Information Flow and Communication Deficit: Perceptions of Brussels-Based Correspondents and EU Officials

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This study contributes to the debate on the European Union (EU) ‘communication deficit’ by assessing EU-media relations. Previous literature has examined the way EU institutions interface with journalists, but tells us little about potential differences between these institutions’ communication performance. Moreover, research tends to address the main actors of this process, Brussels-based correspondents and EU officials, separately. Drawing on interviews with both groups, we established a direct comparison of their perceptions on (1) the press work of each EU institution; (2) the interaction between EU institutions; and (3) their own informal contacts. Results show that specific communicative patterns are aroused from the various institutions, the EU inter-institutional cooperation is negatively evaluated, and non-official information channels are a key asset for communicating in Brussels. Adopting a broader standpoint, our findings reveal that long-standing EU structural and organisational deficiencies might be enduring the ‘communication deficit’.

Keywords: EU-media relations, Brussels correspondents, EU officials, information flow, communication deficit, qualitative interviews

Introduction

Debates on the legitimacy of the European Union (EU) have been increasingly placed by scholars in the context of long-standing communicative handicaps (Morgan 1995; Anderson and Price 2008). Along this line,
EU-media relations are adopted as an analytical framework to discuss the ‘communication deficit’ within the realm of EU democratic shortcomings (e.g. Meyer 1999; Anderson and McLeod 2004). This literature strand draws predominantly upon interviews with Brussels-based correspondents and/or EU officials. On the side of the journalists, previous works investigated the Brussels Press Corps to understand what influences EU news, combining dimensions such as role conceptions (Statham 2010), journalistic cultures (Cornia 2010), editorial policies, and readership demands (Gleissner and de Vreese 2005; Lecheler 2008). On the side of European institutions, research essentially examines officials’ views of EU communication (Mak 2001; Foret 2004).

However, our extant knowledge of EU-media relations presents two fundamental constraints. At an institutional level, studies focus either on specific institutions such as the Commission (e.g. Meyer 1999) and the Parliament (e.g. Anderson and McLeod 2004), or mostly on the EU as a whole (e.g. Gleissner and de Vreese 2005). Reflecting a single-institution and a global standpoint respectively, none of these approaches primarily seeks a direct comparison between the institutions. Regarding the main actors, EU correspondents and EU officials tend to be addressed separately (e.g. Terzis 2008; Foret 2004) and their informal contacts neglected (but see Raeymaeckers, Cosijn, and Deprez 2007).

In light of these considerations, it is our purpose to establish a direct comparison between the perceptions of Brussels correspondents and EU officials about the communication process at the European level. Hence, we develop an approach centred on their professional relationships and networks, rather than on individual role conceptions. From an institutional perspective, we start to reflect upon the implications of the EU institutional set-up for the flow of information, i.e. the communication between EU institutions and journalists. The focus will then be transferred to an analysis of the actors, through an assessment of their interdependent yet different nature. Our study combines the two theoretical stances which accommodate the ‘communication deficit’ debates: the way this concept interweaves with EU institutional structures and decision-making (e.g. Meyer 1999); and its connection to the professional practices of EU press services (e.g. Anderson and McLeod 2004).

To investigate this theoretical background, interviews with representatives from both groups were conducted. Accounting for the limitations of studies on EU-media relations, we explore our interviewees’ insights on (1) EU press work and possible differences amongst its institutions’ performance; (2) the interaction between the institutions in communication terms; (3) their own informal contacts. By examining the correspondents-officials relationship, we expect to shed light on hindrances curtailing EU communication. This assumption is based on the fact that the media are often held responsible for the EU legitimacy problems (Statham 2010, 125). Meyer (1999) observes that the fragmented and technocratic profile of the EU is particularly noticeable in the European Commission’s interface with journalists. Therefore, a better understanding of EU-media relations might help to clarify the structural deficiencies at the core of the EU ‘communication deficit’.
EU Institutional Set-Up and Communication

The ambivalent position of the EU between the rules of international diplomacy and nationally framed democratic practices (Drake 2000, 7) underlies Jacques Delors’ well-known quip describing it as an ‘unidentified political object’. This *sui generis* character is compounded by the idiosyncratic institutional triangle at its core: the Council of the EU (decision-making body which represents the member-states); the European Commission (collegial institution with right of initiative aimed at defending general EU interests); and the European Parliament (assembly of representatives elected by EU citizens). The evolution of European policies from a somewhat more consensual regulatory stage to an era of increasingly controversial political subjects has been concomitant with a (re)negotiation of power and competencies between these institutions. As Mak (2001, 1) argues, ‘over the last couple of years, the discussion has exactly shifted from *whether* institutions matter to *how and how much* they matter’.

