



International Research Network in European Political Communications

<http://www.eurpolcom.eu>

European Political Communication

Working Paper Series

ISSN 1477-1373

Issue 14/07

November 2007

**The impact of ‘Constitutionalisation’ on the EU public communication
strategy: EU official rhetoric and civil society**

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Abstract

This paper investigates the impact of the Constitutional process on the EU’s public communication strategy, in terms of official rhetoric. The aim is to map the top-down aspect of the European public dialogue and the opportunities that the EU’s public communication strategy intends to offer to civil society organisations for involvement in shaping the Union’s political nature. This is done by means of a critical review of the EU’s Information and Communication strategy documents produced by the European Commission, the Council of the European Union, the European Parliament, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions.

The findings show that over the past few years the European Commission has unambiguously committed to facilitate direct communication with EU citizens and civil society as part of the strategy to increase transparency and democratic legitimisation of the EU’s decision-making process. Crucially, the shift in the Commission’s strategy from information- to communication-oriented coincides with the signing of the Constitutional Treaty by the member-states in late 2004 and its failed ratification process, which ended abruptly in 2005 with the negative referenda in France and the Netherlands. However, the EU public communication documents’ review also shows that the concepts of the European public sphere and the democratising potential of open public dialogue- both of which are central to the theoretical concept of the CONSTITUTION project (http://www.eurpolcom.eu/research_projects_const.cfm) - take a different meaning in the Commission’s official rhetoric.* There are also differences in the way that the role of the EU institutions and of organized civil society in the implementation of the EU’s public communication strategy is understood by each EU institution and advisory body.

*Funding support from the ESRC for the CONSTITUTION project (RES-000-23-0866) is gratefully acknowledged. I would also like to thank colleagues working on this project.

The ESRC Constitution project is part of the ESF (European Science Foundation) Project ‘Building the EU’s Social Constituency: Exploring the Dynamics of Public Claims-Making and Collective Representation in Europe’. The British study (Paul Statham [PI], Julie Firmstone and Asimina Michailidou) is conducted in collaboration with partners in Norway (Hans-Jörg Trenz, ARENA Oslo), Germany (Klaus Eder, Humboldt University) and Spain (Agustín José Menéndez, Universidad de León). See also <http://www2.hu-berlin.de/struktur/constituency/Startseite/home.htm>.

List of Contents

Abstract	i
Introduction.....	1
Part 1- EU institutions and their role in EU public communication policy-making.....	7
1.1 The Commission	7
1.2 The European Parliament (EP)	8
1.3 The Council of the European Union	8
1.4 The European Economic and Social Committee (EESC).....	9
1.5 The Committee of the Regions (CoR)	9
Part 2- EU Information and Communication strategy: Document review	10
2.1 The EU's democratic deficit, participation and the European public sphere	10
2.2.1 Pre-Constitution era (2001-2004)	10
2.1.2 Post-Constitution era (2004-2007).....	13
2.2 Public communication actions	14
2.2.1 Pre-Constitution era (2001-2004)	15
2.2.2 The post-Constitution era.....	17
2.3 The position of the other institutions	22
2.3.1 The European Parliament.....	22
2.3.2 The Council of the European Union	25
2.3.3 Committee of the Regions and Economic and Social Committee	27
Discussion	31
Bibliography	37
Appendix- List of EU Information and Communication strategy documents.....	40
COM and SEC documents	40
Decisions and Regulations	41
Other EU official documents	41

List of Figures

Figure 1: Normative model of the EU public sphere- public dialogue as democratising factor.	5
Figure 2: The EU public sphere according to EU official rhetoric.....	35

List of Tables

Table 1: Types of public communication	15
Table 2: Types of EU public communication actions: The European public sphere, 2001-2004.	16
Table 3: Types of EU public communication actions: National public spheres, 2001-2004.....	17
Table 4: Types of EU public communication actions: The European public sphere, 2004-2007.	20
Table 5: Types of EU public communication actions: National public spheres, 2004-2007.....	21

Introduction

Civil society must be actively involved in EU policy making and public communication

(Wallström 2005b).

In 2005 the French and Dutch publics ‘sent shock waves across the EU institutions’¹ by voting against the Treaty establishing a Constitution for the European Union (The European Union 2004). A ‘*period of reflection*’ ensued, during which EU institutions, particularly the European Commission, (attempted to) engage in public dialogue with the citizens regarding the political future of the Union. Core elements of the debate were the EU’s democratic legitimacy, openness and transparency of the EU decision-making process, the role of civil society and citizens’ participation in building the political identity of the Union. Two years on, the draft Reform Treaty (The European Union 2007) is launched, featuring more or less the same institutional changes introduced by the Constitutional Treaty, and evokes similar public debates. In fact, the issues of the EU’s democratic deficit and citizens’ participation in the decision-making process have been featuring in public debates regarding the future of the EU since the Maastricht Treaty (The European Union 1992) came into force, introducing a set of new political aims which took the Union beyond its original economic goals.

