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From An Instrument To The Instrumentalization of "European Opinion"

Philippe ALDRIN*

Through their very existence, European studies tend to reinforce the certainty that the European Union (EU) is the product and the matrix of an unprecedented political process— an exception to the rule laid out by classical theories on the institutionalisation of Nation-States [Pierson, 1996]. The supposed *sui generis* properties of the EU are largely responsible for the fact that traditional models of analysis of political phenomena are not applied to *European* political phenomena. However, the epistemological and empirical arguments to support the notion of a radical alterity of the political material – be it conceptual, human, administrative, legal – that has built Europe as a Community require closer examination. This article will argue that beyond the specific object of our study, the EU is a political object that requires the same sociological approaches as other political objects where this approach seems only "natural". On the basis of a survey conducted in the services of the European Commission's Directorate General (DG) Communication¹, I apply to the EU communication apparatus the same hypotheses that are commonly applied to more "classical" political institutions [Franklin, 2004; Georgakakis, 2004]. This continuist stance [Dobry, 1986:14-28] in no way negates or underestimates the specificity of the "culture" and decision-making procedures of the EU or of certain types of issues faced by the EU. By

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¹ This article is based on the systematic reading of the Commission and the European Parliament's archives and on interviews with the actors of the EU's communication policy, conducted in Brussels, Strasbourg, Paris and Berlin.

focusing on the frames² and the instruments of European communication policy– i.e. on Community instruments of measure, analysis of opinions and management of the public space – I aim first and foremost to show how Community actors have historically assessed, constructed and handled³ the “problem” of European public opinion.

In keeping with the perspective of this book, this chapter places emphasis on three of the most salient conclusions of the survey it is based upon. The historical account of the Commission’s information-communication policy will retrace the historicity of “European public opinion” as a perceived problem within the Commission services. This analysis points to the early presence, originating in the 1960s, of a conceptualisation and of systems of evaluation and resolution of the problem. The success or full efficiency of the latter, as measured by the huge importance accorded to public opinion since the 1990s on, has more to do with the favourable restructuring of the internal and external tensions of the European political game than with a feedback or spill over consequence of the integration process [Haas, 1958]. The socio-historical analysis of the European Community (EC)’s communication apparatus then reveals the extent to which its structuring conceptions are malleable. The redefinition of the objectives and the means of European communication – from the original sectoral approach (“the information policy of the Communities”) to a more global approach (“a European communication policy”) is linked to the conceptual and technical changes of the instrumental equipment of European public action. However, these changes were not specific to the EU, as the processes of professionalisation and rationalization of the EU’s communication apparatus followed the same pattern as local and national executives in Europe at the same time [Olivier-Yaniv, 2000; Legavre, 2005]. Lastly, studying the work of EC agents highlights the importance of policy entrepreneurship in the construction of opinion and communication as a “European problem”. To some extent this is a new illustration of the weight of the civil service within the dynamics of European public action [Peters, 1992] as they mobilize internal and external networks, gain support and material resources in order to legitimize Commission initiatives and choices in the face of resistance from member states.⁴ But the genealogy of the instruments used to achieve these goals – in particular the sophistication of the

² By “frames” we refer to the order of signification, the certainties, the concepts that guide discourses and actions of European actors. These frames are perceived in the lines of actions (“political”, “strategic”, “plan of action”) and the spaces of justifications that collective actors apply to themselves and demonstrate publicly. A frame perspective is also about pointing out how these frames can be used as prognoses, diagnoses and justifications for common principles of action. See [Benford and Snow, 2000] and on political choices [Rein and Schön, 1991].

³ See Christopher Hood’s groundbreaking analysis of the “tools” of control and action of governments [Hood, 1986].

⁴ Following the model of advocacy coalitions, theorized by Sabatier [Sabatier, 1998]

Eurobarometer tool and its uses – also uncovers the tentative, sometimes improvised, but systematically opportunistic character [Kingdon, 1984] of such undertakings, in contradiction with the strategist vision of a political decision centre marked by a unanimous representation of coherent EC goals and a shared will to achieve them.

I will then seek to describe and recontextualize the successive adjustments in the approach of the opinion “problem” within EC institutions. At each significant stage of this redefinition of the “problem”, I will attempt to show the links between the conceptual evolution and the instrumental equipment of communication within the decision-making space.⁵

The powerless condition of European Community communication

*From the Community effort of information
to the European opinion “problem”*

Contrarily to what the advocates of a retrospective vision of its history claim, the EC has since its inception been attuned to the question of public opinion. Various elements show that EC officials did not wait for the political shift of the Maastricht Treaty (1991), the launch of the single currency (2002) or the electoral debacle of the project for a constitutional treaty (2005) to become interested in public opinion. Immediately following their creation, the executives of the three Communities (ECSC, EEC, Euratom) established services that ensured the diffusion of information on their activities for journalists and the populations concerned. Very early on, administrative and political officials monitored media coverage of Community activity and financed opinion polls on public perceptions of the Communities in each member country. The Commission, which centralized an information service shared by the three Communities, created the Eurobarometer in 1973. It was an internal instrument (activating external service providers) of biannual measurement of opinions in member countries. Under the first Delors presidency, the Commissioners adopted the Priority Information Programmes (PIP), and launched full-fledged “marketing campaigns” (partnerships with sporting events, launch of the “European Year”) in order to make EC initiatives and policies widely known [Melich 1989]. The Commission was clearly supported by the European Parliament in this effort to

⁵ I follow here a constructivist tradition of research that “takes ideas seriously” and analyses instruments and their uses as “tracers” of these ideas [Lascoumes, Le Galès 2004b].

inform and evaluate the attitudes of “populations”. As early as 1972⁶, MEPs adopted very firm resolutions on the “information policy” of the Communities, recommending an increased mobilisation of resources and the systematic recourse to the most modern communication techniques⁷. If the genesis of the EC’s instruments of measure of opinions and management of the public space was present at the very start of European administrations and institutions, the sequential reconstruction of EC communication tends to show that, at least during the last two decades, both the range of these activities and instruments and the “problem” they purported to solve have shifted on several occasions.