Although our understanding about how this institutional set-up impacts media relations remains fragmented, some common ground can be found. Drawing on systemic handicaps and on journalists’ evaluations of EU-media relations, three features are assigned to the flow of information at the European level:

1. **Complex information**

   One of the most widely recognised challenges to communication lies in what studies depict as the overcomplicated nature and ‘dullness’ of EU politics, often translated into highly technical press materials (Gleissner and de Vreese 2005, 227; Lecheler 2008, 447). This obstacle is believed to be growing simultaneously with the deepening of the EU in a vast number of policy areas, insofar as this evolution catapulted European topics from the foreign pages to a multitude of news sections (Kevin 2003, 70). An ever increasing standard of specialisation is required from Brussels correspondents, who have seen a dramatic increase in their work span (Gleissner and de Vreese 2005, 230; Terzis 2008, 537).

2. **Voluminous information**

   The heavy flow of information which emanates from a large bureaucratic machine has been identified by correspondents as a major organisational obstacle (Raeymaeckers, Cosijn, and Deprez 2007, 112). Previous research shows that far from arousing the interest of journalists in European affairs, this continuous news feed raises concerns amongst news practitioners about the quality of its political content (Statham 2008, 409). Rather than generating greater EU visibility or an even-handed presence of its institutions in the news, such a trend may decrease the newsworthiness of European daily politics and accentuate the endemic reliance on key EU events (de Vreese 2003).

3. **Scattered information**

   Another obstacle lies in the EU threefold institutional model (Raeymaeckers, Cosijn, and Deprez 2007), which has been notorious for provoking
internal competition and a struggle for media attention (Gavin 2001). Literature acknowledges that wider coordination between services and institutions would be crucial to improve communication (Anderson and McLeod 2004). EU official documents on communication policy corroborate this goal, considering such collaboration – which should not jeopardise the autonomy of each institution – as a counterweight for a dispersed information flow (EC 2007, 4). Within the Commission, a key role is assigned to Directorate General for Communication (DG COMM) in strategic planning and centralising information (EC 2005).

These problems are identified in studies dealing with an assessment of the EU in terms of information provision and communicative quality (Statham 2008). What needs to be explored, however, is whether the EU institutional set-up translates into distinct evaluations of different institutions, and how these institutions interact with each other in terms of communication activities. In this context, the European Commission (EC), the European Parliament (EP) and the Council of the EU should be in the spotlight: not only do they represent the main actors of EU decision-making processes, but they have also been identified as the primary communicators in European affairs (APCO Worldwide 2008, 29).

From the standpoint of EU-media relations, we could expect that the Commission’s technical and administrative profile, compounded by its strive for consensus-building, generates particularly critical views (Meyer 1999). In contrast, a more positive judgement might arise from the press work of the Parliament, where the existence of political cleavages and of a more event-oriented mindset has the potential to stimulate greater journalistic interest (cf. Lecheler 2008, 454; Statham 2008, 409). Finally, the Council is likely to be almost mute with respect to communication (Meyer 1999, 633).

To examine these questions more thoroughly implies a focus on the actors concerned with the information flow at EU level. It is true that an outburst of news sources (Morgan 1995; Lecheler 2008) transformed Brussels into a convergence point for civil servants, lobbyists, and think tanks, amongst many other associations. Nevertheless, research demonstrates that powerful institutional actors have easier access to journalists than civil society and social movements (Schlesinger and Tumber 1994). In the case of the EU, Statham (2008, 406) indicates that European institutions are the key ‘source strategists’ above the nation-state, and that the Brussels Press Corps represents their preferred target. Thus, we have reasons to believe that EU correspondents and EU officials remain at the core of European political communication.

Brussels Correspondents and EU Officials in Direct Comparison

In a study addressing the ‘communication deficit’ debate through the angle of EU-media relations, it is of utmost importance to investigate the two sides of this process. A predominance of the literature, however, chooses to analyse the perceptions of either EU correspondents (Gleissner and de
Vreese 2005; Statham 2008) or EU officials (Mak 2001; Foret 2004). Furthermore, the few works that entail both groups present some drawbacks in the scope: a focus on diverse countries yet an EC-centred design (Meyer 1999; Anderson and Price 2008) or a multi-institution sample limited by the adoption of one member-state as reference (Anderson and McLeod 2004). In the case of the pan-European Europub project, interviews with media professionals and policy makers (amongst which were Brussels correspondents and EU officials) were only a component of an ambitiously broad research set-up. While the findings provide us with relevant data on political communication and mobilisation, countries and issue field comparisons supersede a closer correlation between these actors ( Europub 2005).