Legitimacy, public dialogue and the role of civil society in the EU decision-making process are also key issues at the core of the academic debate regarding the role of the EU institutions and the future of the Union (for example Koopmans et al 2002, Weiler 1996).² The contextual framework for the discussion of these issues is the concept of the European public sphere; a concept highly contentious but directly linked with citizens’ participation in the decision-making process, equality in the possibility of participation and ultimately democracy (for example Habermas 1996).³ Civil society is considered a key component of the European public sphere as it is closely linked in academic works with the issue of democratic deficit of the EU

¹ This is how a senior Commission official described the impact of the two referenda, in Michailidou 2007.

² See also Kantner 2002, Koopmans and Pfetsch 2003, Koopmans et al 2004, Meyer 1999, Pfetsch 2004, Risse and van de Steeg 2003, Scharpf 1999, Schlesinger 1999, Schlesinger 2003, Trenz 2004. The list is only indicative of the available bibliography on the European public sphere.

³ See also Follesdal and Hix 2006; Zweifel 2003; Moravcsik 2002; Trenz 2004; de Beus 2002; Michailidou 2007.

institutions in terms of its involvement with the EU decision-making processes (for example Beetham and Lord 1998; Weiler 1996).⁴

Identifying the role of civil society in the European public sphere is challenging, as to begin with, scholarly definitions of civil society tend to be very broad and even contradictory.⁵ Broadly speaking, *'civil society refers to the arena of uncoerced collective action around shared interests, purposes and values'* (Centre for Civil Society 2004). Diamond (1994: 4) defines civil society as *'the realm of organised social life that is voluntary, self-regulating, (largely) self-supporting, autonomous from the state and bound by a legal order or set of shared rules'*. Similarly, for Janoski civil society *'represents a sphere of dynamic and responsive public discourse'* between the state, voluntary organisations and private firms and unions (Janoski 1998: 12).⁶

In a similar manner, the European Economic and Social Committee (EESC), which represents civil society interests in the European Union, understands civil society as the *'representatives of Europe's socio-occupational interest groups, and others'* (Economic and Social Committee 2006; Economic and Social Committee 2007). The socio-occupational interest groups mentioned here are employers and employees (i.e. trade unions) while by *'others'* the EESC means

'organisations, small businesses, the crafts sector, the professions, cooperatives and non-profit associations, consumer organisations, environmental organisations, associations representing the family, persons with disabilities, the scientific and academic community and non-governmental organisations' (Economic and Social Committee 2007).

In this context, certain questions emerge regarding the EU's public communication strategy, particularly towards civil society actors: Have the academic debates regarding the EU's democratic deficit and the European public sphere impacted on the EU's public communication strategy? Has the Constitutional Treaty and the events that followed its signing by the Heads of the (then) 25 member-states and 3 candidate countries in 2004 affected the EU's communication strategy in any

⁴ One of the points of criticism against the EU decision-making process focuses on the issue of Comitology (for example Weiler 1996). Comitology is one of the legislative procedures followed on EU level, whereby the Commission consults committees of experts and proposes legislation. Until very recently, for example, the EP had no power to block legislative proposals made by expert committees.

Other issues are the decreasing turnout at EU parliamentary elections, the still limited powers of the EP compared to the decision-making powers of the Council and the lack of transparency in the Council's decision-making procedures.

⁵ For the history of the concept of 'civil society' see Baker 2002.

⁶ See also Baker 2002; Baker and Chandler 2005; Chandler 2004; Janoski 2005; Katz 2006; Powell 2007.

way? Is there a specific EU communication strategy towards collective actors (NGOs, local/regional governments, journalists/media etc)? How does that compare with the strategy the EU institutions (propose to) follow with regard to the general public?

These questions are at the core of the 'CONSTITUTION' project, coming under its first pillar of research, '*Vertical Europeanisation*' of communicative linkages (Statham et al 2005: 7). The core aim of the project is to map the '*political demands and expectations which citizens and their representatives mobilise on the European Union, across countries, across time, and within Britain*' ('*public claims-making*') (ibid.: 5). By doing so, it will be possible to identify the '*chain of linkages*' of political communication between political institutions (EU, trans-European, foreign EU, British, regional) and their citizens. This is a prerequisite for increasing the visibility of the decisions taken by political actors, which, in turn, is necessary in order to render political actors more accountable to the public- openness and accountability are core preconditions of (democratic) legitimacy (ibid.). More specifically to the case of the EU, identifying structures of public communication between political institutions, civil society and the public allows for a better understanding of the 'Europeanisation' process of national public political debates (Schlesinger 1995, Gerhards 1992 in Statham et al 2005: 5).

