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Chapter 11:
THE EUROPEAN UNION AND ITS PUBLIC RELATIONS
Context, Actions and Challenges of a Supranational Polity.

Chiara Valentini

INTRODUCTION

“Europe will not be made all at once, or according to a single plan. It will be built through concrete achievements which first create a de facto solidarity.”

Robert Schumann, The Schuman Declaration, 9 May 1950

The European Union (EU) is the most advanced regional political and economic entity in the world. Since its inception the EU has been presented by questions dealing with nation building issues, specifically how to create a European polity that could contribute to peacemaking, economic growth, and empowering civil society. Fundamentally the EU is a socially and politically constructed project of integration among European nation-states to reduce fragmentation, instability and the pursue of unilateral and destructive policies. It is less than a traditional nation-state but more than a traditional international organization (Valentini, 2008). It is a union of independent nation-states, who have relinquished part of their national powers in return for representation within EU institutions. In many respects, the political status of the EU is unique, as it is a supranational polity that functions in some policy areas as a federation since its power is above member states’ legislation, and in other policy areas as a confederation of independent states, similar to an intergovernmental organization, because it can provide some guidelines but decisions and agreements reached are not enforceable, and member states are free to decide whether and to which extent to follow them (Valentini, 2008, 2013). Since the Maastricht Treaty in 1992, the EU has gained increasing power in establishing new legislation in

Europe, and has become a key player in international and trade relations. Thus, it serves as an interesting case for discussing global public relations because of the complexity of conceptualizing, developing, and implementing strategic communications by a *sui generis* organization that constantly faces the need “for establishing symbiotic relationships with relevant publics, many of whom are culturally diverse” (Sriramesh & Vercic, 2009, p. xxxiv).

This chapter presents and discusses the context, the actions and the challenges faced by the EU in communicating *to* and *with* its diverse publics. It starts by offering a short review of the context as well as actions undertaken since its inception. This review makes no claim of completeness as it is primarily meant to offer an understanding of the environment and organizational settings that fundamentally impact the way global public relations is conducted by the EU institutions. The chapter concludes by addressing global public relations challenges in relation to the EU.

THE CONTEXT: ORIGIN, STRUCTURE AND ORGANIZING

To understand the context of global public relations in relation to the EU, one must start from its environment, its origins, structure and organizing. Along the description presented in Section 1 of this volume, Valentini (2017) defines an environment as “an arrangement of political, economic, social, and cultural factors existing in a given context that have an impact on organizational processes and structures” (p. 839) as well as the “large variety of stakeholders and how these interact and act upon organizations” (p. 839). The form of communication chosen for interacting with the environment is determined by the organizational settings as much as cultural and institutional requirements, which, in the case of the EU, are quite complex and multilayered.

The EU was established in 1992 with the Maastricht Treaty, but was preceded by the European Economic Community (EEC), which dates back to post WWII when securing long-lasting peace and reconciliation in the devastated European continent became an important priority for European leaders. Creating a community of countries with common political and economic goals paved the way to the creation of a more formalised supranational structure of peaceful national collaborations. The European Economic Community was established in 1957 with the Treaty of Rome and had as primary goal the creation of a common economic market among six nation-states - Belgium, France, West Germanyⁱ, Italy, Luxembourg, and the Netherlands -. Through the years, the EEC brought political stability and increased economic growth to the six founding countries. After the formation of the EU, the six expanded to the current 27, after the United Kingdom decided to leave the EU in summer 2016ⁱⁱ. The EU as also increased its competences to cover a wide range of policy areas beyond

economic ones, including social and cultural policies, agriculture, fisheries, the environment, consumer protection, transport, energy, security, and justice, and many others.

Today, the EU comprises diverse supranational, independent institutions with legislative, executive, and judiciary powers including the European Commission, the European Parliament, the Council of the European Union also known as the Council of Ministers, the Court of Justice, the Court of Auditors, and financial institutions such as the European Central Bank and the European Investment Bank (Nugent, 2010). The EU also operates through intergovernmental negotiated decisions by the member states that gather together, for instance, in the European Council. The European Council has no legislative powers, but acts as a body that issues guidelines to the European Commission, the European Parliament and the Council of the European Union, which are the main policy-making institutions (Valentini, 2013). The European Commission has executive powers and so drafts and proposes legislation based on its own initiative, but also on the suggestions made by the European Council, the European Parliament, the Council of the European Union or by other external political actors. The European Commission comprises a President and 27 commissioners who are responsible for one or more policy areas. The European Commission is also responsible for monitoring that EU legislation, once adopted, is implemented (Nugent, 2010). The European Parliament and the Council of the EU have legislative powers and are both involved in the approving of EU legislation. The European Parliament is the only institution whose members are directly voted by European citizens. It comprises a President and 751 members across seven political groups representing the left, central and right political positions. The Council of the EU represents the executive governments of the EU's member states and comprises a Presidency and a council of ministers (one per member state) that changes ministerial composition according to the policy area under discussion (Nugent, 2010).