A direct comparison between Brussels correspondents and EU officials is all the more pertinent when we consider them as interdependent but intrinsically different groups. They are interdependent in the sense that their routines are governed by a relation of mutual influence. Firmstone (2008, 432) acknowledges that work division in transnational newspapers follows the portfolio division of the Commission. Conversely, the EU seeks to adapt to news media logics (such as newsworthiness criteria and agenda-setting), although its degree of mediatisation is still low to moderate (Meyer 2009).

They are different insofar as dealing with EU affairs, a subject which plainly disdains the classic ‘news values’ (Gleissner and de Vreese 2005), places them on a route of distinct expectations (Morgan 1995). Gavin (2001, 303) and Meyer (1999, 629) underline the officials’ efforts to withhold information in the precise areas that arouse the most journalistic attention. Moreover, a cross-analysis of EC communication output and news coverage revealed that this institution and the media emphasise distinct aspects of EU politics (Bijsmans and Altides 2007).

Based on insights offered by political communication and journalism literature, a comparative study of correspondents vis-à-vis EU civil servants requires two dimensions. On the one hand, officials represent what Sigal (1973) describes as ‘routine channels’, because they provide journalists with institutionally sanctioned press releases and media-oriented events. On the other hand, they manage information leaks to pursue their own agendas, thus falling into the author’s category of ‘informal channels’. Previous research has predominantly addressed the first dimension by investigating press strategies and activities (e.g. Anderson and McLeod 2004). Subsequently, a more thorough knowledge of these groups’ informal networking is required.

Such an approach is of great interest if we take into account that ‘behind-the-scenes’ interaction is deeply ingrained in the culture of EU institutions. Private contacts represent Brussels journalists’ most useful source (APCO Worldwide 2008, 20) and EU officials’ privileged way to boost their interests (Balčytienė et al. 2007, 8). The EU institutional set-up itself favours the use of ‘informal channels’, as the complex, voluminous and scattered information flow paves the way for weak management and control (Baisnée 2004, 147). With respect to the tacit conventions which
dictate this interplay, ‘nationality’ (Morgan 1995; Gavin 2001) and ‘outlet’ (Raeymaeckers, Cosijn, and Deprez 2007; Lecheler 2008) represent de facto determinants of access to sources. In this context, it is our purpose to clarify the relevance of informal contacts, as well as to verify the validity of these unstated rules.

Research Questions

Our study examines EU-media relations in Brussels against the background of the ‘communication deficit’ discussion. At an institutional level, we draw upon literature exploring the link between the EU set-up and communicative shortcomings (Morgan 1995; Meyer 1999). Concerning the actors, we rely on analyses regarding Brussels correspondents and/or EU officials (e.g. Foret 2004; Europub 2005; Lecheler 2008). Our research questions merge these dimensions, enabling a comparison between the different institutions on the one hand, and between the two actors on the other.

We saw that scholars tend to assess the EU communicative performance as a whole (e.g. Gleissner and de Vreese 2005; Statham 2008), with the samples being limited to the EC (Anderson and McLeod 2004; Baisnée 2004). Accordingly, our research question reads: How do correspondents and officials evaluate the press work of each of the three main EU institutions?

Little is known about the interaction between the institutions, i.e. the degree of collaboration and synergies in communication activities. The dominant position of the EC (Gavin 2001; Baisnée 2004) may be counterweighted by attempts to foster inter-institutional cooperation (e.g. EC 2007). We investigate, therefore, the way correspondents and officials evaluate the interaction between the three main institutions.

Communication dynamics in Brussels are as much about access to official sources as they are about behind closed doors contacts (Morgan 1995), but it remains unclear what determines the access to information at this level. Hence, through the insights of correspondents and officials, our study addresses the perceived importance of informal information channels in Brussels, and the factors by which they are governed.

Method

Interviews

Seventy-five semi-structured in-depth interviews with EU correspondents and EU officials were conducted in Brussels from June to July 2009. This period coincided with the campaign leading up to the European Parliamentary Elections, the primary EU inter-institutional communication priority in that year. Consequently, it represented a privileged moment to explore potential differences and institutional interaction.

Qualitative interviews have been extensively used by communication academics to assess political journalism overall (e.g. Pfetsch 2001) and EU journalism (e.g. Statham 2008). Based on these references, an interview guide was designed. The questionnaire was built upon the same lines of
enquiry as our research questions, and arranged to accommodate (expected) follow-up comments from interviewees (Berg 2001, 70–72). For instance, the question ‘How do you evaluate the EU press work?’ was accompanied by cues and prompts (e.g. ‘But do you find institutional differences?’) in order to direct the interviewees towards our topic (Patton 2002).