The project identifies four levels of Europeanisation of public debates, namely:

I. Vertical Europeanisation: This is where the communicative linkages produced by public claims-making occur vertically between national and EU politics. There are two possible types:

- i. 'bottom-up' claims-making: national actors make demands on EU institutions, regarding European issues;*
- ii. 'top-down' claims-making: EU institutions intervene in national politics in the name of EU common interests.*

II. Horizontal Europeanisation: Communicative linkages run between EU member states. Here collective actors from one country explicitly refer to actors or policies in another member state regarding European issues.

III. Europeanisation through National Cleavages over Europe: In this instance communicative linkages remain within the boundaries of the nation-state; a collective actor makes a demand on another actor or institution within their own country regarding European issues. Here increasing conflict and contestation over European issues within a country, and the increasing reference to Europe that occurs, is considered as a form of Europeanisation.

IV. A European Supranationalisation: Prospects for a supranational EU public sphere 'strictu sensu' may look bleak in the absence of a Europe-wide mass media. However, there may still be evidence for an EU supranationalisation of national public spheres, which is produced, for example, by the interaction between EU institutions and EU-level collective actors around European themes' (Statham et al 2005: 7).

From the above it becomes apparent that public dialogue- be it supranational, between EU and national-level public actors or among national actors across member-states- is a core element of the 'Europeanisation' of the public spheres. Public dialogue is also linked with the democratic legitimacy of the EU institutions, as it increases transparency and openness of the decision-making process, thus making political actors more accountable to the public. Of course public dialogue is not the only potentially democratising factor within a polity. Structural, legal and political reform of the decision-making mechanisms is also required if a polity is found to be lacking democratic legitimation.⁷ Nevertheless, the focus of the project is on the communicative links between political institutions and EU citizens.

The following figure illustrates the project's normative concept of the EU public sphere. This is understood as a multi-level communicative space, which incorporates the several national (depicted in pink) and regional/local (in green) public spheres found in the EU member-states (the layered circles indicate interaction between the several national and regional/local public spheres- 'horizontal' Europeanisation). At each level of the EU public sphere we find four core actors among whom, it is assumed, political dialogue is continuous, in order to ensure democratic governance ('Europeanisation through National/Local Cleavages over Europe' and European 'Supranationalisation'):

- I. The government. Depending on the level of political communication, this can mean national governments of the member-states, local/regional authorities or the EU institutions.*
- II. Civil society. Similarly to the government actors, civil society is understood to operate at each communicative level of the EU public sphere.*
- III. The public. As with the case of civil society and government, there is not one homogenous type of public but several local/regional and national publics. However, unlike the two previous actors, which are distinctly organised and autonomously functioning at each communicative level, there is no homogeneous EU public, separate from the local and national ones. Instead, the public at EU level is the 'sum' of all the local and national publics found in the EU polity.*
- IV. The media. Although in theory, we would find media organisations at every level of communication within the EU public sphere, it is a fact that there are no supranational widely established media at EU level. There are, however, EU media targeted at specialised EU audiences, such Europe by Satellite, Euronews and the newspaper European Voice. EU*

⁷ In fact, the call for greater transparency in politics has been met with scepticism by several scholars in the EU and International Relations fields. For example, De Beus (2002) has argued that EU governance can be more effective in the absence of a wider EU public sphere, while for Fenster, '*transparency theory's flaws result from a simplistic model of linear communication that assumes that information, once set free from the state that creates it, will produce an informed, engaged public that will hold officials accountable*' (Fenster 2006: 885).

media is depicted in grey in the EU public sphere model below to indicate precisely that such an institution does not really exist.

Interaction occurs not only among same-level actors (black arrows), but also among actors from different levels of the EU communicative space (coloured arrows- 'vertical' Europeanisation). 'Vertical' public dialogue can also be further facilitated by the online public sphere, which transcends geographical and socio-economic boundaries.

