This “sea change in the Commission’s approach to disseminating information” (Upson 2003, 13) was “the first time, the EU had made considerable funds available for informing the general public” (Mak 2001, 55): for example about 500 million Euro to inform the citizens about the Euro (Upson 2003, 14). The Prince programs of the 90s covered the topics internal market (“Citizens First”), the Amsterdam Treaty and institutional reform (“Building Europe Together”) and the Euro. Today’s Prince programs deal with enlargement, the discussion about the future of the European Union, the “Area of Freedom, Security and Justice” and “the Role of the European Union in the World” (Com 2002, 350 final, 13).

These campaigns range somewhere in between the strategy of agenda setting (as they want to create awareness for the main projects of the Union), political marketing and public justification (as they want to convey the benefits of the EU for the citizens both by argumentation and symbolic measures).

The main innovation of the latest Prince campaigns, namely on the Euro, was that the Commission started to apply its network approach of governance - laid down in the White Paper on Governance (COM 2001, 428 final) - to the field of information policy.³⁰ This approach means trying to take on board potential partners with a common interest in order to increase the limited leverage of the Commission and enhance the legitimacy of its actions.

³⁰ The idea of enhancing democratic governance through networking is fashionable in social science as well as among EU policy makers. It basically describes the evolution of non-hierarchical cooperation between actors with a general common interest ideally leading to more efficient and legitimate governance (Cf. Börzel 1997).

The natural ally are pro-European NGOs such as the European Movement but partners such as the mass media, the national governments and interest groups such as trade unions are much more important. The Commission signed so called “conventions” on common information about the Euro with all governments except for Great Britain and Denmark. Calls for proposals offering money for information activities on topics such as EU enlargement are the means used to create editorial or civil society platforms for European topics. All of this created the leverage to reach a significant number of citizens.

The campaign on the “Future of Europe” entails the first serious effort to realize the promised dialogue. The website “Futurum” mentioned above was part of this campaign. In contrast to all other big information campaigns, the discussion actually preceded the decision-making in the convention on the future of Europe. In what way the convention actually took into account the debate is of course a question that deserves close scrutiny.

Researchers disagree on the success of the Prince programs. Upson shows for the common market campaign that knowledge of the citizens about their rights actually increased after the campaign.³¹ He pleads to intensify the program and put Prince on a durable basis (Upson 2003). In her case study on the Euro Mak finds that “the Commission has not managed to reach out to the citizens in a clearly visible and high profile way” (Mak 2001, 14). Within the Commission however, the Euro campaign is heralded as a success story (cf. CEC 2004, 552 final) in spite of getting a rather critical evaluation by an external consultancy for a lack of strategy and professional management (CEC 2003).

The fact that dialogue has been a prominent catch-word in all papers on information that the Commission has edited within the last years leads Mak to the conclusion, that “it is nothing more than a Dialogue on Dialogue” (2001, 79) – the same conclusion that Gramberger drew four years before (1997, 266). The possibility of a dialogue which is not only instrumentally used does by definition only arise if political projects are communicated before the major decisions are taken. This is why today the Commission might explain the project of EU enlargement but it cannot seriously start an *open* dialogue about it. So in this regard all promises were bound to be broken.

Strategy-searching after the scandal of 1999

The change of the Commission towards a more open and pro-active information policy was halted in 1999 when the Commission tried to deal with its corruption scandal by mobbing the critical journalists (cf. Meyer 2002), leading to an aggravation of the crisis. Meyer argues that the resignation could possibly have been avoided with a different

³¹ According to Upson (2003, 15): After the campaign the percentage of people who knew that they do not need a work permit to work within the EU rose from 36 to 54 per cent.