**Sampling**

Purposive (Miles and Huberman 1994, 27) sampling enabled us to select the most pertinent cases in light of our research questions. The main criterion implied that journalists were based in Brussels (as permanent employees or freelancers) to report on European affairs for national or transnational outlets (news agencies, press, radio, television, online). We sought to recruit correspondents from high-profile media, in terms of readership, listening or viewing indicators. Representing organisations with a prevalent agenda-setting function over less powerful counterparts (Reese 1991, 324), they are expected to develop a narrow relation with EU officials. With the same purpose of relevance, our selection in this latter group entailed staff from EU institutions (EC, EP, Council of the EU) with decision-making power in communication matters. Lastly, we tried these ‘information-rich cases’ (Patton 2002, 230) to reflect variance in age, gender, and most of all nationality. We recruited interviewees from twenty-two countries, half of which were from EU15 (n = 11) and the other half split between EU12 (n = 8) and non-EU member states (n = 3) [see Appendix 1].

**Data Analysis**

Interviews were transcribed and examined following a systematic qualitative content analysis. Central to this methodology is the notion of ‘code’, for which we rely on Peters and Wester’s (2007, 641) definition as the researcher’s interpretation ‘of the exact text in the document’. The authors emphasise that codes progress in parallel to a set of successive steps: *exploration* (discovery of concepts), *specification* (working out concepts), *reduction* (relating the concepts), and *integration* stages (answering questions). We will illustrate this evolution with examples taken from the coding of our data.

‘Descriptive codes’ (*exploration* stage) highlight elements relevant to the research question (Peters and Wester 2007, 641). At this initial phase, we assigned the tentative code ‘EU Evaluation’ to textual segments in which interviewees discussed the overall EU press work. The same way, ‘institutional interaction’ was used to label sentences on the communication between the institutions. When strategies to gather or disclose information were mentioned, we used the code ‘access information’. At the second level, that of ‘analytic codes’ (*specification* stage), dimensions and variables were added to the previous exercise. In order to accommodate institutional differences, the preliminary code ‘EU evaluation’ unfolded in formulations such as ‘EP evaluation’ or ‘voluminous flow’. Furthermore, ‘EC-centred’ or ‘lack coordination’ were associated to
‘institutional interaction’, and ‘personal relations’ or ‘subject-driven strategies’ were used to specify the code ‘access information’.

Thirdly, ‘pattern codes’ (reduction and integration stages) investigate the co-occurrence of previously identified dimensions or variables. For instance, in a given interview with an EP press officer, codes were examined vis-à-vis the same specific profile (i.e. other EP press officers), the same general profile (i.e. other EU officials), and a different profile (i.e. correspondents). In doing so, we aimed at a cross-function and cross-group comparison. Coding paved the way for a final conceptual analysis, where results were presented in table (Peters and Wester 2007, 642) [see Appendix 2].

Several procedures were followed to enhance the validity of this study. MaxQDA software assisted us in drafting lists of codes and respective frequencies, arranging them into a hierarchical tree structure, and reviewing textual segments in context. During this process, our work alternated between data observation and theoretical background, and the reflection was guided by the use of memos (Miles and Huberman 1994; Peters and Wester 2007). Finally, we relied on review by inquiry participants (Patton 2002, 560) in the sense that the results were sent back to interviewees for follow-up comments.

Results

Evaluation of the EU Press Work

Negative overall, but different arguments. While correspondents display a more negative attitude overall, officials do not exempt themselves from self-criticism. Interviewees complain about the voluminous information flow, depicted by a press journalist as ‘heaven for a journalist from a monthly magazine and hell for a journalist from a daily broadsheet’. To address this problem, several officials refer to attempts of creating subject-driven ad hoc lists of journalists. Nevertheless, a Head of Unit notes that ‘this screening exercise lives in permanent tension with the somewhat individualist ambition of different services to capture media attention’.

When the discussion is transferred to the quality rather than the quantity, the overcomplicated nature of press releases appears to be downplayed by both groups. One official believes this technical dimension to ‘be ingrained in the EU political DNA’, and several journalists note that it only represents a hindrance when the absence of non-English versions affects the immediacy of their job. A newspaper correspondent explains that ‘proposals dealing with financial or market-related subjects are almost exclusively in English and targeted at the City of London, making it much easier for Anglo-Saxon colleagues to send the information back home’.

Hence, instead of being deemed as a communicative obstacle, complexity is generally accepted as a component of European politics. The difference lies, however, in the way the informative value of institutional material is rated. Most officials agree in considering press releases as a useful source, whereas the majority of correspondents admit that they tend
to use them solely to contextualise the ‘authentic information’ provided by other means. As a TV journalist puts it: ‘EU institutional material is as good to find information as it is bad to find the truth’.