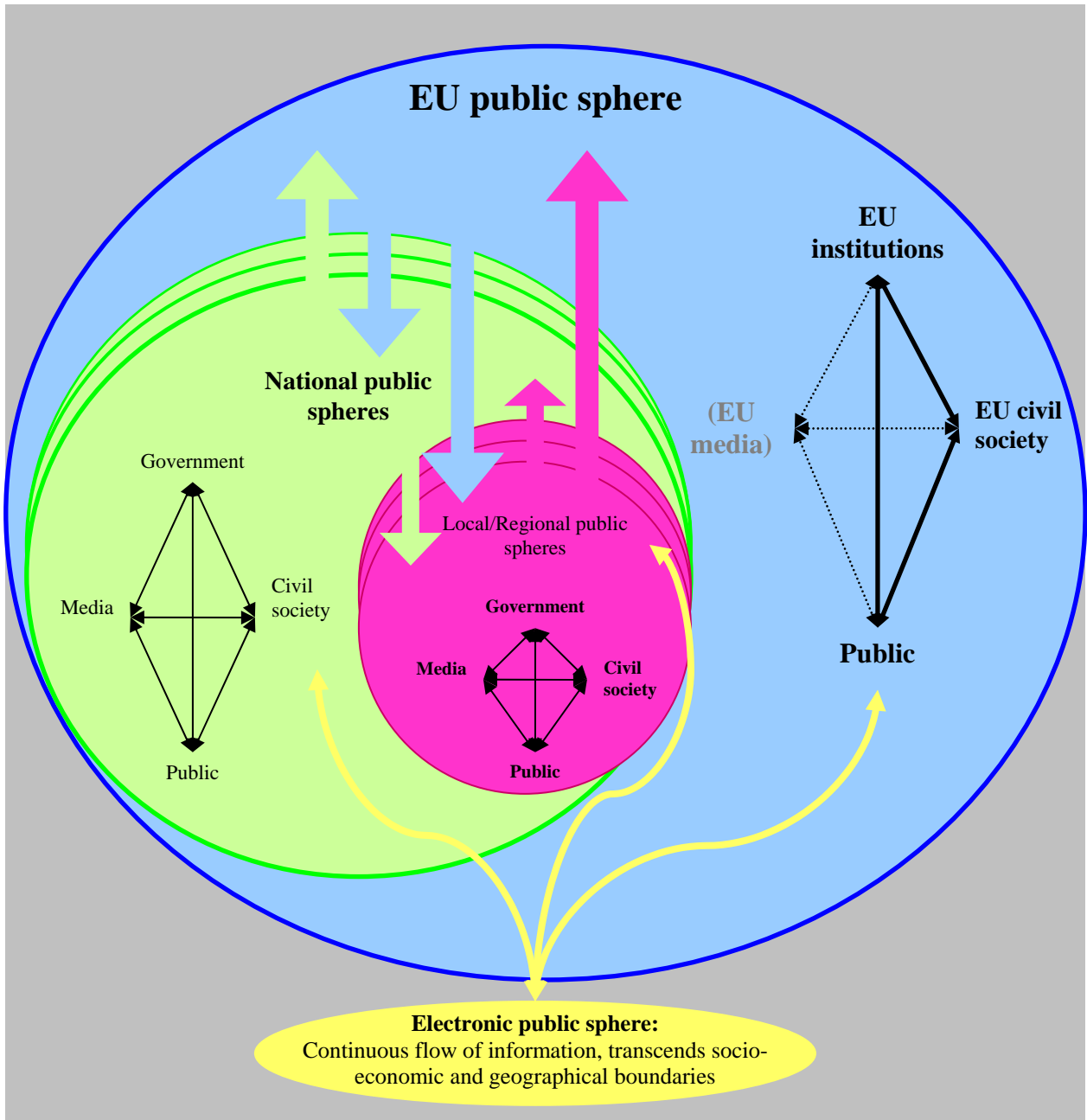


Figure 1: Normative model of the EU public sphere- public dialogue as democratising factor.

The aim of this working paper is to investigate the top-down aspect of the European public dialogue and the opportunities that the EU's public communication strategy actually offers to civil society organisations for involvement in shaping the

Union's political nature. More specifically, this paper examines the EU's public communication strategy in relation to civil society organisations. This is done by means of a critical review of the EU's Information and Communication strategy documents produced by the European Commission (henceforth called 'the Commission'), the Council of the European Union (henceforth called 'the Council'), the European Parliament (EP), the European Economic and Social Committee (EESC) and the Committee of the Regions (CoR).⁸

EU public communication is understood here as aiming to '*a) increase people's familiarity with the EU; b) increase people's appreciation of what the EU does; and c) engage people with the EU/ in the debate of EU affairs*' (Michailidou 2007 adapted from Leonard et al 2002 definition of public diplomacy). Crucially, public communication aims to promote interaction within the public sphere. Furthermore, it moves beyond intellectual forms of communication and beyond propaganda: it is necessary to understand the target audience and demonstrate relevance to target audience (ibid.).