From an organizational point of view, EU institutions can be considered public sector organizations operating in an international context (Valentini, 2008). Similar to public sector organizations, they have a political nature and are subjected to complex and unstable environments. They are expected to fulfil legal and formal requirements, and thus tend to have less autonomy than other types of organizations and more rigid procedures. Their objectives are broad and they serve many diverse publics (Gelders, Bouckaert, van Ruler, 2007; Fredriksson and Palas, 2016). Similar to public sector organizations "they are affected by the same forces, low management relationships with different publics, transparency and accountability of information versus security and high versus low public involvement" (Valentini, 2008, p 56). They differ from public sector organizations of nation-

states because EU institutions are not comparable in terms of power and public acceptance with national institutions nor they can be wholly considered outsiders, distinct from the national ones, seeking to promote their national interests in other countries (Valentini, 2008).

The supranational nature of the EU makes communication *to* and *with* publics even more important. For political institutions such as the European Commission, the European Parliament and the Council of the European Union, communication is the means through which legislative drafts are shared and discussed and negotiations among political actors and relevant publics. Historically, communication has also been an important instrument for seeking public support so to be able to increase the EU supranational political power through legislative integration. For administrative institutions such as the European Central Bank, the Court of Justice, and the Court of Auditors, communication is an instrument to handle the relationships between these institutions and its diverse sets of publics.

THE ACTIONS: THE ROLE OF COMMUNICATION IN FOSTERING THE EUROPEAN INTEGRATION PROJECT

Within the EU context, communication has been essential to further develop the European Economic Community into a more integrated community first and later a union of member states. It has served the purpose of creating an institutional legitimacy that was not there when the head of states of the six-founding nation-states signed the Treaty of Rome in 1957 (Valentini & Nesti, 2010). Specifically, communication has, and still does, serve four fundamental functions for the EU: First, it increases public knowledge on policies and thus enhance electoral participation; second, it allows for more public participation in policy-formulation and decision-making by giving information about issues at stakes, positions and procedures; third it promotes the accountability of political representatives; and lastly it enhance political responsiveness by improving political actors' knowledge of citizens' preferences (Valentini & Nesti, 2010, pp. 6-7).

It is important to note that, at the very beginning of the European integration project, European leaders were not concerned about engaging, and very limited interested in informing, the general public. Thus, communication was a sporadic activity, and not necessarily strategic. The main purpose of EU communications was to notify key influential publics from the academic, political and economic elites about the agreements and progress made in the economic integration with the intent to eventually influence the opinions of the general public. These key elite publics, often referred to as 'multipliers,' were considered the "communication bridges" between EU citizens and the EU

institutions, as they were chosen because of their “highly-developed communication skills that enabled them to influence those who came in contact with them, directly or indirectly” (Terra, 2010, p. 50). Communications were, however, scarce and not strategically oriented. Those multipliers had their own discretion in deciding what to share about the EU and in which manner based on what they considered relevant for their audiences. After two decades of political work to produce EU legislation that integrates new policy areas and a general recognition that most of EU citizens did not show either interest or sufficient knowledge to understand the new political developments in the European Community, in the early 1970s the community developed a specific information policy with concrete communication objectives. The EU information policy was essentially a political document on how the EU and its institutions should keep the citizens informed. Yet, this information policy has been described as a bureaucratic form of arcane policy – a policy whose main aim was to passively provide access to EU information (Brüggemann, 2005). Its implementation showed the very nature of how the EU understood its role of public communicator. Communication was limited in scope and quantity, fulfilled mostly basic transparency and accountability requirements, and yet did so through a language that was not easily comprehended by those outside the political environment. Public relations initiatives were almost inexistent.