**Institutional set-up and communicative performance: a close relation.** Our data confirmed that not only does the perception of each institution’s communication performance differ, but it is also closely tied to their distinct political architecture. The most recurrent shortcomings assigned by journalists to the Commission, which gathered a negative view overall, relate to the lack of ‘juicy’ topics imposed by its consensus-striving nature. The Parliament, on the other hand, is rated in a more positive light, with its party politics dimension leading to media-tailored press releases. Comparing the two institutions, an Italian correspondent argues that in the former ‘a good story isn’t within reach of everyone’ and in the latter ‘everyone can reach a story, therefore it’s no longer good’.

The ‘Commission-Parliament comparison’ is also the most visible opposition amongst officials’ discourse. All the EP press officers considered their services to be of better quality than those of the Commission, which dovetails with the insights provided by the journalists. Nonetheless, the fact that several officials from the EC shared this assumption was a somewhat striking result. As the arguments used by Commission and Parliament civil servants differ, we locate the greatest disparity at this analytical level not between correspondents and officials, but amongst this last group. On the one hand, EP civil servants highlight their work division in country sectors as a way of more effectively fulfilling the media logics of national relevance: ‘Our press officers write for their own journalists. This is an obvious advantage compared to the Commission’s portfolio system, where the same document is translated countless times. I don’t believe that one size fits all’. Yet they concur with journalists that the EP transparency is not conducive to greater media coverage.

EC officials on the other hand place the Parliament vantage point in the higher organisational freedom which underlies the production of institutional material. A Head of Unit notes that ‘it’s much easier for an MEP to come up with a sexy press release, because they can write whatever they like’. Between the lines of this back-handed praise, one might read the Commissions’ staff dissatisfaction with the strictness of their information hierarchy. A common thread between EC officials is the description of the template for press releases as an obstacle to creative communication.

While Permanent Representations are deemed as a useful source for most journalists, the low communicative profile of the Council as a whole (namely, of its press officers) was agreed amongst almost the whole sample. As summed up by a Dutch press correspondent: ‘If I had to parallel the EU with media needs, I’d say that the Commission is well adapted at a daily newspaper, the Parliament at a weekly, and the Council at a monthly’. Contrary to the claim of a Spokesperson for the third institution that ‘we try to be as visible and collaborative as possible’, several officials assume that they do not have sufficient knowledge about the Council to comment on its performance. A civil servant even adds that ‘the most
powerful institution should remain the least visible’, and a British journalist addressed this discrepancy in a cheerful way: ‘What wouldn’t we give to have a Midday Briefing in the Council instead?’

Inter-Institutional Interaction

A more professionalised yet uncoordinated EU. Our data shows that a friction point between news practitioners and officials lies in the overlapping agendas of the European institutions, which particularly affects the practices of journalists who are alone in Brussels. A newspaper correspondent mentions that ‘I’ve missed important Council meetings because they coincided with the EP Strasbourg week’. In the first institution, the simultaneous broadcast of the Presidency press conference and national ministers’ press conferences is another example of the same criticism.

Although most officials recognise an improvement brought about by the professionalisation of EU communication staff (a trend which was absent in the journalists’ discourse), we found an unexpected negative evaluation towards institutional interaction. Once again, distinct patterns stem from civil servants working for different institutions. Rather than reflecting about their own case, EP and Council officials emphasise the problems of the EC, implying that it is seeking to perpetuate its monopoly over information. A Council Spokesperson says: ‘I’ll give you a tip. Unless it’s strictly necessary, I never organise press briefings at twelve, whereas the Commission has never asked me at what time I hold my meetings’. The EC is also the focus of Commission officials, yet from the viewpoint of internal fragmentation, as shown by opinions claiming that ‘everyone’s communicating in their corner’.

The role of DG COMM is still regarded as fragile by their insiders: not only does the assignment of responsibilities between the communication units of other DGs and the Spokesperson’s Service appear to be dictated by ad hoc agreements, but also the interplay between the latter and the whole Directorate is volatile and indefinite. A Head of Unit acknowledges: ‘COMM doesn’t own the message. The message is owned by the remainder DGs. Guess who the Spokes are going to talk to’. Subsequently, the location of the Commission at the epicentre of EU communicative dynamics leads to different approaches: an inter-institutional perspective by EP and Council officials, and an inter-service angle by EC civil servants. In this context, insights about EP Elections did not provide us with evidence of exceptionally strong inter-institutional contacts. On the contrary, EU staff appeared to be more concerned in outlining what their own tasks were as opposed to those of other services and institutions. For instance, all EP officials insisted on the leading role of their institution in the campaign.