After briefly introducing the role and structure of each of these EU institutions and advisory bodies with regard to their role in the EU's public communication strategy in Part One, this paper proceeds with the analysis of the EU documents in Part Two.⁹ In Section 2.1 the documents are examined within the wider context of the academic debate regarding the EU's democratic deficit and the existence and characteristics of the European public sphere. The aim is to establish whether the EU institutions are aware of these theoretical discussions and how they perceive the issues that arise from these discussions, i.e. the EU's democratic deficit, lack of accountability, openness and participation. Section 2.2 identifies the key points on which the Information and Communication strategy for the EU is based, as this is proposed by the Commission while Section 2.3 investigates the position and proposals of the EP and the Council in relation to the Commission's proposed public communication strategy. Finally, the issues that arise from the document review in relation to the research questions of the project are examined in the Discussion.

⁸ This paper draws on and expands on the findings of the study on the public communication strategy of the Commission of the European Communities, written up as part of the author's doctoral thesis (Michailidou 2007).

⁹ See Annex for a list of all the official documents examined.

Part 1- EU institutions and their role in EU public communication policy-making

1.1 The Commission

As the EU's guardian of the Treaties, responsible for planning and implementing common policies and the sole institution with the right to initiate EU legislation, it is the Commission that proposes and, with the approval of the EP and the Council, implements the EU's Information and Communication strategy. Therefore, the policy documents of this institution are the focus of this paper and have also been used to set the time frame for the EU's public communication strategy review.

The Commission documents are divided in two periods, namely the period 2001-2004 and the period 2004- to date.¹⁰ This distinction was deemed necessary in order to be able to identify and record any changes that may have occurred in the EU's communication strategy after the Constitutional Treaty was signed and its ratification process commenced in October 2004. 2001 has been used as the starting point for this policy review as this is when the first Commission Communication on the EU's information and communication policy was published (COM(2001)354, final).

Before 2004, the EU's Information and Communication strategy was the responsibility of the Commission's Directorate General (DG) Press. Since 2004 the issue of the EU's public communication strategy has become a Commission portfolio of its own right, with Commission Vice-President Margot Wallström responsible for it. DG Press was merged with DG Communication, which works under the authority of Vice President Margot Wallström and Commission President, Jose Manuel Barroso.

The Commission does not act in isolation from the other EU institutions and advisory bodies. In the process of proposing strategies, the Commission consults the EP, the CoR and the EESC before and after one of its proposals is published, although it is not obliged to take the recommendations of these institutions into account. The EP, the Council, the CoR and the EESC have their own institutional communication policies as well. Consequently, in order to get an insight into how the EU institutions understand the public communication process, it was necessary to review relevant

¹⁰ For the origins of the EU's Information and Communication policy see Rye 2007.

documentation published by the EP and the Council, which in the case of the EP in particular dates as far back as 1993. Furthermore, all relevant documents published by the advisory bodies CoR and EESC were reviewed and the results are presented in Section 2.3.

1.2 The European Parliament (EP)

The main job of the EP is to pass European laws. It shares this responsibility with the Council of the European Union, and the proposals for new laws come from the Commission. The EP and Council also share joint responsibility for approving the EU's €100 billion annual budget.

As far as the EU's Information and Communication strategy is concerned, the EP discusses all relevant issues as well as the Commission's proposals in its parliamentary Committee of Culture and Education (CULT). Therefore, all available CULT reports and resolutions on this topic have been included in the documents reviewed for this research. In addition, the resolutions and reports of the EP Committee on Constitutional Affairs (AFCO) have been included in the sample of documents, as they address specifically issues concerning the EU's Constitutional process.

1.3 The Council of the European Union

The Council of the European Union- formerly known as the Council of Ministers- apart from its legislative role, it also bears the main responsibility for what the EU does in the field of the common foreign and security policy and for EU action on some justice and freedom issues.

In the field of the EU's public communication strategy, there are very few documents that the Council has produced, and these are actually resolutions of the European Council (heads of state/government of the 27 member states meeting four times a year, in summit meetings, which set the overall EU policy) or declarations of the Presidency of the European Council.¹¹ It is worth noting that the European Council, which defines the general political guidelines of the Union, is not currently recognised as an EU institution by the Treaties.

¹¹ The presidency of the European Council rotates among member states.

1.4 The European Economic and Social Committee (EESC)

The EESC was set up by the 1957 Rome Treaties in order to involve economic and social interest groups in the establishment of the common market and to provide institutional machinery for briefing the European Commission and the Council on EU issues (Economic and Social Committee 2007). The EESC's role has gradually been reinforced over the years although it remains an advisory body and is not an EU institution. The 344 members of the EESC are drawn from economic and social interest groups in Europe. Members are nominated by national governments and appointed by the Council for a renewable 4-year term of office and they belong to one of three groups, namely employers, employees and various interests, including civil society. The next renewal will occur in October 2010.