A first change of communication approach was visible during the first half of the 1980s with a new information and communication policy. EU political leaders’ concern about how the EU was represented in the news had increased and there was a need for professional advice to cope with media scandals, blame games, and the general mediatization of news and information (Esser & Strömbäck, 2014; Hood, 2011). The new policy sought to increase EU visibility and relevance among the news media and EU citizens through more professionalised communication by dropping bureaucratic, fact-based and administrative communications for a more accessible, receiver-centred one. Public relations activities of EU institutions were part of the implementation of the EU information and communication policy, supporting the promotion of European values and identity through diverse campaigns and cultural initiatives targeting EU citizens. During this period, symbolic communications (Grunig, 1993) were important instruments for developing a shared appreciation of the European integration project among the culturally diverse EU publics. Public relations was mostly asymmetrical and information driven and was not aimed at increasing dialogue with relevant publics or engage citizens in political debates in the different policy-formulation stages. EU public relations activities were, thus, primarily focused on the image and reputation management of political leaders and EU institutions.

During the 1990s, the EU experienced an important political crisis when French and Danish citizens rejected via national referendum the ratification of the Maastricht Treaty that resulted in the founding of the EU. Additionally, some institutional scandals and the constant low support of, and knowledge about, the EU among EU citizens triggered a substantial shift in the communication approach of the EU institutions including their choice of public relations activities. First, there has been an increasing professionalization of communication through hiring more public relations and communication experts across a number of institutions and units. Until then most communication activities were performed by civil servants with no specific communication training or education, whose approach to communication was mostly limited to documenting EU political discussions and activities. Second, a new communication strategy in a new communication policy was proposed in early 2000 that aimed at increasing the engagement of specific public groups with the European integration project through dialogue-oriented initiatives (Valentini & Nesti, 2010). In particular, the new communication policy sought to increase the participation of national civil society organizations in the development and dissemination of specific EU contents, but also in organizing educational and issue specific events at local levels where citizens could meet and discuss political matters. In recent years, EU institutions have also tried to leverage the interactive nature of the Internet to find alternative channels to communicate to and with citizens.

EU PUBLIC RELATIONS TODAY: COMMUNICATIONS *TO* RATHER THAN *WITH* PUBLICS

Public relations activities in public sector organizations are very diverse and are often disguised under the general activities that take place in government communication. Essentially, the function of public relations in the EU is the strategic management of information and communication activities directed to specific publics, either internal or external to the institutions, by providing information, raising awareness and influencing public attitudes or even behaviour towards specific issues and policies. For the most EU communication has been characterised by a public information model (Grunig & Jaatinen, 1999), which helps the EU meeting transparency, accountability and legal requirements of keeping their constituents informed about their actions, but it is a model that has minimal contributions toward increasing EU institutions' public engagement.

Public relations activities at the EU level are not as centralised as one may expect. Each EU institution has its own communication professionals in-charge of diverse internal and external communications. In some EU institutions, communication is centralised in a specific unit. For

instance, in the European Commission, a specific unit called *Directorate General (DG) for Communication* is in charge of all communications and public relations activities of this institution and of more general EU-wide campaigns. In other EU institutions communication is performed in decentralised units specifically dedicated to certain policy areas. These communication specialists represent the bulk of government communication officers in-charge of institutional and/or unit specific communications whose main function is to help public understanding of the EU policies and increasing awareness of the political decision makers' roles and the functioning of the institutions (Laursen & Valentini, 2013). Coordination among EU institutions on what to communicate, how to communicate and in which circumstances to communicate is not systematic, even though general guidelines for EU communication exists (Valentini, 2013).

The EU has primarily targeted the news media and civil society as key multipliers and disseminators of their activities with the intent of winning the hearts and minds of EU citizens by convincing them of the value of a supranational polity and showing that the very essence of the EU is meeting the democratic expectations of its EU constituents in providing a stable, democratic and free society. Reaching out to EU citizens directly or via these multipliers, however, has not been so effective. The complex institutional and political nature of the EU, coupled with its multicultural environment, makes building relationships with key publics an extra difficult task for public relations professionals. According to Valentini and Laursen (2012), one of the major problems in EU relations with its public is that the EU has focused predominantly on political information and political communication rather than on communicating with EU citizens through increasing opportunities for political dialogues. The latter would assume communications oriented at encouraging EU citizens participation to political debates, discussion on policy-formulation and voting.

Other studies (e.g. Anderson & McLeod, 2004; Laursen, 2013) have shown that this problem is partly related to institutional constraints and the general understanding of communication in public sector organizations that must promote a culture of impartiality, neutrality and transparency and, at the same time, secure smooth and rapid political negotiations of legislative acts which often are possible if a certain level of secrecy among those involved is maintained. Because political actors are highly concerned about their public image, they tend to avoid overexposing themselves, their positions, and negotiation tactics before an institutional agreement is reached. Thus, secrecy increases these political actor's manoeuvring power in different EU policy-making stages (Laursen, 2013; Laursen & Valentini, 2013), but reduces public scrutiny of these political actors' behaviors and hampers opportunities for public engagement in open political discussions.