Complex decision-making and conflicting interests. General agreement concerning the weakness of EU institutional balance does not prevent the emergence of remarkable differences between the journalists’ views vis-à-vis those of officials. Several correspondents indicated that the difficulties of coping with the three-level decision making process itself supersede the complex character of EU politics. A Czech journalist explains that to
understand the actual content of a directive doesn’t pose as much of a great challenge as to know the right timing to write the story.

The hegemonic position of the EC in the Brussels microcosm is an assumption omnipresent throughout the interviews with the accredited press. Nevertheless, this hierarchy is not necessarily perceived as positive, with a British correspondent complaining that ‘by treating the Commission as the fountain of all wisdom we end up neglecting other sources and aspects of European integration’. Due to its right of initiative and centralisation of communication resources, the EC becomes the stage of what various journalists pejoratively describe as ‘news recycling’ practices. In order to take advantage of the sluggish EU political cycle, officials are accused of restricting media contacts to a continuous flow of pseudo-events detached from any relevant information. Mobile tariffs are one of the items where this strategy is most evident, as one correspondent states: ‘It’s important for the public, but you don’t need to write fifty stories on that. Europe’s political importance is much higher than these roaming tales’.

Civil servants find the most significant shortcomings in the redoubt of internal organisation rather than in media contacts policy. The ‘recycling’ is actually praised by several officials as one of their most successful strategies: ‘My bendy cucumbers story... it was agreed last year and it came into force in July, so of course I recycle it. If you have a good story why not milk it for all it’s worth?’ Judgements such as this one permit us to clarify the extent to which the interests of the two groups may clash.

Informal Contacts

A mutually accepted tacit game. Informal contacts represent a privileged medium to speed-up the work of correspondents and officials. One journalist from an online media summarises: ‘my private network has become routine in the sense that I don’t use it just to get scoops, but often as a shortcut that saves me hours of digging though endless documents’. Conversely, some civil servants admit that they ‘have a group of regular customers’ amongst the Brussels media.

Concerning the rules which govern these non-official channels, the correspondents’ news outlet is considered as far more influential than nationality in terms of information access. The classic ‘Financial Times example’, however, is framed differently by the interviewees. Correspondents relate the newspaper’s status as the ‘Second Official Journal’ or ‘a kind of DG publication’ to a gradually consolidated preferential relation with the institutions. Officials on the other hand underline its ‘role of agenda-setter and multiplier throughout the media of different member-states’. Thus, what news practitioners deem as an obvious case of inequality in the journalist-source relationship is analysed by officials as a strategic choice to facilitate the effective relay of information.

Subject-driven targeted strategies. Interviewees agree that the country of origin of a correspondent matters in light of the portfolio orientation of EU politics. A correspondent illustrates that ‘if a Maltese journalist wants an interview with a Commissioner to discuss immigration issues, he’ll probably get it; if he wishes to talk about gas pipelines, or Barroso’s nomi-
nation, whatever, good luck for him’. Hence, the nationality criterion goes beyond the simplistic assessment of officials indulging their own nationals, rather entering the equation in terms of the key messages tailored by the EU at specific member-states. While it is true that journalists might benefit from having counterparts in a position of power, this does not automatically grant them exclusive news just for the sake of their home country. For instance, the Portuguese correspondents interviewed denied that they had gained more access to information sources under Barroso’s Presidency.

Another common idea is the description of ‘Brussels scoops’ as fundamentally different from national ones. One Spanish journalist summarises the dominant opinion by explaining that it’s not ‘regarding scandals, but often just about getting a classified document in advance’. Another Spanish interviewee adds that ‘scoops are more for my boss than for my readers’. As for the origin of exclusive news, correspondents refer to contacts within the institutions, and also to sources in their countries, as exemplified by a Polish correspondent, ‘often when my Government is in a kind of arm wrestling with the EU’. Officials who are mostly in contact with the media, however, show greater reluctance in admitting favouritism policies. An EC spokesperson provides a standard explanation in this respect: ‘That’s a myth (...). It’s not the spokesman who leaks things, it’s the Cabinet, it’s other people. We had this report that didn’t please many member-states. The fact that is was out there before it was discussed by the Heads of Cabinet meant that those countries started to apply pressure to get it changed. It wasn’t helpful at all’.