Although initially labelled as a “policy”, strictly speaking, the information activity of the Community was not, at least when it started, a supranational public policy; it had no vocation to serve a collective good, solve a social problem or meet the needs of a specific fraction of the population. In the early stages of the Common Market, the objectives of this policy were to popularize the activities of EC institutions towards target populations. There was a first shift of this information activity – which was not however framed as a political problem– when the attitudes of “European public opinion” became a question of democratic legitimization. Indeed, the political order of the EC was progressively democratised from the late 1970s with the direct election of MEPs in 1979, the extension of the Parliament’s attributions and the increasing use of referendums for the national ratification of European treaties. For a unification process that had been until then based on diplomatic negotiations ratified by national political elites, the challenge of universal suffrage made opposition to Europe more visible, and probably also more politically coherent. While they realized that popular support for Europe was waning in ballot boxes and polls, the actors of the EC process noted the emergence of a critical discourse denouncing the “democratic deficit” [Marquant 1979], the “stateless bureaucracy” of “Brussels Eurocrates” under the influence of lobbies, ranging from occasional bursts of Euroscepticism to the politically organized Europhobia of sovereigntists and anti-capitalist movements. The EC spread geographically, extended its capacity of intervention⁸ in member countries, and the issue of popular support, and consequently of the manifest proof – through votes or polls – of its democratic legitimacy,

⁶ On the basis of the Dutch MEP Wilhelmus Schuijt’s report in the name of the political Commission of the European Parliament [SCHUIJT 1972].

⁷ Although taking care to distinguish public relations from propaganda, the 1972 Schuijt report mentions the possibility of resorting to advertising techniques: “We can ask ourselves whether the possibility of renting airtime or newspaper space should be ruled out” He also insists on the “creation of the Community’s image”, a guarantee that “the character, the quality, the motivation and the objectives of a company are respected” [SCHUIJT 1972: 18, 10].

⁸ The Delors Plan (1985) and the ratification of the Single European Act (1986) paved the way for the construction of the Single Market (1986-1992), which caused a considerable rise of the legislative initiatives – and in the normative and restrictive intervention – of the Commission.

became more pressing. The awareness of this new situation modified the dominant framing of the opinion problem. Convinced that informational pedagogy was no longer enough to ensure popular support, the EC actors who were the most dedicated to the defence of the unification process – MEPs and political and administrative Commission officials in particular – started taking numerous initiatives in order to attempt to curb indifference, fear or rejection of Europe. The tone and the recommendations of the report⁹ adopted by MEPs in 1986 are a striking example of this:

“A simple effort of factual information and awareness to European institutions is not sufficient to defeat the feeling of all the parts that compose Europe that they belong to distinct entities, which is the main reason for the indifference to common institutions. (...) A modern information policy should include two equally important aspects: information and communication.” [Baget-Bozzo, 1986: 6-7]. Aside from increasing budgets, the report recommended “the rationalization and strengthening of the information policy towards groups and associations that are opinion multipliers, i.e. primarily journalists, professional organizations and various interest groups, such as environmental protection groups, women’s groups, youth organizations and European movements.” [*id.*: 10]. In order to implement this “plan of action”, the MEPs recommend “resorting to the most appropriate means of communication: television, radio, newspapers, poster campaigns, advertising” and “systematically using instruments of measure of public opinion: polls and surveys like the Eurobarometer” [*id.*: 10-11].

The information effort progressively led to a new institutional treatment of the problem, wherein the mobilization of opinion was to be achieved with the tools of mass communication. This political stake, crystallised by the phrase “the democratic challenge”, grew to be so important that it seeped into every aspect of the EC’s structure from the late 1980s on. The initiatives aiming to increase the “transparency” of decision-making processes¹⁰, to further “institutional reform”¹¹ should be seen in this light, as well as all the actions aiming to formally democratize Europe. Thus at the turn of the 1990s, when the apathy of European citizens appeared as a threat to the integration process, the *Community* information effort was rephrased as a *European* problem of democratic legitimacy.¹² Even if they had been developed since the early stages of the Communities, the EC’s tools of management of the public space (spokesperson’s service, publications, relays and networks, etc) and of measure of opinions (the Eurobarometer), only became a political instrument when mass public support to the EC became a vital political issue for the Community. By outlining the

⁹ Based on Italian MEP Gianni Baget Bozzo’s report [BAGET BOZZO 1986]

¹⁰ See in particular “Institutional Declaration on Democracy, Transparency, and Subsidiarity” (*Bulletin of the European Communities*, 10/1993).

¹¹ See the dispositions in the Maastricht, Amsterdam and Lisbon treaties to reinforce the EP’s attributions.

¹² On the useful distinction between a “Community problem” and a “European problem”, see Smith, 2004.

socio-technical¹³ combinations that have successively determined the definition and treatment of this problem, we will see how the functional instrumentation of information (instruments aim to inform the populations concerned and opinion leaders) has been replaced by a sectoral instrumentation of communication (instruments serving as a cognitive measure allowing the harnessing of cognitive benefits of mass opinion).