Consultation of the EESC by the Commission or the Council is mandatory in certain cases; in others it is optional, although the EESC may also adopt opinions on its own initiative. Since the Amsterdam Treaty, the EP may also consult the EESC. All opinions are forwarded to the Community's decision-making bodies and then published in the EU's Official Journal. The EESC's work is divided in six sections and a Consultative Commission on Industrial Change (CCMI).¹²

There are few EESC documents directly concerning the EU's public communication strategy and these have been published either by a Rapporteur-general of the EESC or by the temporary Subcommittee on Reflection: debate on the European Union set up after the 'No' referenda in France and the Netherlands on the Constitutional Treaty. Issues linked to the EU's public communication strategy such as the Constitutional process, governance, active citizenship etc, are addressed in EESC opinions produced by other committees and these documents have been included in the present review.

1.5 The Committee of the Regions (CoR)

The Committee of the Regions (CoR), established in 1994 by the Maastricht Treaty, is the political assembly that provides local and regional authorities with a voice in the EU (Committee of the Regions 2007).

The Treaties oblige the Commission and Council to consult the CoR whenever new proposals are made in areas that have repercussions at regional or local level. The

¹² The CCMI was set up after the expiry of the European Coal and Steel Community (ECSC) in 2002.

Maastricht Treaty set out 5 such areas - economic and social cohesion, trans-European infrastructure networks, health, education and culture. The Amsterdam Treaty added another five areas to the list - employment policy, social policy, the environment, vocational training and transport - which now covers much of the scope of the EU's activity. Outside these areas, the Commission, Council and EP have the option to consult the CoR on issues if they see important regional or local implications to a proposal. The CoR can also draw up an opinion on its own initiative, which enables it to put issues on the EU agenda.

The work of the CoR is divided between six commissions. The EU's Information and Communication strategy falls under the umbrella of the Commission for Constitutional Affairs, European Governance and the Area of Freedom, Security and Justice (CONST). Documents produced by CONST and other CoR commissions regarding the EU's public communication strategy are reviewed here, as well as documents concerning CoR's opinions on the role of civil society in EU governance.

Part 2- EU Information and Communication strategy: Document review

2.1 The EU's democratic deficit, participation and the European public sphere

The focus here is on the Information and Communication strategy for the EU proposed by the Commission. The documents produced by the Council, EP, CoR and EESC are examined from the perspective of whether they agree with the Commission's proposed strategy or they deviate from the Commission's main strategy line by introducing new proposals. The documents are divided in two chronological groups, namely those produced before the Constitutional Treaty, i.e. before 2004, and those produced after the signing of the Constitutional Treaty, that is, from 2004 onwards.

2.2.1 Pre-Constitution era (2001-2004)

All the Commission public communication strategy proposals of the period 2001-2004¹³ acknowledge the fact that the public is alienated from the EU institutions and that there needs to be more citizens' participation in the EU policy-making process, as well as more transparency and accountability of the EU institutions. These

¹³ See Annex, COM(2004)196, final; COM(2002)705, final; COM(2002)350, final/2; COM(2001)354, final; COM(2001)428, final.

issues are identified as the main aims of the reform of EU governance and are also proposed as aims for the Information and Communication strategy of the EU, together with the creation and encouragement of a public forum for debate on European matters.

Although general information was to be aimed at the public as a whole, the Commission identified **priority audiences** such as women and youths, who should receive more specialised information, as well as EU specialists' groups, such as academics and law professionals, who would require specialized in-depth information on some very particular aspects of EU policy (COM(2001)354, final). This indicates that a divide between a knowledge elite and general public already exists on a policy-making level, as far as the EU's public communication strategy is concerned.

One of the key points common in all the Commission documents examined in the 'pre-Constitution' period is that they recognise the need for reform in EU governance and are aware that the public is suspicious towards the EU institutions and often also misinformed about their role and actions (COM(2001)354, final: 18; COM(2001)428, final: 3 and 7; COM(2002)350, final/2: 6).

The Commission also acknowledged the need for more **participation** of the public in EU governance, an issue which had initially been raised by the European Parliament (ibid.: 5; see also COM(2002)350, final/2: 7). Putting these proposals in practice, the Commission submitted the White Paper on European Governance (COM(2001)428, final)¹⁴ to public consultation, giving the opportunity to the public and EU and national institutions to submit their feedback on the issues raised either by post or online. The results of that consultation were presented in a Report, in 2002 (COM(2002)705, final) and forced the Commission to change its position on the issue of democratic legitimacy of the EU institutions. Although the Commission's proposals on the principles that should underline European governance, namely openness, participation, accountability, effectiveness and coherence found support among the academics and officials who responded to the Commission's

¹⁴ For more information on the inter-institutional debate that led to the publication of this document, as well as on how the Commission's proposed measures were received by the other EU institutions, see: Annex, Committee of the Regions 2002; Economic and Social Committee, Subcommittee (98), Engelen-Kefer 2002; COM(2001)0727, final; The European Parliament 2001a; European Parliament and European Council Regulation (EC) No. 1049/2001; Economic and Social Committee, Subcommittee (98), Rapporteur-General (98), Rodriguez-Garcia-Caro 2001; Kinnock 2001b; Kinnock 2001a.

consultation,¹⁵ respondents almost unanimously proposed that **democratic legitimacy and subsidiarity** be added in the principles of European governance.