Conclusion and Discussion

The purpose of this study was to directly compare the perceptions of Brussels-based correspondents and EU officials on the communication process at the European level. Our first research question focused on the interviewees’ evaluation of each EU institution’s press work. We found that different patterns arose from each institution, with the most striking contrast being drawn between the ‘dullness’ of the EC (Meyer 1999) and the more ‘media-friendly’ EP communication (Statham 2008, 409). As expected, the Council ‘as a whole’ was deemed invisible in communication terms (Meyer 1999, 633). We then asked how do correspondents and officials evaluate the interaction between the institutions. Interviewees showed their dissatisfaction concerning EU efforts to foster inter-institutional cooperation (cf. EC 2007), considered to be undermined by overlapping agendas and the endemic prevalence of the Commission (Baisnée 2004; Meyer 2009). Lastly, this analysis explored the perceived importance of informal contacts, and the factors by which they are ruled. In line with extant literature (Balčytienė et al. 2007; APCO Worldwide 2008, 20), participants agree that non-official channels are the primary asset for communication. Nevertheless, contrary to previous findings (Morgan 1995; Gavin 2001), the influence of nationality on information access was downplayed and superseded by criteria such as the news outlet and subject-driven strategies.
The extent to which the position of both groups differs and/or converges was thoroughly examined in the results section. At this point, therefore, it is essential to frame these findings in light of the ‘communication deficit’ debate (Meyer 1999; Anderson and McLeod 2004; Statham 2008). Against the background of the discussed ‘institutional’ and ‘actors’ perspective, three contradictory – somewhat paradoxical – elements arise from each of our research questions.

The views on EU press work confirmed the existence of a disparity between the perceived importance of the institutions’ political messages and respective communicative performance. The political-legal profile of the Commission emerges as a double-edged sword: while its right of initiative favours permanent media attention (cf. Baisnée 2004), the consensus-striving nature of this unelected institution – often criticised for policies owned by the Council – constrains its press work. This explains the recurrently negative evaluation by our interviewees. Conversely, the EP press releases are praised for their openness (cf. Lecheler 2008, 454), but the institution’s excessive transparency decreases its newsworthiness. Within debates on EU legitimacy, this low interest is problematic because the media represent a crucial link between citizens and the only elected institution (Anderson and McLeod 2004). Finally, being the redoubt of inter-governmental agendas, the Council is seen as the most powerful institution, but this power does not lie as much in the Council of the European Union (CEU) ‘as a whole’ as it does in a selected group of member-states. Sources from Permanent Representations, for instance, are deemed as more useful when compared to Council press officers. Accordingly, studies on media content underline the uneven presence of EU institutions, and country-oriented approaches in the news (van Noije 2010). Providing a fragmented institutional picture, such coverage does not seem to reflect the elements of the political process which, according to Meyer (1999), EU governance should communicate to the media: ‘accountability’ (who is advocating what); ‘procedural’ (how does decision-making work); and ‘issues’ (what is about to be decided).

As far as the interaction between the institutions is concerned, EU policy orientations do not appear to be in line with work practices. Despite the goal of closer inter-institutional collaboration (e.g. EC 2007), our results demonstrate that the lack of coordination between institutions curtails communication (cf. Anderson and McLeod 2004; Anderson and Price 2008). This point was best illustrated by the fragility of DG COMM, ideally responsible for planning and centralising input from other DGs and departments (EC 2005). From the viewpoint of organisational performance, its weak position is problematic insofar as the effectiveness of communication depends both on external action and solid internal channels (Meyer 1999). Consequently, a ‘communication deficit’ might endure as long as resistance to inter-institutional cooperation stems from the very same institutions/services which advocate this objective.

Finally, although the dynamics of informal contacts are a key to speeding up work, they may be negatively affecting the goal of a greater inter-institutional balance. This informal dimension is perceived as a win-win
relationship by the interviewees; nonetheless, topical phenomena such as leaks and scoops (Terzis 2008, 547–548), mainly from the Commission, appear to be enduring and reinforcing its hegemonic position. As this enhances the already fierce competition between institutions (Gavin 2001), overcoming the ‘communication deficit’ emerges as challenging. Revisiting our second research question, the goal of inter-institutional balance is jeopardised by the greater appeal of informal channels.

Since the interviews took place, significant changes to the communication policy were introduced by the re-nominated Barroso Commission, the most evident being the integration of Margot Wallström’s communication-centred portfolio into the broader field of ‘Justice, Fundamental Rights and Citizenship’, lead by Viviane Reding. Our conclusions, however, illustrate a set of long-standing problems aligned with the documented shortcomings of the EU (e.g. Meyer 1999; Anderson and Price 2008). Hence, we argue that the findings can be catapulted beyond the specific time frame when data was collected.

