



Texto de la ponencia / Txostenaren testua

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Komunikazio zuzendariaren laguntzaile ohia, Toki Gobernuen Nazioarteko Bulegoa

Civil society, press and public opinion in the future of the EU

Almost everyone finds out about the European Union from his or her newspaper, television, radio or Internet connection. It is clear that the media has a crucial role to play in driving public opinion.

This is nowhere more apparent than in my country. UK national newspapers are among the most Eurosceptic, seizing almost every opportunity to present the EU in a bad light or to stir up anti-European sentiments. This could be one reason why the UK was near the bottom of the chart on citizen's interest in the EU in the survey presented earlier by Mr Martínez de Luna.

The constitutional Treaty has provided a focus for much of the adverse media coverage in recent years. In the run up to its (failed) ratification, in 2004-05, the press were baying for a referendum so that UK citizens could demonstrate anti-European feelings. Indeed, many suggested that the press were instrumental in whipping up public opinion, so that a 'no' vote would have been inevitable.

In many ways, the French and Dutch vote against the constitutional Treaty saved the UK. The British government immediately abandoned plans for its referendum and ratification was put on hold indefinitely.

The subsequent two-year period of reflection has allowed the EU, its governments and other stakeholders to take stock and determine how best to avoid provoking a media frenzy or misunderstanding every time the EU is mentioned.

Instead, they have approached European affairs from a more pragmatic standpoint. If the public understood just how much of their daily lives were affected by decisions taken at EU level, they might, so the argument goes, be able to make a fairer assessment of its merits and disadvantages.

So, EU coverage has become realistic, explanatory and down-to-earth in the UK.

The media at local and regional level

It is clear to those of us who have been responsible for providing information about the activities and effects of the EU, that the media, the EU institutions, civil society, business and national, local and regional governments are completely inter-dependant.

Most of the effects of decisions taken at EU level are felt locally. Changes to local waste collection practices, influxes of foreign workers, new rules for working hours, and safer practices for selling food and consumer goods are all recent examples of developments that have resulted from agreements reached by governments and MEPs. How these are reported and the connections made with the EU can affect public perceptions and opinions.

Like all good journalists, the local and regional media rely on their contacts to provide them with good stories for their readers. A good or bad interpretation of a local initiative can have far reaching effects.

Take, for example, town twinning. For many years, any partnership formed between a UK community and one overseas, was subjected to intense scrutiny. Local newspapers demanded to know how much of local revenue was spent on councillors travelling to "exotic" places where they could wine and dine at public expense.

A combination of cheap travel and judicious public relations has seen a notable decline in this type of negative media coverage. Town twinning exchange visits are now more likely to be reported as youth projects, fact-finding visits or economic opportunities, with the council providing a leadership role and focal point for welcoming visitors and dignitaries.

How has this been achieved? In the UK, almost every local and regional authority now has a team of professionals dedicated to ensuring their authority receives good media coverage. They make sure that council visits to overseas local authorities or the arrival of representatives from a twin town are planned with the local media in mind. They prepare media packs, provide spokesmen and write press releases.

They also ensure that the media is given access to the visit. Indeed, one local council took an unusual approach to tackling media criticism of its overseas link. The London Borough of Croydon invited the local newspaper's business editor on a trade mission, where he could see the project first hand and keep the electorate informed about the link.

At the same time, the local and regional media must provide a local dimension to news that is breaking at national and international level. Local reactions to an EU decision on energy, for example, makes the issue more relevant to the readership, or

to viewers or listeners. This is one reason why most British MEPs publicise their activities through their local press, TV and radio stations, rather than through the national media.

With a few exceptions, the UK local and regional media has tended to be less anti-European than its national counterparts.

A recent look at a typical week's regional press in the UK found coverage of the EU to be generally more issue-based and locally-focussed and less polemical.

For example:

In the West Midlands, a former industrial area of the UK with a high number of people from ethnic minorities, stories in the regional press focussed on:

- new EU rules to combat racism and hate crimes;
- an EU project involving an exchange of jewellery manufacturers from Birmingham, Denmark and Sweden (Birmingham hosts one of the UK's four assay offices, which hallmark items of gold, silver and platinum);
- a report that toys top a list of the most dangerous products on sale in the EU;
- a call by MEPs for a special EU mark to enable consumers to distinguish fake ceramics from the real thing (ceramics being a local industry in the region).

In the North of England, stories included:

- a report that residents who suffer from regular flooding from nearby rivers could receive EU support; and
- details of a local campaign for EU-wide rules to make children's nightwear flameproof.

However, in the South West of England, an area highly dependent on agriculture and fishing and suffering the effects of the CAP and Common Fisheries Policy, EU press coverage was more hostile. Stories included a call by the UK Minister for fairer fishing rules and attacks on Tony Blair's decision to forgo a referendum on the reshaped constitution.

Nevertheless, the EU can be a fruitful topic for the local media. Local projects that have succeeded in obtaining EU funding are generally proud of the fact and want to publicise this to the community. Similarly, if handled well, reports of town twinning can generate local pride and show the value of involving members of the local community in international exchanges. This type of positive coverage makes Europe a reality and then contributes towards improving the public's opinion and perceptions of the EU.

