



Texto de la ponencia / Txostenaren testua

Claus Sørensen

*Director General de Comunicación de la Comisión Europea
Europako Batzordeko Komunikazio zuzendari nagusia*

Introduction

Thanks to the Government of the Basque country for arranging this meeting. Being here brings back a lot of memories to me: when I was 8 years old I drove with my parents along the coast and we stayed two days in Bilbao and I can tell you one thing: it has changed, dramatically and for the better. It also brought back memories of 1969 when I was hitchhiking through Vitoria and got picked up by some very nice people and we ended up in the Rioja district. I don't remember exactly what happened but it was quite pleasant and much nicer than what happened just a month before in Valencia where we were arrested by the Guardia Civil for reasons that I still don't understand. Those were different times.

So here we go: let's be very clear, it's been said before: communication cannot substitute political content. We need policies, we need substance and when we have that, we may or may not succeed in communicating. We are at a moment right now in Europe where there is a cry for leadership, where there are a lot of challenges right there in front of us, as Jeremy Rifkin was saying a moment ago, that need solutions and solutions in common. It is so obvious to all of us, so I really hope that Jeremy will take the train to Madrid and whisper something in the ears of Mr. Sarkozy and your president: I think that would be really useful because now it is time to move.

One other obvious fact to all of you who deal with communication: it's very difficult to communicate about communication. You have to talk substance. I will however today speak a little bit about the techniques of communication because that is what I'm supposed to do. But I'm just warning you: that is not what the citizens want. They don't care. They don't care for the arteries, they don't care for the veins where the blood of communication is flooding: I agree with my boss, Margot Wallström: it is essential for democracy that the free press is living, that communication is interactive and that citizens discuss and politicians receive feedback from those citizens.

But the citizens don't want to know too much about the arteries and veins of communication. They want visions, they want substance, they want policies and they want solutions. Let's keep that in mind.

EUROPEAN PUBLIC SPACE

I smell a bit of a laboratory. I'm sorry for that: I'm coming straight from the Brussels laboratory; from this "unidentified political object". So I feel a bit destabilised. And maybe I look like a "Trojan horse", to quote from Mr. Sarkozy's characteristic of Brussels. I have to get accustomed to that. But of course I'm not different from anybody of you. We are the same. I very much recognise the picture of "network policy making" that we do in Brussels. But the European policy network is not only in Brussels. It includes people in Madrid, people in Barcelona, and this is why I'm here in Bilbao, this is why I have talked with your President of the Basque government outside: we're linking and linking and linking.

This is equally true for my son Maximilian, who's half Danish and half Greek: he is interested in European issues, he is interested in Belgian issues, in Greek issues and in Danish issues. When I come home from the office in the afternoon or late in the evening and I'm in his room I have to take off his ear phones because he's on SKYPE speaking to his friend in Tokyo. So the link that Daniel Innerarity, keynote speaker in this round table, was talking about, with the globalised world is already there.

This doesn't mean that Europe is irrelevant: We do have a set of values, we do have a way of constructing societies that in my view is rather unique and it is clear that we have a view on the world, on society, on solidarity that is in demand out there in the wider world.

I was in China when I was dealing with environmental issues and they got very interested in something very specific: the integrated river-based management system. A very peculiar kind of instrument. Why were they interested in that? Because they cannot control what is going on with the Yangtze and the Huang He Rivers. So they said: "You have the system of cross-border cooperation that we need. Why don't you send 200 people over to explain it to us?" and I said: "I'm sorry I don't even have 20 people in my unit so we are not there yet, we cannot help you with that". There is a demand for our model of society so we have to get our act together.

On to communication: This is where we are: 500 million inhabitants, 27 Member States and did you know that we have 3500 TV channels all over Europe and that a lot of them are regional? We have 1200 journalists in Brussels - I think they get a fairly good treatment - but we have 25000 journalists approximately that are generating EU stories every day. People in this auditorium are probably counted in that figure, and they are very much under our radar screen. We are not very good in Brussels to reach out, provide information, make sure you get the news and the possibilities to participate in that. We have to deal with 27 languages, I can say "ezkerrik asko" and it's great but it's a little bit difficult for me to go any further and

nevertheless I have to communicate in Basque, in Catalan, in Castilian and all the other 23 languages as well.