A future scholarly agenda should comprise of a more thorough institutional approach (e.g. nuances in EU-media relations within the same institution), as well as of actors such as editors or journalists in home offices (cf. Bainsée 2004, 153) and civil servants from EU agencies and/or offices in the member-states (cf. AIM 2007). Such a standpoint is all the more relevant when we consider that the number of journalists in Brussels is declining, and EU coverage is being increasingly generated in national newsrooms (cf. API 2010). In connection to this, interview-oriented literature could be crossed with analyses of media content (Firmstone 2008, 438) in order to assess the extent to which organisational changes inherent to the production of EU news are reflected in the journalistic output. This approach appears to be particularly important when it has been consistently acknowledged that media content influences citizens’ attitudes towards the EU and voting behaviour in European parliamentary elections (Banducci and Semetko 2003). While it would be pertinent to expand research beyond the Brussels microcosm (for a recent example, see Cornia 2010), we believe that this study has provided useful insights on EU-media relations in the so-called ‘capital of Europe’.

References


Appendix 1. Interviewees

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Correspondents</th>
<th>Officials</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Nationality</td>
<td>Outlet</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>German</td>
<td>TV/Online</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>British</td>
<td>Newspaper</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Portuguese</td>
<td>News agency</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Irish</td>
<td>Online</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Spanish</td>
<td>Newspaper/TV</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Portuguese</td>
<td>Newspaper/Radio</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>American</td>
<td>Newspaper</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>British</td>
<td>News magazine</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Portuguese</td>
<td>Radio/Newspaper</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Polish</td>
<td>Newspaper</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Italian</td>
<td>TV</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Spanish</td>
<td>Newspaper</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dutch</td>
<td>Newspaper/Radio</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Turkish</td>
<td>Newspaper</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>British</td>
<td>Newspaper</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Latvian</td>
<td>Radio/Newspaper</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>French</td>
<td>Newspaper</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Estonian</td>
<td>TV</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Czech</td>
<td>Newspaper/Online</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Italian</td>
<td>Newspaper</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Portuguese</td>
<td>Radio</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dutch</td>
<td>Newspaper</td>
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<tr>
<td>German</td>
<td>Newspaper</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dutch</td>
<td>Newspaper/Radio</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>British</td>
<td>Newspaper</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Irish/Swedish</td>
<td>Online</td>
</tr>
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<td>TV/Radio</td>
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<td>German</td>
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<td>Italian</td>
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<td>German</td>
<td>Newspaper</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

1Alongside its particularly strong agenda-setting effects, the press accounts for the largest share of Brussels correspondents (Raeymaekers, Cosijn, and Deprez 2007), which explains the prevalence of newspaper interviewees in our sample. Following the same purpose of relevance, the special attention paid to EC officials is anchored to the decisive role of this institution in terms of communication resources and competences (e.g. Baisnée 2004). In the CEU, we interviewed the only official authorised to speak to the media on-the-record.
## Appendix 2. Coding (examples)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Level</th>
<th>Group</th>
<th>Code &gt; Sub-code</th>
<th>Text Segment</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>EU press work</td>
<td>Journalists</td>
<td>EU evaluation &gt; Informative value</td>
<td>You wouldn’t exactly expect to find the 'real' stuff in a stack of documents printed with the EU logo, would you?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>EU evaluation &gt; EP evaluation</td>
<td>The EP has been gaining political power, but that doesn’t mean media power, as the main issues are under the control of the EC.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Officials</td>
<td>EU evaluation &gt; Voluminous flow</td>
<td>Too many press releases become message-killers, media-indigestible.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>EU evaluation &gt; Council evaluation</td>
<td>The EU is Brussels; the Council is Mrs. Merkel. The EU only exists as a whole; the Council never exists as a whole.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Inter-</td>
<td>Journalists</td>
<td>Institutional interaction &gt; EC-centred</td>
<td>They keep recycling news, and we keep going there. We centre our agenda in the Commission. So, it’s partially our fault. Pure propaganda: they make very small changes in the documents, and sell them as if they were the big issue of the day.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>institutional</td>
<td></td>
<td>Institutional interaction &gt; Spinning</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>interaction</td>
<td>Officials</td>
<td>Institutional interaction &gt; Lack coordination</td>
<td>The more we have simultaneous meetings, the more you kill the message. It’s not a communication deficit, but a management problem. It speaks for itself the fact that it took us four years to get the Council and the EP to sign two pages saying that we must communicate Europe together.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Informal</td>
<td>Journalists</td>
<td>Leaks/scoops &gt; Personal relations</td>
<td>They distinguish those journalists that peep through the keyhole from those who can actually open the door. There are subjects that grant me much more access than others.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>contacts</td>
<td></td>
<td>Access information &gt; Subject-driven strategies</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Officials</td>
<td>Leaks/scoops &gt; Personal relations</td>
<td>All journalists have the same access, but some have more access than others. It comes down to personal relationships. It’s not a one-off scoop, but a regular contact. If the Commissioner was going to Tuscany in a few days, Italian correspondents would be our main target. It would be pointless to have the FT. It depends more on the topics.</td>
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</tbody>
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