Early stages of the European communication apparatus

The shared information service of the three Communities, set up in the early 1960s on the initiative of the EP, initially sought to build contacts with national and local media and spread information to the populations concerned by EC action. Nevertheless, each of the three executives still had their own press speaker, who interacted with the media present in Brussels and Luxemburg¹⁴, enabling them to be reactive and keep sensitive issues under control. The merger of the executives¹⁵ in 1967 forced Community officials to find a new rationality in the organization of external relations. A single Spokesman's Service soon included the press speakers of the various Commissioners under the direct authority of the President of the Commission¹⁶ in charge of relations with accredited journalists present in Brussels. These daily relations took the form of "midday briefings" where the "accredited" came to listen to the press speaker and ask questions in the pressroom of the Commission headquarters [Bastin 2003]. With the merger, the Information Service became the Directorate-General of Information and Communication (DG-X), a full-fledged administrative subdivision of the Commission¹⁷.

The "information policy" structured in the 1960s covered various services holding very traditional functions of public relations such as press relations and editing documents on the activity of Community institutions. From the very start, the institutional conception of European information was inspired by trendy scientific theories on public space, societal tendencies and social influence, as well as by strategic and technical progress in the field of communication. The

¹³ The term « socio-technical » refers to Bruno Latour's actor network theory. I do not have the same scientific agenda, but I am following up on his invitation to reconsider the effects of objects (and therefore of systems, tools and instruments) on logics of collective mobilization and action [Latour 1994].

¹⁴ Giorgio Smoquina then Bino Olivi directed the EEC's spokesperson's service; Jean Poorterman headed the Euratom's and Luis Janz the ECSC's.

¹⁵ In 1952, the ECSC's High Authority was set up in Luxembourg. In 1958, the EEC's Commission was established in Brussels. After the Merger Treaty of 1965, it became the Commission of the European Communities (ECSC, Euratom and EEC).

¹⁶ Bino Olivi was put in charge of the Spokesman's Service of the unified Commission.

¹⁷ The German Louis Janz was DG-X's first director, but he was soon replaced by his countryman Karl Heinz Narjes (former Head of Cabinet for W. Hallstein and later on Commissioner).

sacralization of the press briefing – for which former journalists were already in charge at that time, under the direct authority of the President of the Commission – as a major act of communication is symptomatic of this “age” of political communication [Blumler 1995]. The choices that structured the organisation and the equipment of the Community’s communication apparatus until the 1980s attest to this reactivity to contemporary debates and innovations, notably on two aspects that would become central: relations with the press and the media on the one hand, opinion polls on the other.

In the post-war years, government management of the media in western European countries was mostly limited to the setting up of administrative services in charge of drafting press releases and reviews for government members.¹⁸ Assimilated with propaganda of totalitarian regimes, communication campaigns organised by governments were then few and far between and only dealt with politically neutral themes (fight against social scourges such as alcoholism; civic messages). Ministries and their specialised administrations limited themselves to spreading technical and practical information to “their” audiences (agricultural workers, industrials, CEOs, teachers, etc.) [Olivier-Yaniv 2000]. The Communities’ relationships with journalists – and their relationships with populations – partake in this cybernetic approach¹⁹ to communication: the institution provides information through various channels, and then receives feedback on that information thanks to press reviews and opinion polls. Public institutions only started making systematic use of interviews, press tribunes or rented space in mass media in the 1980s, when commercial sponsors themselves resorted increasingly to institutional communication, thereby making the audience familiar with a form of communication where the message is not exclusively centred on the promotion of a product, but on the identification with values or projects. The founding principles and the evolution of European information thus strictly follow the models of communication techniques used by member States.

The Information Service was at first a minimalist administrative apparatus in charge of informing and observing the media [Rabier 1993]. Symptomatically, its size and scope would mirror the evolution of the integration process itself and more generally reflect the rise and fall of the authority of the Commission within the institutional game. The organisation and the objectives remained identical when the Information Service was transformed into a Directorate General of Press and Information after the merger (1967), and subsequently into a

¹⁸ After the war, European democracies created central services: the Federal press office in FRG, the Central Office of Information in England and later on the *Service de liaison interministériel à l'information* in France.

¹⁹ On the cybernetic approach to communication inspired by Norbert Wiener’s research, its uses and interpretations, see Winkin 2001: 27-53.

Directorate General of Press and Communication or DG-X (1973). Two main principles guided the structuring of these services. First, the staff was dispatched to central services (the Commission headquarters in Brussels) or external offices (in the capitals of member countries and in Geneva, London, New York City, Montevideo and Washington). Secondly, efforts were concentrated on audiences perceived as priority targets [Meijers 1965]: journalists (to ensure contact with the general public), and “determined audiences” i.e. professional categories concerned by Community policies (professional organizations, trade unions, agricultural workers), as well as the milieus expected to be interested in the Community’s project of integration (teachers at all levels). The Information Service employed about 100 people at its creation, and over 200 upon transformation into a DG.²⁰ The information policy instruments remained basic as most of the activity consisted in drafting and disseminating informative brochures and magazines, and in putting together press reviews for the cabinets of Commissioners. DG-X’s work was therefore no different from that of the nascent press and information services that were being created in other DGs [Joana, Smith, 2002].

Europeans and Europe... before the invention of “European public opinion”

The political and administrative officials of the Information Service were influenced by the dominant trends in social sciences on public opinion issues. As post-war European sociology was openly disinterested in social phenomena related to opinion [Lautman 1981], the scientific knowledge on the mechanisms of formation of opinions emanated mainly from theories derived from experimental American psychosociology based on polling techniques. The few European scholars interested in opinion, such as Jean Stoetzel in France or Elisabeth Noelle in Germany, acted as mediators for American science of opinion and introduced polling techniques in their national academic spaces.²¹ This psychosociological approach to opinion would deeply influence Jacques-René Rabier, a high-ranking Commission official who played a crucial role in the first institutionalisation of the services and logics of the European opinion policy. Indeed, he was the director of the Information Service from the beginning, and then Director-General of DG-X and founder of the Eurobarometer (v. *infra*

²⁰ The Schuijt report (1972) mentions 215 civil servants and 71 “other agents”.