We are in the middle of a jigsaw of political interests: sometimes when I compare the European public sphere I imagine that we're living in different aquariums; we're fish swimming around, I swim in a Danish aquarium, sometimes I swim in the Brussels aquarium, which is a little bit different, people swim in the German aquarium etc. They know each other, they can see each other, but there is a language barrier, there is a media barrier, there is a communication barrier and in the different aquariums you have very big fish like prime ministers who like to control the aquarium. So communication is affected in that aquarium by what the national agenda is. Then the blame game starts. Brussels gets blamed and we don't know because it is in German, Greek or Polish.

We're not good enough at actually linking the different aquariums to each other: getting the opinion from one aquarium into the other one, telling the prime minister "sorry you didn't win all the battles in Brussels, you didn't get all the fish in the Atlantic". As they always say: "I won" etc. This is actually not true; you made a nice compromise, that's excellent! This is one of the main challenges of communicating Europe, I think, to make sure that the different spheres are being linked up together.

As Margot Wallström was saying, communicating the European Union is basically about democracy: it won't really work, even the network version, will not work in the long run if our citizens are not aware, in the Basque country for example, how their colleagues in Greece look at fish conservation, how the Danes look at fish conservation or any other issue. Do they have the same discussions about child care? Do they have the same concerns about the fiscal stability, how we finance our pension systems, which is right at the centre of the stability pact. How are these discussions from different parts of Europe linked together? This is what creates legitimacy, in my humble view, in a democratic society.

I accept to be outvoted in a representative democracy if I have participated in a contradictory debate, if I have heard the argument of the other and, if it is better, they win. Then I come back next time, maybe, but it has to be part of the same kind of process.

So we absolutely need to nurture this civilised and contradictory debate among citizens. I'm not inventing this. Many people have worked on that. Jürgen Habermas, just to mention one of the big guys, and his concept of *Bürgerliche Öffentlichkeit*. This is the kind of European public space that we need. It is also about informing people and in order for this to happen there has to be a minimum of knowledge, a minimum of shared, common values. Otherwise the communication doesn't work; I'll come back to that.

So let's at this very strange creature, "Public Space", if it has ever existed. You need to get four things together in my view: you need to identify some issues (Commentary on the picture of the Polish plumber: I can see the girls getting

exciting, he is very beautiful this polish plumber but I didn't invent him, I think it was the Polish tourist bureau that put him up when we had the discussion.) So we need to identify issues? Secondly we need to be better at establishing a calendar. It is very difficult to discuss the service directive in one country when in another country the main issue is immigration and in the third country the main issue is whether you can put heavy metals into organ pipes: the citizens get completely confused and we're not good at helping them to say: "this is an interesting issue, let's discuss that. Here we have some good issues. Let's discuss them! This is not to monopolise anything but just to get a bit focused.

Thirdly, we also have a need for values: a "decoding system". We have very few cases in Europe where you can really see that an issue touches everybody. Take Zidane as one of the recent cases. Suddenly everybody around Europe, even some in my family that had never looked at football, had an opinion: was he a nut case? Was it because he was hurt because of his mother, is he just an Arab who doesn't understand the rules on what's admissible? Everybody was discussing it.

The Atocha terrorist attack, everybody got involved and had opinions immediately about it. When Haider took power, or was invited into the government in Austria, we all had opinions across Europe. These are issues that show that something is brewing; something is coming up that requires a joint value system. But it is slow in getting there although our value systems are not that different from each other.

Fourthly, the channels must be there: the press has, in my view, difficulties in coping; we have very, very few genuinely pan-European news channels obviously because of the language barrier, because of the extra costs that it involves, because of the difficulties of getting the view points in from different parts of Europe. The web is taking over: if you speak to your kids; my son for example, he's not really looking at the evening news anymore. He goes online, he "googles" around and he comes back and he's better informed than I am! I'm a little bit chocked. But that's reality.

COMMUNICATION PRIORITIES

So just on issues, to tell you a bit, not to be very proud of it, but at least we have tried in the Commission this year for the first time to identify in the Commission work programme some communication priorities. (Slide with 7 priorities.) A lot of people tell me that this is crap. That people only want to see roaming charges, or they want to see the wine reform. They want to see something very specific. I agree: this is very bureaucratic. But I need, of course, to cut these different items into smaller parts and I would have thought that the budget review, which is coming up and which is a very dry subject, is full of wine reform, is full of agriculture, is full of cohesion fund, is full of regional policy.