approach towards the media and the public (Meyer 2002). After the disaster of 1999, the Commission hastily dissolved DG X which was held responsible for the PR disaster. PR competences were spread over the different sectoral DGs but later on re-concentrated in the newly founded DG Press. This confusion is probably one reason why it took the Commission three years to come up with a new communication strategy which the Council had already asked for in 1999. The “strategy” from 2002 is not a strategy in the strict sense as it is much too abstract and general. On the other hand it shows that the Commission wants to take the issue more seriously than before. The paper demands “far-reaching changes” (17) in that it admits that so far there has been no information and communication policy (7). Its explicit aim is to “create a public forum for the European debate” (CEC 2002, 350 final, 4). The primary goal however, remains outspokenly persuasive communication: Messages shall be produced and controlled in order to win the citizens for Europe. While the word „genuine dialogue“ occurs in the paper, it seems that ultimately „dialogue“ is rather used in the sense of an interactive form of persuasive communication³²: The Commission would rather sit down with citizens and discuss its policies than just distributing a leaflet.

The effects of such a paper may be more limited than the rigour of its content suggests. DG Press remained in a weak position during the Prodi Commission since there was no Commissioner primarily responsible for information. While Romano Prodi – in the beginning – claimed to make communication a priority, he gave the issue as an additional duty to Commissioner António Vitorino who was primarily responsible for justice and home affairs. New structures of cooperation among the institutions in Brussel were established, namely the “Inter-institutional Group on Information” which since 2002 unites the Council, the EP and the Commission. Furthermore evaluations of the information networks of the Commission were carried out. This process of reflection led to an “implementation”-paper in 2004, which was not so much about implementing a strategy but rather about finally coming to concrete proposals on how to go on with the Commission’s information policy (COM 2004, 196 final).

At the end of 2004, a new Commission took office and since then there has been a Commissioner solely responsible for information. Again the issue is declared a priority but this time, the conditions seem much more favourable that this will actually lead to changes on how the EU reaches out to the people. Member states’ governments seem to be willing to cooperate on this issue. In 2004 two ministerial conferences were organized by the Irish and the Dutch presidency on the issue of “communicating Europe” – something that had never happened before.

³² Cf. Raupp who criticizes the Commission’s instrumental approach to communicating its policies which conflicts with genuine dialogue (Raupp 2004, 236).

Relicts of Arcane Policy

Beneath this turn towards transparent governance relicts from the days of arcane policy prevail. The transparency regime of the Commission still offers loop holes and due to a lack of a comprehensive register of *all* documents one cannot easily ask for the documents not published on the web.³³ The Commission still is haunted by its bureaucratic culture and Council negotiations partly still take place in secrecy, thereby making it difficult to hold national politicians responsible for what they do “in Brussels”. The information policy remains structurally weak, as it still lacks a legal basis. The upcoming constitution will not change this. One sentence is missing: “The Institutions inform the citizens about the activities of the Union”. Alejo Vidal-Quadras, co-chairman of the Interinstitutional Group on Information (IGI) for the European Parliament, wrote an open letter to Giscard proposing to put this sentence into the constitution. The proposal did not make it into the final draft of the constitution. Maybe the appropriate sentence would rather read: “The institutions *and* the member states inform the citizens about the activities of the Union.” The Commission has stressed that it is mainly the member states’ task to explain European policies towards their citizens. In the field of information policy the Commission seems to have realized that by claiming too much responsibility, it risks to be blamed for failing to inform citizens about Europe. Last but not least, the representations of the Commission complain to lack the personnel for a more pro-active work with the press. Due to this lack of personnel they were not even able to spend all the money that could have been available for communication.

The analysis has shown that we find examples of all strategies of information policy. The table below shows this by giving examples for all strategies. This notwithstanding, we still find that the dominant policy paradigm has changed over time.

³³ Reasons for a denial of documents (e.g.: a document that “expresses the personal opinions of Commission officials or advice from a Commission department”) can be looked up at URL: http://europa.eu.int/comm/secretariat_general/sgc/citguide/en/citgu19.htm. The Commission seems to make extensive use of these arguments to deny information as a team of Swedish journalists found out when testing the new “European Rules on Openness” by requesting different types of internal documents (van Buuren 2003).