A further problem with the EU capacity of reaching out to the general public is essentially the limited ability of speaking with one voice when it comes to internal – the Union – matters. Paradoxically, EU institutions have shown on several occasions to compete against each other than cooperate for media attention (Martins et al, 2012). This is particularly evident among the main policy-making institutions because these institutions have different political interests in communicating their role to the news media, and in their specific political agenda (Valentini & Laursen, 2012), even within their own institutional settings (Laursen & Valentini, 2013). It is important to note that the European Commission, the European Parliament, and the Council of the European Union have a great interest in showing to their publics that each of them is a legitimate political actor promoting the Union interests by showing the contribution of own specific political actions. Yet, given the highly political nature of these institutions, their political agenda, and positions in relation to diverse issues may diverge. Because of this long and sometimes strenuous negotiations across institutions, but even among single member states in the case of the Council of the European Union and/or among political parties in the case of the European Parliament, may occur. In these institutions, most of the public relations activities are performed by communication professionals in the form of political public relations and political marketing. In this function, communication professionals work either at a party level, or as personal political communication advisors, and/or spokespersons, taking care of the image of specific EU political parties or representatives, such as the presidents of the three policy-making institutions. The goal is to frame political discussions into discourses and ideas that reinforce the particular institution or party or political leader's image. But this can result in presenting the EU to its publics through many different and possibly conflicting views.

As a consequence, the multi-vocality of EU has not facilitated, but it has hindered the public understanding of the main issues and questions that are at stake in the political agenda. The recent exit of the United Kingdom from the EU by public referendum is an illustrative example of the deficient knowledge of the value of being part of the EU and limited knowledge by the UK citizens of the implications of such a decision (Galbraith, 2017; Koch, 2017).

Overall, the big problem of EU information and communication policy is the lack of a clear coordination and alignment in what should be communicated among the different EU official sources. This has impaired public appreciation of the EU and the significant work of its institutions as actual instruments for advancing EU society and supporting policies that address very real European but also global problems.

CURRENT CHALLENGES

As extensively described in Section I of this volume, the nature of public relations practiced in a country is influenced by five major environmental variables. Detecting, analysing and finally using these factors for public relations planning is, however, a big challenge in the case of the EU because it is not a country but a supranational polity characterised by a multicultural environment and a diverse range of political, economic, social, legal, and media systems.

The first major setback in setting up a public relations strategy for the EU is fundamentally its supranational polity nature and the management of public relations in a hybrid political system in which national political systems still play a key role. What is the best strategy to address key public concerns when the EU should represent the position of the entire Union but national political systems and priorities diverge widely among member states? The EU comprises member states from Western and liberal countries but also many former Soviet bloc countries, whose historical roots are still evident in their governing approach. An illustrative example is the 2017 uprising by the general public in Romania after their government passed an emergency degree that weakened anti-corruption legislation and offered potential amnesty for those convicted of corruption (Fishwick, 2017, February 6). This shows that hegemonic actions perpetuated by political leaders in the EU are still occurring despite the impetus of the EU in fostering democracy and democratic practices. Even among member states with similar political systems, public relations activities may be hindered by differences in political, social and economic priorities. So, the socialist political agenda of Nordic countries which typically expect more public-sector spending and social caring often clashes with those of liberal, capitalist EU countries that want more liberalization. In this environment of political differences, not only do political discussions and negotiations within the EU institutions become more difficult, but the strategic communications of those issues, and managing EU political responses and subsequent legislation become a public relations challenge.

Similarly, EU public relations aimed at increasing public support and appreciation for the EU work in advancing EU society and supporting policies that address very real European problems is thwarted by the very legal nature of the supranational polity and its effective powers in regulating EU society across different policy areas. Even though most of the EU countries have a similar legal system, that is based on civil law (excluding Ireland and the UK which are based on common law), a number of differences that are closely linked to the political and economic developments of each member states still exist. Harmonization of legislations across EU countries has been, and still is,

happening. Yet, delays, alterations and even non-compliance with supranational policies have occurred because member states still retain the possibility to decide when, to what extent, and how to conform to the approved EU laws in many policy areas (Mbaye, 2001; Börzel, Hofmann, Panke, & Sprungk, 2010). These affect the general expectations and opinions of EU citizens, who are often not aware that the lack of, or limited implementation of an EU law is often imputable to their national governments and not to an EU negligence (Thiel, 2008).