²¹ After a stay in New York, where he worked with Paul Lazarsfeld’s team on mass media research, Jean Stoetzel founded the French institute of public opinion (the first French polling institute) and launched the *Sondages* (Polls) journal in 1963. He sheds light on the American roots of his axiological and methodological approach to public opinion in Stoetzel, 1963. E. Noelle left to the US in the late 1930s and completed a PhD in opinion studies. After the war, she and her husband Erich Peter Neumann founded the demoscopia institute of Allensbach [Noelle 1974].

box). In the mid 1960s, almost ten years before the Eurobarometer was officially introduced, Rabier put forward a very precise assessment of opinion-related issues for the Communities and of the communication tools necessary to face them. Strongly influenced by Lazarsfeld's theory on the effect of mass media²² and the mechanisms of opinion, this conception was certainly not typical of high-ranking officials at the time, but it is nevertheless an extremely enlightening indication of the clarity of vision of one of the main entrepreneurs of European communication policy even at that early stage. In a lecture on "The information of Europeans" given at the Institute for European Studies in Brussels, the head of the Information Service provided one of the most enlightening contributions on the future European communication. Referring to the theories of such specialists as Jean Stoetzel²³, David Easton²⁴ and especially Paul Lazarsfeld, he highlighted "resistance, processes of protection and selection" of media messages²⁵, always "transmitted in a more assimilable form, with affective connotations" by relatives, and argued in favour of a relativisation of the "mass" concept.²⁶ Based on these observations, he emphasized the advantages of polling, portrayed as the only technique likely to overcome the usual quibbling and biased interpretations of opinion.²⁷ On the basis of polls conducted in 1962²⁸ on civic attitudes and in 1963²⁹ on consumer behaviour in the six member States of the EEC, Rabier noted a "widespread adhesion of the public to the European idea" but "little curiosity for the steps of Europe's construction". Without mentioning it explicitly, Rabier borrowed Lazarsfeld's classifying principles of political interest³⁰ and, using data from these polls, defined three categories of "attitudes towards political life and the unification of Europe in the EC". These categories were indexed on socio-professional status, income, and the level of education, and distributed according to the following stratification: "well informed, interested and generally favourable" (20 to 30%), "weakly politicized and generally favourable" (40 to 60%); "relative or absolute apathetic" citizens (20 to 30%). For Rabier, the results of

²² On the academic influence of the model developed by the Columbia school, see Pollak 1979.

²³ Paraphrasing him, he writes: "Strictly speaking, there is no public opinion, but collective phenomena of opinion, expression of attitudes or behaviours, observed with adequate techniques such as polls on representative samples" [Rabier, 1965: 35].

²⁴ The text borrows from Easton's conception of the political system transforming inputs into outputs [Easton, 1957].

²⁵ Numerous references are made to Lazarsfeld, Berelson, Gaudet 1944.

²⁶ A reference to Lazarsfeld's *Personal Influence* [Lazarsfeld, Katz, 1955].

²⁷ We find here the theme of an « alliance » between polls and democracy put forward by the American (Elmo Roper, George Gallup) and French (J. Stoetzel) advocates of the method. See Blondiaux, 1998: 211-226.

²⁸ *Public opinion and the Europe of Six*, a poll (on representative samples) conducted by Gallup International under the IFOP's supervision, published in the first issue of *Sondages* in 1962.

²⁹ *Products and People*, a poll conducted and published by *The Reader's Digest Association* in 1963.

³⁰ In order to differentiate the effects of political propaganda, Lazarsfeld and his colleagues created an index of political predisposition (based on socio-economic variables such as occupation, income, religion, location) that provided information on the political interest and exposure to media of the pollees [Lazarsfeld, Berelson, Gaudet, 1944].

these first polls “undeniably” mark the beginning of a “European consensus” produced by a “relative homogeneity of the natural and technical conditions of production” and the resemblance of the “attitudes towards life, shaped by a long history of cultural exchanges, cooperation and conflicts” [Rabier 1965: 18]. In light of these results, the director of the Information Service and soon to be director of the DG-X wrote:

“A European information policy’s goal would be to support and “boost” favourable attitudes of active minorities; raise the interest level and increase the information of citizens who are both favourable and badly informed, or not very interested, and of those who are on a more or less vague level of consensus” [Rabier 1965: 32]

Ideally, the EC’s strategy would be to focus communication towards the socially “better integrated groups and milieus” who would in turn act as relays, translators, information multipliers among their peers according to the “two-step flow of communication”³¹. But Rabier immediately went on to explain why this would not work:

“These institutions [the EC’s] are hampered by a series of factors:

1. The integration process is recent and the image of its reality has difficulty emerging against national imagery or ideological representations of a generous but vague internationalism.
2. It follows that the most apparent forms and results of European integration, in the economic field, are quite technical, involve numerous and complex institutions bearing obscure acronyms, hence the absence of clear images, personalized faces, symbols with emotional resonances with which the popular psyche could form a connection.
3. [...] The participation of citizens in European integration is indirect and covert: as citizens of an emerging Europe, they do not even have the right to vote.
4. The system of psychosocial conditioning occurs almost exclusively to the national sphere – in the fields of (notably, civic) education or information.
5. Furthermore, the very resources of European institutions, except the ECSC, are provided by member States (whose) attitude is often reluctant and suspicious” [Rabier 1965: 63]

One by one, Rabier had pointed out the intrinsic flaws of the EC’s institutions and of the system of intergovernmental constraints that limited their leverage in terms of communication. Overcoming the EC’s communication problem would entail two types of solutions. There was a material one, consisting in increasing the means of analysis (of media, opinions) and of transmission of information. The other was political and consisted in giving more freedom and range of action to the information services, i.e. to the Commission. In order to

³¹ Outlined in Lazarsfeld, Katz, 1955.

do so, States had to be persuaded, as they controlled of the budget and granted competences to EC institutions.