We will get to the task of how to communicate all that. The good news is that at least we have a reduced number of priorities whereas last year we had 35 priorities and that is not anyway of communicating with the citizen, it's total confusion.

PLAN D

I will just go through the next slide briefly. We have taken a lot of paper initiatives: the Action Plan, which was mainly for me and my DG to become better at doing things; Plan D, these are discussions like the one we're having now and this fantastic discussion you had, I think, a year ago here in Bilbao. It is taking place all over Europe. We have citizen's forums that are coming more or less to the same conclusions as Jeremy Rifkin which is very interesting. When we have these citizen panels we take people, students, sportsmen, housewives, doctors, people that work with sewage systems. We bring them together. They discuss for two days. They come up with the same issues: they want social security, they want us to be strong in the world, they want a better coordination of development policy, they want immigration but maybe not immigration border control only in the tough sense: we should stop migrants coming in, but also give development to Africa and so on: people are not stupid. But they need to be involved. The good ideas come.

ACTION PLAN

These are a number of the actions we have taken to communicate better, I don't want to bore you with that, you can have a look. (Slide.)

These are also very specific instruments that I have in my tool box that I can deploy: so at the end of the day when we have to translate all these very lofty speeches into reality it is actually for example about putting something on the web, it is actually about translating all our press releases into the local languages, it is about writing in a way that the citizens understand. This is actually very, very hard work and it is about being available 24 hours a day in our call centres so that the citizens, if they have a concern, can phone in and get the answer in their own language.

Onto the values and the education and to the languages.

We have touched upon that. Communication will never work unless we also get serious about linking up our school curricula; it is rather pathetic that we still have many European countries where European cooperation is only mentioned in a footnote. There is a lot about World War II, there's a lot about what happened during the Napoleon wars, there is a lot about the ancient Greeks. I love that myself. I think it's very good, but I think, we cannot expect people to participate in a reasonably informed debate on Europe unless they get the basic knowledge; there has to be a bit of an effort done in improving the educational performance.

When we speak about languages, I have said to my people, on everything that touches the general public we must go fully multi-lingual: I can tell you it's very difficult, let's be realistic. Some people said to me "why don't we all speak English, I mean, let's do that!" I said "well, there's a little problem because the Brits are members so it would be discriminatory". We have to do something but we have to be realistic. Nevertheless everything that goes to the general public in my view has to be done in the local languages.

Culture, that's not something that you can do very much about; it comes on its own. But it is coming because people actually do compare notes and they do listen to the same music and they do have opinions about Zidane and Haider and all the rest. They do discuss in their families. So this is something that will take maybe 1-2-3 more generations for this culture to come about. I was very puzzled with what Jeremy said about your prime minister mentioning combating machismo; this is part of culture and this is obviously part of the way politicians communicate in different countries: certain things would not go down well in my country but would be perfectly acceptable in the country of my wife, which is Greece, I don't want to go into details, but the behaviour is at times quite different even if the values are similar.

Now the citizen, and I do happen to meet some citizens as I move around, they cannot really tell the difference between the institutions in Brussels and they don't like that they get these confused signals: they understand that their governments tell them one story but they don't get the other version of the story from the European Parliament. They don't get the third version from the Commission.

I think there is scope for working a little bit more in partnership respecting the roles: the Parliament has to fight the Commission, the Commission has to make proposals, and the governments have to defend the national interests. But I think we have to work at creating the "platform" where these arguments meet and confront each other. And that's where I think there is a "Public Space" building site that we have to get onto. What I really would like is to take a qualitative step forward in building up these partnerships.

It's not easy because very often the national parliaments or the national governments would not like that you step too much on their toes: I come from one Member State where they definitely do not want anybody to mess up European messages in Copenhagen. But I think they have to realise that we all need to be present in this debate. At the local level, for example in Madrid, the Commission sits together with our colleagues from the European Parliament in the same building, I think it is much better that we share facilities, we can help each other and we should actually coordinate a bit with the government too, on what they are communicating. There is a scope for economies of scale, better effect for tax payers' money.

Maybe we can even come - that's a bit more ambitious - to some kind of agenda setting: not about what the content should be, that's not my business, but just organising the debate: making sure that we have these fights, making sure that we have these contradictions, making sure that it gets out there, in front of the people so they can say: "hey, they're discussing something real, it's not a joke".

This is, in summing up, legitimate European decisions. We need a lot more discussion, going local and organising the debate.



Thank you very much!