Culture is also a complex element in EU public relations. Working for an EU institution has boosted a common organizational culture to increase the support for the European integration project among EU officials and civil servants who come from all over Europe and thus have very different motivational interests in working for the EU while also bring their own cultural and national differences to their work in the EU. Even among correspondents of large national news media, who are typically based in Brussels where most EU institutions are located, an EU cultural assimilation has been seen. Such acculturation dissolves, in parts, journalists' differences based on nationality and media systems and makes EU news coverage less biased (Spanier, 2010). Yet, a complete cultural assimilation among the average EU citizen has not yet occurred, although recent public surveys show indications that feelings of being European have increased in the last years (Eurobarometer 2017).

For a supranational organization as the EU, news media are traditionally a top priority in communication activities. EU media relations have been quite challenging on different levels, mostly because of the diversity in EU media systems and media agendas. The problem is not simply a linguistic one, that can be solved with translations, but rather on what is considered newsworthy, from a national point of view. Historically the EU institutions have targeted elite transnational news media such as the *Financial Times* and *The European Voice* which are typically pro-European affairs hoping for a spin-off effect in national, regional and even local media outlets. However, research (Laursen & Valentini, 2013; Spanier, 2010; Thiel, 2008) has shown that only highly educated and EU concerned publics consume these transnational media, and that these elite news media do not reach average EU citizens who prefer to get information from local, regional or national news outlets and in their own language. But local, regional and national news outlets offer limited coverage of EU topics and when they do, they often take on a cynical approach towards the EU and downplay the EU position for the national one (Gleissner & de Vreese, 2005; Trenz, 2008; Valentini, 2013). In part, this is because national news media find it more newsworthy to cover the position of their national institutions and political actors and these have no interest in linking the supranational level with the national electorate, nor communicating the EU because it is not considered rewarding or

advantageous to gain political voting (Pollak & Slominski, 2014). Thus, the average EU citizen is exposed to less EU news and this tends to be more negative than the information that those elite publics who access transnational news media receive on EU activities. The increasing professionalization of communication specialists in the EU institutions of the last ten years has partially addressed this problem. More public relations professionals from diverse member states have been hired to communicate with national journalists not only in the local language but according to the news value and specific news interests of the member state. This *glocal* approach in handling media relations has paid back to the EU in terms of more visibility and better news coverage. However, it is not without problems. Besides technical issues such as the time lag that is caused by translating EU communications in 23 official EU languages, there is a constant unease in the communication outcomes. Even if the EU communication professionals today come from diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds, conveying a specific meaning when communicating to EU publics may not happen, since the receivers of those communications “have many different political and cultural communication contexts in which they receive and understand a message” (Spanier, 2010, p. 200).

CONCLUSIONS

This chapter has outlined and discussed the complex nature of the EU public relations as an illustrative example of global public relations efforts of a supranational polity. The European integration process is never over as new political, social and economic challenges continuously emerge forcing the EU and its member states in enacting new policies, laws, regulations and relationships. Within this scenario, public relations and communication activities play a key role in fostering mutual and beneficial relationships between the EU institutions and nation-states, their citizens and other key publics, as well as international relations between the EU and non-EU countries. Yet, as this chapter has outlined, complex organizations such as the European Union requires a transversal approach in planning global public relations. An approach that takes into consideration the interplay of the different infrastructural variables (politics, economics and activism) with the environmental ones (culture and media). Within the EU context, measures of ethnic, linguistic, and cultural diversity have effects on policy outcomes, redistribution, and the provision of public goods and these, in turn, affect how communication is strategically conceptualised and managed to effectively creating symbiotic relations among the EU institutions and their relevant publics.

NOTES

ⁱ It is important to note that at the beginning of the European integration project, only West Germany was part of the European Economic Community. At the end of WWII, Germany was split into two blocks, the West under control of the Allies and the East under the Soviets. West Germany was fundamentally a capitalist economic and saw in the European integration project a way to draw economic prosperity and political legitimacy, hence its interest in joining the group of western European countries in the European Economic Community. Germany was reunified only in 1990. The reunification extended the European Community membership to the East block as well as other international agreements that West Germany made in the early decades. For a detailed discussion on Germany, post-war political changes and the EU, see Anderson, 1999.

ⁱⁱ In June 2016, UK citizens were called in to vote for remaining or leaving the supranational union, after a long political discussion on the role of UK in the EU. Different arguments were presented for the pros and cons of the UK membership. The majority of citizens decided for a leave after more than forty years of membership – the UK joined the European Community in 1973. The political, economic and social consequences of this decision are still unclear. For more information on the UK historical relations with the EU and the implications of their leaving, see Galbraith, 2017, Koch, 2017, and MacShane, 2015.

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