A few years after Rabier's remarks, in 1974, the Eurobarometer brought the hypostatising power of numbers [Desrosières 1994] to something that used to revolve around debatable considerations and impressions. The instrument replaced the multitude of subjective visions and controversies with a supposedly objective and unequivocal statement based on a supposedly unquestionable form of expertise resulting from a methodology resembling a scientific protocol. The Eurobarometer was presented as a scientific objectivation of "European public opinion", to which it instantly conferred an almost tangible reality. But this was not enough to transform the issue of opinion into a European problem, i.e. a problem shared by member states and the EC's institutions. This only happened when the EU entered the realm of "democracy of the public" [Manin, 1995] and the legitimacy of its action was correlated to popular support. Until then, the Eurobarometer remained confined to the periodical examination of the attitude of Europeans towards the European project.

The instrumentalization of opinion in building legitimacy for EC action

Updating the opinion issue within the Commission

A new institutional problematisation of the issue of European opinion took place at the turn of the 1980s-1990s, transforming the place of the issue and therefore also the place of the communication staff within the EC's decision-making space. Despite the precocity of Rabier's assessment, the EC's communication apparatus remained structurally embryonic and in charge of secondary tasks until well into the 1980s. The original principle of division of information tasks was maintained: the spokesmen were in charge of the management of "sensitive" information and daily relations with accredited media, while the DG-X was responsible for the management of the Commission's network of representations (mostly in member countries) and of contacts with the relays of information, as well as for the drafting and diffusion of brochures. DG-X's confinement to mundane tasks of institutional communication was masked by the integration of the Spokesman's Service within DG-X in 1977. From then on, DG-X was often directed by a very high-ranking political official (often a former Head or Deputy Head of Cabinet of a Commissioner) who gave particular attention to the management of the Spokesman's

Service.³² The maintenance of these traditional conceptions illustrates the low level of interest high-ranking officials and members of the Commissioner college accorded to the type of information-communication policy outlined by Rabier twenty years earlier. Since the 1960-1970s, each institution as well as each division of the Brussels administration set up its own communication service [Joana, Smith, 2000], thereby conferring a sectoral, fragmented character to the EC's information task, which reconciled the Commission's aspirations for autonomy but did not openly challenge member States suspicious of open intervention in their public spaces.

DG-X's vocation is not to produce directives; it does not have the legitimacy conferred by the institutionalisation of a link with professional groups³³, unlike other DGs where agents are involved in regular transactions and act as mediators between Brussels and "the field". For this reason, DG-X was perceived as weak within intra-institutional games, in contrast with the big "historical" DGs such as Internal Market, Competition, Secretariat General or Agriculture, who had more power (normative competences, "clienteles"), means (budgets, human resources) and a reputation for competence (staff training and diplomas, close contact with political reality).³⁴

However, this situation changed radically between 1985 and 1995 due to several congruent factors: first, a new configuration of relationships between member states and the Commission during the Delors Era increased the authority of the latter through the revival of the integration process, wider competences and increased political cooperation of member states (Maastricht Treaty), with the perspective of a vast enlargement (after the collapse of the Soviet Bloc). In addition, Jacques Delors was highly interested in opinion issues. Several sources³⁵ describe the Delors presidency as a "golden age of opinion" symbolized by the presentation of a monthly report on opinion trends (the so-called "Trend" note) during the College's meetings. Prepared by the Unit members in charge of opinion monitoring (and therefore of Eurobarometer) and media monitoring, this report provided indications on the "climate of opinion" and the Commission's "leverage". Delors's interest for opinion issues and communication can be explained mainly by his quest for success in his great endeavour: the advent of the Single Market in 1992 [Ross, 1995].

³² When President Jenkins merged the Spokesman's Service and DG-X, Paul Collowald, former Deputy Director of the Spokesman's Service, became Director-General of the DG-X. Collowald's successors were then also former members of cabinets.

³³ On connections with "client groups" as a power resource in the EU's sectoral bureaucracies, see Mazey and Richardson 1993.

³⁴ The prosopographic study of the highest-ranking European officials shows that having worked in one of these « historical » DGs confers "institutional credit" to European careers [Georgakakis, DeLassalle, 2006].

³⁵ Among others interviews with Anna Melich (May 2007), formerly in charge of the Eurobarometer (1994-2000) and now member of the Bureau of European Policy Advisors (BEPA) Renaud Soufflot-de-Magny (February 2008), and Ariane Debyser (May 2007), respectively former (1998-2005) and present collaborator of the Eurobarometer unit.

In 1988, the Commission developed the Priority Information Programmes (PIP) in order to concentrate information-communication resources on priorities determined by the Commission. At the same time a "92 Market" information unit (notably in charge of the monthly *Objectif 92* magazine)³⁶ was created within the DG-X. Remarkably, after a long struggle against DG-III (Internal Market), DG-X obtained the management of "audiovisual policy" [Polo, 2001] and launched the first MEDIA program.³⁷ As the Maastricht treaty provided the EC with competences in culture and audiovisual medias (within the limits of the subsidiarity principle), DG-X was for the first time in its history able to issue directives and negotiate with professionals and representatives of the major media firms of member countries. The political determination to improve communication and the strengthening of the administrative apparatus would find an opportunity for expression during the first actual democratic "crisis" of the European project.