Role of the institutional media

After some twenty-five years of monitoring developments in the EU, I have seen many changes in the way the institutional media operates. Not least those resulting from the opportunities created by new information technology.

The Internet created the biggest shift in information and communication when it arrived in the mid 1990s. It allowed the EU institutions to communicate their activities to everyone and anyone across the world. Until then, information about EU developments had been restricted to a few privileged media contacts, who could then choose whether or not to publicise it.

How is the official media used by civil society?

There are several ways that those of us from local and regional government, non-governmental organisations and others with an interest in Europe use the media releases, webcasts and broadcasts produced by the European Commission, Council of Ministers and European Parliament.

Most importantly, the official media often provides a short explanation and update of key developments taking place in the EU. We, in turn, produce information sheets, bulletins and our own media products. We rely on the official announcements to provide a starting point for our research, responses and information.

In theory, giving more people access to the media releases created by the European Commission, Council of Ministers and European Parliament, should have increased the public's understanding of the EU.

Certainly, making these official announcements and speeches available more quickly and easily increased the transparency of the EU institutions. Soon, anyone with access to a computer could find out what the institutions were doing within hours of a document's publication.

Those of us whose role had been to interpret and explain European developments to a local audience could have expected to be out of a job. But, in truth, our role became even more important.

For, although the quantity of EU information increased, its clarity did not. EU media officers prepared press releases for a general audience that was assumed to understand:

- how the EU works (ie the role of the different institutions and the legislative process);
- the EU vocabulary and jargon (what, for example, is the 'proximity principle', codecision or a 'designated authority?'); and
- the relevance of the initiative or announcement (what does it mean for a particular audience?).

Rather than targeting its media to specific audiences, the EU institutions assume the same level of knowledge for everyone, whether they are ordinary citizens, national media organisations or sector specific lobbyists.

It means, for instance, that a Commission press release announcing a public consultation on biofuels used the same language for an audience that could have conceivably consisted of an environmentalist, an academic, a newspaper editor or a local politician.

Surely, I would argue, it would be better for a system of separate releases to be set up that could be tailored to specific needs and that used appropriate terminology and concepts? This would make it easier for each group to understand the Commission's message and less likely that the message would be embellished or changed.

Public misunderstanding or hostility is particularly likely in cases where the institutional media is picked up by the local, regional or national press. Presented with a typical EU media release, busy journalists and editors may well be inclined to either:

- ignore it completely;
- misinterpret the information; or
- ask someone else to explain it (a trusted source, an in-house specialist or a willing volunteer. Eurosceptics and those critical of Europe are always willing to comment on institutional announcements).

The language used by the institutional media therefore creates a barrier between the EU and those charged with informing the citizen. It assumes a knowledge and understanding that the national, regional and local media generally do not have and do not have the time to acquire.

In turn, the use of jargon has reduced public trust in the institutions and has reinforced the view of the EU as a faceless foreign bureaucracy. Public opinion has therefore become more entrenched, despite there being no shortage of official information.

But, things are getting better...

As part of its drive towards a new communications policy, the European Commission has started to recognise the importance of writing its pronouncements in plain language and is providing more laypersons' summaries. It is recruiting a new set of media professionals who, it is to be hoped, will be better able to communicate with their equivalents in newspapers, broadcasting and online.

The Commission has also announced, as part of its transparency initiative, plans to improve public access to the documents of the EU institutions. It is to be hoped that, when access is made easier, the public will also be able to read these documents and their associated media releases, web content and summaries in plain language.

Is subsidiarity a communications issue?

The principle of subsidiarity is enshrined in the EU Treaty of Maastricht. It states that decisions should be taken at the lowest, most appropriate level. We could argue that the principle should also apply to the way in which the EU's institutions communicate with their people.

The period of reflection has acknowledged that there is a communications gap between the institutions and the citizens who live and work within the EU. However, EU citizens do not form one distinct group. Rather, they belong to many different groups and interests and cannot be categorised as a single entity.

If the EU is to succeed in using the media to change public opinion, it will need to develop a variety of approaches to cater for these groups. It will need media specialists who can communicate with those working in particular specialisms, who will use their terminology and understand their concerns.

The EU will also need to change the way it uses jargon. If it is to communicate with the readers of newspapers, it should use a language that newspaper editors understand. If it is to appeal to business people, it should communicate separately in business language, through the business media (this already happens with newspapers such as the 'Financial Times' and 'Wall Street Journal' that are able to speak to business people around the world).

If it is to enlist the help of civil society or local government, then it should try to meet their needs for clarity, simplicity and relevance. This will mean that the users of these organisations – the voters, service-users, churchgoers, women's organisations and young people, for example – will not have to rely on intermediaries, who may not have their interests at heart, to interpret the EU's activities for them. They will then, in turn, be able to ask questions of Europe and become more engaged in its decisions.

Once more people begin to understand what the EU does and how it works, without resorting to Google or reference books, we may even see a shift in public opinion. We can't expect everyone to like the EU, but we can expect everyone to know what it is doing and how it affects our lives.

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