Despite the poor response rate,¹⁶ the Commission incorporated most of the feedback in its new proposal. More interestingly, the Commission declared in the report that the way the White Paper had been received had challenged the Commission *‘to take into account the positions of the various players in the further development of the European governance, including delaying or abandoning actions which do not generate sufficient support’* (COM(2002)705, final: 4, emphasis added).

Although it is encouraging that the Commission showed a willingness to incorporate the feedback it had received into its proposal, this declaration is problematic in two ways. Such wording tends to be popularistic and could be perceived as an attempt by the Commission to flatter the parties involved in policy making. The Commission could be entering a process where policies or decisions which are deemed necessary for the progress of the EU economy or of the EU as a polity, yet are bound to cause upheaval and reactions of the established institutions and polities which form the EU, will be abandoned for fear of displeasing the latter. Certainly, declarations of that sort create a precedent to which actors may refer when asked to contribute to future policies.

The European public sphere/space also takes a central place in all Commission documents of this period: In the Information and Communication Strategy proposed by the Commission in 2002 (COM(2002)350, final/2), for the first time, the European public sphere is not only mentioned but the Commission also acknowledges that the European Institutions need to be actively involved in supporting that public sphere. Apart from stating the obvious [that in order to exist, *‘the European public sphere needs temporal, spatial and ideological points of reference and active public involvement’* (COM(2002)350, final/2: 8), in this 2002 Communication, the Commission also identifies specific areas of action that will strengthen the European

¹⁵ The consultation was aimed at academics and national and EU officials.

¹⁶ Although the Commission tried to put a positive spin on the quantity of the feedback it had received, the fact remains that the number of responses was quite disappointing. Considering that the EU consists of 450 million citizens, a return of 260 contributions cannot be considered just ‘modest’, which is how the Commission described it (COM(2002)705, final: 7). Even more disappointing was the fact that several Member-states did not send any feedback, while the responses from EU institutions varied, with certain institutions not sending any feedback at all.

public sphere: developing all forms of representation at European level; and building on all forms of cooperation, including journalists, media and national representations (ibid.).

2.1.2 Post-Constitution era (2004-2007)

Whilst the documents of the ‘pre-Constitution’ period were not clear on whether the focus of the Information and Communication strategy should be on the elites of the EU or on the European masses, the focus is now clearly shifted towards the EU mass communications (COM(2005)494, final; COM(2006)35). The Action Plan for example criticises the previous strategy for putting too much emphasis on the communication with the elite audiences and forgetting the rest of the citizens (Commission of the European Communities 2005a).

True to its commitment for more openness and public dialogue with the citizens of the EU, the Commission launched a six-month-long online and offline public consultation on the actions proposed in its White Paper on Communication (COM(2006)35), during which all citizens and civil society bodies were invited to submit their views and suggestions regarding the EU’s communication strategy.¹⁷ The White Paper also focused on matching the EU’s communication policy to the EU public’s priorities, a crucial prerequisite, according to Leonard and Arbuthnott (2002), if the EU’s institutions are to become more democratic.

With the Communication on the Commission’s contribution to the period of reflection and beyond: Plan-D for Democracy, Dialogue and Debate (Plan D) later in 2005 (COM(2005)494, final), the Commission returns to the issues of EU governance and citizens’ participation in the decision-making process as parameters of the establishing of a European public sphere. In particular, Plan D identifies the promotion of citizens’ participation in the democratic process as one of the four broad areas of action required to help regain the EU citizens’ trust towards the EU institutions and address issues of democratic legitimation, accountability and openness within the EU (ibid.: 18).

Plan D is also the first Information and Communication-related document, which clearly states that its aim is to contribute to the establishment of a European public sphere (ibid.: 2-3). At the same time, the Commission gives us an idea of the

¹⁷ For more information see the website ‘White Paper on a European Communication policy: Have your say!’ (Commission of the European Communities, Directorate General Communication 2006).

EU public sphere it is envisaging, and that consists of interrelated Europeanised national public spheres (ibid.). The similarities of this proposal with the theoretical approaches of the European public sphere found in Kantner (2002), Pfetsch (2004), Koopmans (in Koopmans et al 2004 and Koopmans et al 2002), Weiler (1996) and other scholars¹⁸, who have suggested that we should be looking for a European public sphere in the national public spheres of the Member States, are evident. However, it is not clear whether this occurred through extensive consultation with the academic community or simply by chance.