***The reinvention of "European public opinion":
the instruments of opinion as a solution to the "democratic challenge"***

In the early 1990s, a succession of events favoured the expression of this new voluntarism in EC communication. The Maastricht Treaty, which turned the EEC into the EU, was rejected in the June 1992 Denmark referendum³⁸ and was only accepted by a narrow margin by French voters in September.³⁹ The referendum failure echoed the relative drop in "public support for the EU" measured by the Eurobarometer since autumn 1991⁴⁰ and the chronically weak participation in European elections.⁴¹ At the same time, academics pointed to the "half-hearted" support for Europe [Percheron, 1993] and the end of the "permissive consensus"⁴² for a European project driven by political elites [Feather, 1994]. Without the support of the citizens of member countries, who had become European citizens with the ratification of the TEU, it would be difficult for the EU to confront the looming political challenges: economic and monetary union; integration of the former "popular democracies"; and providing security for the European continent. The Commission seized the

³⁶ In 1987 and 1988, various media campaigns (Europe day, European year, sponsoring of sporting events) and more sectoral communication campaigns aimed at women, youth and social partners were launched. See *European Yearbook*, 1988: 15CE.

³⁷ Adopted by a December 1990 Council decision, the MEDIA I program (1991-1995) had a 200 million ECU budget in order to "stimulate and increase the competitive supply capacity of European audiovisual products".

³⁸ 50,4% voted against the ratification of the TEU.

³⁹ Only 51,04% of votes were cast in favour of the TEU, with more than 30% abstentions.

⁴⁰ See Eurobarometer 36, 1991.

⁴¹ The average participation in European elections was 63 % in 1979, 61 % in 1984, 58 % in 1989 and 57 % in 1994.

⁴² The phrase "permissive consensus" was popularised in the 1970s to refer to attitudes towards the implementation of the Single Market [Lindberg, Scheingold, 1970].

opportunity provided by the mounting grievances and controversies around the “democratic challenge” to launch communication campaigns. In January 1993, Delors entrusted Portuguese Commissioner João de Deus Pinheiro with the Commission’s communication policy.⁴³ Around the same time, Belgian MEP Willy de Clercq was asked to write a report on the EC communication. With the help of senior officials such as then Director-General of DG-X Colette Flesh and professionals of political communication such as President Mitterrand and later Jacques Chirac’s communications guru Jacques Pilhan, de Clercq interviewed numerous communication and media specialists and in March 1993 came to an uncompromising conclusion of the shortcomings of EU policy [Clercq, 1993].

“After many years of growing impatience, “1992” came and went in an enigmatic silence. Politicians and officials of European construction complain that they are misunderstood. However, they confine their communication efforts to formal, dry and rational information, apparently thinking that someone else will make their messages “livelier” for the public. But journalists (who are essential mediators of communication) cannot turn boring information into engrossing news items. The main reason for this crisis situation lies in the fact that the Commission and some of the member states are trying to “sell” the wrong “product”. The product that should be “sold” to the public is not the Maastricht Treaty. (...) Trying to “sell Maastricht” instead of selling the positive effects that the EU will have on everyone of us is a mistake” [Clercq, 1993: 3-4]

There were mixed official reactions to the report⁴⁴ due to the phrasing used to describe the course of action (“sell the good ‘product’” to “target audiences”) and the solutions deemed necessary (“regain lost credibility”, “show the common sense and usefulness of the decisions”, “make the proposition relevant”). It did however have consequences, especially the remarks on “good instruments” such as the Eurobarometer which, better used, could be used to evaluate “the changes in the public’s awareness and attitude following information campaigns” [*id.*: 37]. The Eurobarometer tool, which up to that point had only been an experiment developed and debated by academics (see box below), became a factor in political exchanges and even a policy instrument.

J.-R. Rabier, the entrepreneur and his enterprise

Former Head of Cabinet for Jean Monnet in the ECSC’s High Authority, J.-R. Rabier became Director-General of the Information Service in 1960 until the latter was

⁴³ Deus Pinheiro’s mandate also included relationships with the EP, relationships with member states on Transparency, Communications and Information, Audiovisual and cultural policy and the Publications Office.

⁴⁴ See in the international press notably Tom Burke, “Selling’ the EC Image: Brussels Bid Falls Flat”, *International Herald Tribune*, April 1, 1993

transformed into a Directorate-General in 1967. He was appointed as Director-General of DG-X in 1970 but was replaced by an Irish official after the first enlargement (1973). The new French President of the Commission, François-Xavier Ortoli, granted him the title of Honorary Director-General, which allowed him to remain a member of DG-X, where his mission was to systematize opinion polls on the integration process. With very few resources (he had only one agent at his disposal), he coordinated the Eurobarometer's semesterly surveys until the mid 1980s, with the support of a small group of academics interested in the international comparison of political attitudes and values.