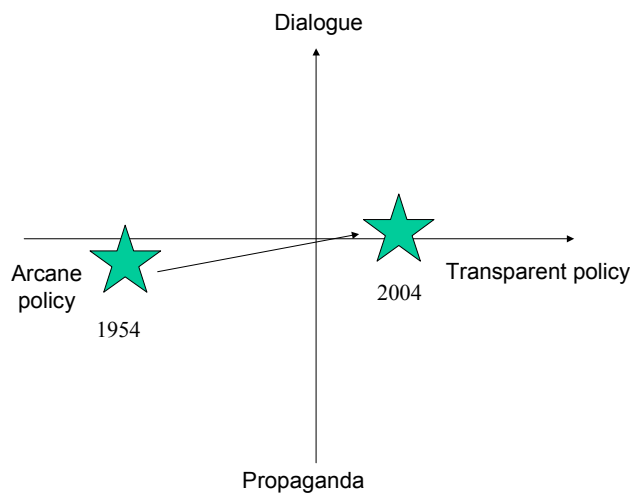
Table 1: The seven strategies in practice: Examples from the EU’s information policy

<i>Propaganda</i>	The Treatment of journalists before the Commission’s resignation in 1999
<i>Arcane Policy</i>	Exclusion of the public during part of the Council’s sessions; Weakness of Transparency Regulation
<i>Marketing</i>	Symbolic measures such as the European anthem and flag and events such as the Schuman Day
<i>Justification</i>	Team Europe
<i>Agenda-Setting</i>	PRINCE Campaigns
<i>Transparency</i>	Right to access to documents included in the constitution; Website: EUROPA
<i>Dialogue</i>	Website: FUTURUM; convention: consultations with civil society and citizens

VICIOUS OR VIRTUOUS CIRCLE OF POLITICAL COMMUNICATION?

The new instruments used in the context of the Prince campaigns as well as the general tenor of practically all recent policy documents on the issue hints at a change of paradigm in the way the EU treats information (see figure 2). Nevertheless, there is still a long way to go towards open and transparent governance and backlashes such as the corruption scandal may always occur.

Figure 2: A Change of Paradigm in EU- Information Policy?



The review of the EU’s activities in the field of media, culture and information has shown that the EU is trying to influence all dimensions identified by research on the Europeanization of the public sphere which were listed earlier in this article: 1. Information campaigns aim at more talk about the EU. 2. By pursuing strategies of agenda setting they attempt to make people discuss the same topics at the same time. 3. By framing topics in the same way and trying to activate the same networks in all member states, EU information policies hint at developing similar camps and frames in national debates in different countries. 4. A European public (“we“) is promoted with cultural

and language policies. 5. Information material and the press work of the Commission foster the transnational circulation of certain arguments in all EU countries. 6. A rising effort is put into helping transnational media such as Euronews. 7. Transnational speakers are present in the form of the EU-personnel itself but the EU also mobilizes speakers who are willing to talk on European topics from a European perspective (“Team Europe”).

Looking at the last two decades, a comprehensive study of the quality press in five countries has just come to the conclusion: There is a Europeanization of public spheres, but they remain segmented as each national paper pays more attention to the EU’s institutions and policies, albeit transnational discursive exchange between national public spheres is not intensifying (Peters et al. 2005; Brüggemann et al. 2005). At the same time, the citizens knowledge of and interest in the EU still is very low in spite of all efforts described above.

This leaves questions for further research: To what respect is the political activity analysed above really relevant to this evolution of the EPS? Have the EU policies contributed to reverse the vicious circle of non-communication mentioned above? Are media, political actors and audience dragged into a virtuous circle of political communication? We observe a change towards a more democratic information policy, but its effectiveness might be called into question. Obviously, there is no linear cause and effect mechanism but one that is dynamic, full of feedback processes and with the permanent presence of adverse effects: The attempt of Santer’s PR people to silence the scandal in 1999 lead to a mobilisation of journalists who were now more than ever interested in writing something about the EU. In the end this might be as effective for vitalizing the public sphere as all planned information campaigns. The sheer existence of information campaigns does not mean that they do have a significant effect or primarily the effect intended. To assume that they have no effect at all would be equally naïve. Long-term and rather subliminal effects might be expected that are worthwhile further examination.

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