A contributor to the French *Esprit* magazine in the late 1940s, Rabier had been interested in public opinion issues ever since his training in political science, and had made connections with academics working on the subject early on. Thus he was closely in touch with J. Stoetzel and Hélène Riffaut, specialists of opinion and heads successively of IFOP and the Faits et Opinions institute which was in charge of the Eurobarometer during the first fifteen years of its existence (from n°0 to n°31). A small team of researchers grew around them, mainly from the Political Science Department of the University of Geneva (created in 1969). Along with Dujan Sidjanski, the founder and director of the department, there was a Ph-D student from Barcelona, Anna Melich (who would then be in charge of the Eurobarometer), a young American political scientist from the University of Michigan, Ronald Inglehart, who was a visiting professor in Geneva in 1969-1970 and collaborated with Eurobarometer for several years. The tool's conception was strongly influenced by these researchers' scientific agenda, in particular by Inglehart who at the time was studying post-materialistic values and their effects on the attitudes of European populations [Inglehart, 1971] and played a crucial part in the construction of surveys and the elaboration of analytical indicators⁴⁵. The links between Rabier and these academics led to a series of scientific publications [Rabier, 1964; Inglehart, Rabier, 1984; Reif, Inglehart, 1991]

Since the 1970s, every report, resolution, written question related to the information policy recommends the extensive use of this tool. But due to the absence of a strong political will, the tool remained for a long time limited to biannual polls sponsored by the Commission providing a reflection of popular opinion towards Europe in member countries. Thanks to the stability of its methodology⁴⁶ and its frequency, the tool offers a longitudinal comparability which mostly interested specialists of opinion. The politicization of the "European opinion" issue however upset both the tool and its uses. The first indicator of this evolution is the increasing number of thematic ad hoc polls conducted at the request of particular DGs on specific issues (inflation, languages, energy policy, agricultural policy, single currency, etc.). 68 special Eurobarometers were conducted between 1974 and 1992 (i.e. 3.5 per year on average), whereas 219 were conducted between 1993 and 2007 (more than 14.5 per year). The second indicator is the appearance and subsequent multiplication of the Flash Eurobarometers: polls conducted over the phone that can focus on a single country or category of people (CEOs, agricultural workers, youth). 235 such surveys have been conducted at the time of writing. In addition, between 1994 and 1997, the European Continuous Tracking Survey (CTS) was launched in order to provide monthly monitoring based on 200 phone

⁴⁵ R. Inglehart's theoretical model can be found in Inglehart, 1977. He is now the coordinator of an Ann Arbor-based *World Values Survey*.

⁴⁶ Some questions have remained almost unchanged since 1974, hence their labelling as "trend" questions ("Generally speaking, do you think that (your country's) membership of the European Community (Common Market) is: a good thing/a bad thing/neither good or bad?"). Along with other questions, they act as indicators on the "climate of opinion".

interviews in each member state. From 2001 onwards, “qualitative surveys” were added based on the focus group method.

From the 1990s, the Eurobarometer tool was not only “a valuable feedback element on what affects citizens the most”⁴⁷, it was also a precious instrument for public policy, allowing decision-makers to have a snapshot of opinion on a given question, evaluate their leverage or windows of opportunity for a particular policy proposal, develop campaigns directed to relevant audiences or the general public.⁴⁸ We can even say that, in the political configuration and shifts of the structures of the institutional game between 1985 and 1995, the tool served three separate goals which, combined, have contributed to the transformation of the *Community* information problem into the *European* opinion problem. 1/ The first goal is the symbolic creation of a “European public opinion”, i.e. an audience specific to Europe, expressing its expectations and fears about European decisions. The tool “organically” produced the appearance of a transnational public opinion through powerful instruments of objectification such as numbers, percentages, statistical tables, and graphic representations (histograms, linear curves, pie charts, geographic representations, etc...).⁴⁹ 2/ The second objective is the justification of the ongoing supranational project. Without excessively pushing the orientation of the questions and the interpretation of the results, the tool induces an apparent desire for Europe of the pollees by questioning them on their agreement with positively connoted attitudes towards dialogue and cooperation between member states. 3/ The third underlying objective, related to the second, is the legitimization of the Commission’s increased communication effort vis-à-vis member states and the Parliament – the Commission being the only institution capable of responding to the lack of information on Europe recorded by Eurobarometer surveys (see box below). Seen in the light of the Eurobarometer results, the apathy of Europeans towards Europe was interpreted as the consequence of a lack of information, of communication, and thus presented as a problem which could be solved through an extension of the capacity of Brussels to “talk” directly to the populations of member states.

⁴⁷ In the words of Jorge de Oliveira e Sousa, who was briefly Director-General of DG Press and Communication (2003).

⁴⁸ Several interviews conducted in 2007 with senior officials from DG-COMM and DG-MARKET attest to this use. Also see Smith, 1997. on this topic.

⁴⁹ This “reality effect” is produced by the method and the modelling it enables. The Commission’s measuring tool is indeed based on the “sociologically debatable” premises of the polling method criticized by Pierre Bourdieu in the following terms: everybody has an opinion; all opinions are equivalent; there is a consensus on controversial problems (Bourdieu, 1984: 222). Moreover, the theme imposed (Europe) increases the “feeling of incompetence” of the pollees with the remote, abstract character (“disconnected from everyday issues”) of the problems posed and the political bias of the questions (Bourdieu, 1979: 466 467).

The structural pro-Europe effect of Eurobarometer surveys

Because of the biases in the formulation of the questions and the limited range of possible answers available, the famous “trend questions” tend to artificially produce the existence of a “European public opinion” as well as the idea of a strong adhesion to European integration. For example, the following question, used to measure the respondent’s support to their country’s adhesion to the EU - “Taking everything into account, would you say that (our country) has on balance benefited or not from being a member of European Union? Benefited – Not benefited – Don’t Know”- has since 1974 invariably received 50% of positive answers or more.

More generally, the word choice, the tone of the questions and the implicit alternative in the question create a pro-Europe effect on the latitude respondents have in their answers. The following question shows this effect: “For each of the following areas, do you think that decisions should be made by the (nationality) Government, or made jointly within the European Union? Fighting crime / Taxation / Fighting unemployment / Fighting terrorism / Defence and foreign affairs / Immigration / The educational system / Pensions / Protecting the environment”.

For such serious issues, clearly perceived as transnational (but not necessarily European), answers appear as an unconditional support for a common resolution implicating the EU. 79% of respondents believe that decisions on fighting terrorism should be made jointly within the EU, 71% for protecting the environment, 70% for scientific research, 64% for defence and foreign affairs, 62% for support to regions... (EB 69, Spring 2008). The authors of Eurobarometer reports hastily claim that “Europeans continue to favour decision-making at European level” (*id.*: 14).

From the “information policy of the Communities” to the “European communication policy”

Since the 1990s, Commission communication has made good use of its instruments and their intrinsic legitimacy. Without a clear legal foundation, the Commission’s communication apparatus has acquired ever more sophisticated means and has become progressively desectorized, even giving up the traditional discourse of the duty to advertise political action [Lascombes, 2001] in order to become a transversal repertoire of the EU’s legitimization task. Year after year, the functions – and therefore the technical, financial and human resources – attributed to the task of information have been officially requalified in terms of “communication strategy”⁵⁰ and “governance”. The “governance” concept, officially theorized in a Commission White Paper [European Commission, 2001], links two logics: informational transparency and the participation of relevant citizens – *stakeholders* – in the decision-making process. The institutional theory of governance built the foundations of a participatory shift in opinion management, later completed by the “communication strategy” adopted by

⁵⁰ The “communication strategy” qualification appeared incidentally in the 1980s and was officially sanctioned in the De Clercq report [Clercq 1993]. The term “strategy” became part of the official terminology in the early 2000s [European Commission, 2002].

the Commission in 2002 [European Commission, 2002], and confirmed in subsequent programs.⁵¹

Each European crisis has been the occasion for the Commission to increase its authority within the EU on the “European opinion” problem. If the resignation of the Santer College in March 1999 temporarily weakened its capacity for action and initiative, the failure of the Rome II treaty (TEC) in the French (May 2005) and Dutch (June 2005) referendums paradoxically gave the Commission an opportunity to regain the upper hand. The results of these referendums immediately revived the debates on the “democratic challenge” around a new imperative: “closing the gap with citizens”.⁵² Even before the advent of this new crisis, President Barroso, when setting up his College in November 2004, had expressed the wish that communication constitute a portfolio in its own right in order to favour the ratification of the TEC. This mandate – exceptional in the Commission’s history – was entrusted to Swedish Commissioner Margot Wallström, symbolically appointed Vice-President of the Commission in charge of the “communication strategy and inter-institutional relations”. The recognition of the Commission’s role in the resolution of European opinion problems was made clear in the conclusions of the June 2005 council, which called for a “period of reflexion to allow for a broad debate” on the future of the EU in which the Commission was mandated to lead a “mobilizing debate” on Europe.⁵³ In the summer of 2005, it had already adopted texts recommending that DGs professionalize “European communication” by systematically integrating public expectations, fears and perceptions, as well as communication goals (preparing budgets, planning and communication strategy) in the first stages of the chain of normative or legislative production. The *Action plan to improve communicating Europe by the Commission* states:

“Commissioners and their DGs will insure that communication aspects are included right from the beginning of all policy formulation. [...]. Key proposals will be accompanied with a “layperson’s summary” explaining the personal and societal benefits of the policy. A communication plan will be prepared by the DG concerned when the topic so necessitates. Clear, simple and precise drafting of Commission proposals is essential if they are to be transparent, readily understandable and their rationale fully endorsable by citizens and business. “Eurojargon” or “Eurospeak” is confusing, complicated and often elitist.” [European Commission, 2005a: 7]

⁵¹ This procedural legitimization contrasts with the analysis that limits the EU’s capacity of legitimization to its outputs, thus caught in a “negative integration” trap which makes it more efficient in the correction and harmonisation of national policies, especially market distortions, than in the elaboration of new public policies [Scharpf, 1999].

⁵² This expression was the focus of a consultative forum organized by the European Economic and Social Committee in November 2005 and was used again in the 2006 White Paper [European Commission, 2006].

⁵³ The paradox introduced by the Eurobarometer results can be found in the Heads of State’s statement: “We have noted the outcome of the referendums in France and the Netherlands. We consider that these results do not call into question citizens’ attachment to the construction of Europe. Citizens have nevertheless expressed concerns and worries which need to be taken into account.” (European Council, 2005)

A few months later, the “plan D” adopted in October 2005 by the Commission on M. Wallström’s initiative announced the organization of debates and participative forums throughout Europe and set up a new frame of action involving all partners of the European institutional game:

“Any vision of the future of Europe needs to build on a clear view on citizen’s needs and expectations. [...] The Commission will present a specific Eurobarometer survey on the future of Europe, assessing citizens’ views on the future of the European project as well as citizens’ support for and expectations of European policies and actions.” [European Commission, 2005b: 2 and 10]

Forty years after J.-R. Rabier [Rabier, 1965] expressed his aspirations, these statements attest to a radical change. Beyond the calls for more rationality, coordination and professionalism, the Commission now possesses the authority to assess and address the problem of “European communication”. It defines the objectives and the lines of action with its expert instruments. As we have seen, this shift is primarily the result of a gradual shift in perspective of the institutional framing of the opinion problem which took place in various stages mainly through a dramatization of the supposed “democratic deficit” and a changing use of the Eurobarometer. Following this line of thought, we can ask if the White Paper on a European communication policy published in February 2006 by the Commission is a sign of a final evolution in this process of affirmation of Brussels’ legitimate role in the communication within member states’ public spaces as one of the main proposals of the Commission suggests: “Communication should become a EU policy in its own right, at the service of the citizens” [European Commission, 2006: 4]. The reception of this proposal by other EU institutions has probably played a part in this White Paper’s relative failure [Aldrin, Utard, 2008], temporarily sidetracking the proposal, at least until the next European crisis.

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