It is also obvious throughout the 2004-2007 documents that the Commission not only identifies two types of audiences (elite and mass) but also intends to continue to address them separately and with different communication tools. What is not clear is whether it is the Commission's intention to eventually bridge the gap between the two types of European audience, or merely assist in establishing what in effect will be two parallel public spheres- one for the European elites, and one for the European general public.

Although the Commission acknowledges that further citizen participation in EU matters and greater openness of the decision-making process are necessary to restore the public's trust in the EU institutions, it still does not acknowledge the democratic deficit attributed to the EU institutions as real, and refers to it as a 'perceived' deficit (for example, COM(2005)494, final: 9).

2.2 Public communication actions

For this stage of policy analysis we distinguish between specific proposals/actions regarding the communication strategy aimed at **collective actors** (further divided in governmental/state actors and NGOs); and specific public communication proposals/actions aimed at the **general public**. These proposals/actions are classified under the six categories, which are listed in Table 1, below.

¹⁸ See, for example, Kevin 2001; Kunelius and Sparks 2001; Risse and van de Steeg 2003; Schlesinger 1999;Trenz 2004; van de Steeg 2002; Waldenström 2002; Weiler 1999; Weiler et al 2003.

Table 1: Types of public communication

1) Indirect: Relying on national/regional/local media to convey the EU's message and establish public communication linkages with collective actors and/or the general public	OR	2) Direct: Direct communication with collective actors and/or the general public
3) Offline: Relying on conventional media, i.e. press, TV, radio	OR	4) Online: Deploying the Internet/cyberspace communication possibilities
5) Directed to national/regional/local collective actors or aiming at national/regional/local public spheres	OR	6) Directed to EU/transnational collective actors or aiming at a supranational European public sphere

2.2.1 Pre-Constitution era (2001-2004)

In order to achieve the aims of its proposed EU information and communication strategy for the pre-Constitution era, the Commission underlines the need for full use of partnerships at all levels, i.e. member-states, civil society and NGOs.¹⁹ In addition, the Commission repeats the importance of inter-institutional cooperation and of improved and better organised internal dissemination of information/ communication culture. The cooperation of both the Member States and the three Community institutions (Commission, Council and Parliament) is seen by the Commission as essential if the Information and Communication Strategy is to achieve its targets (e.g. COM(2004)196, final: 5-6).

Furthermore, the Commission gives the audiovisual and new communication technology tools a central position in the implementation of the Information and Communication Strategy (ibid.: 12 and 16-22). However, the audiovisual strategy continues to revolve primarily around the information tools intended for the media and information professionals (i.e. development of EbS, support for electronic media and the media library). EuroNews (pan-European channel and its website) is also deemed as 'clearly relevant to the EU objectives' (COM(2004)196: 18). Work with the press was also identified as '*a high priority in today's world*' and '*key to the immediate presentation of new information, policies and opinions*' (COM(2001)354, final: 5).

¹⁹ See, for example, COM(2001)354; COM(2002)350, final/2; COM(2002)705, final; COM(2004)196, final.

As far as the Internet is concerned, the strategy outlined in the documents of this period identifies an important role for this medium in the EU's public communication strategy, particularly with regard to the issues of public debate, openness, transparency and citizens' participation in the EU policy-making process. EUROPA, the EU's official portal, is the main focus of the actions proposed. Nevertheless, the actions outlined with regard to the Internet's capability as a two-way communication tool with the public are few and rather abstract.

Overall, despite acknowledging the need for interaction with the public and the importance of a European public sphere, the strategy proposed in 2001-2004 mainly focuses on one-way communication with the public. In addition, the public communication strategy proposed has its basis on a two-tier audience, meaning there is a distinction between specialist EU audiences, such academics and EU or national governmental officials, and the general public. The latter is in turn divided in 'target audiences' (women, youths, jobseekers) and the wider general public, and the proposed strategy recommends that all information disseminated should be audience-specific, in order for the public to be able to relate to the EU's aims and actions (for example, COM(2004)196; COM(2002)350, final/2). This includes communicating with the various publics in their own language, which is another key priority of the proposed EU Information and Communication strategy of the pre-Constitution period.

The following tables summarise the specific actions that the Commission proposed as part of the implementation of the EU's Information and Communication policy.

Table 2: Types of EU public communication actions: The European public sphere, 2001-2004.

Data source: Commission COM documents 2001-2004 (Annex).

European public sphere	Offline	Online
Collective actors: EU institutions/ interinstitutional communication	-Interinstitutional Group on Information (IGI)	---
Collective actors: Transnational/ European civil society	-EuroNews and cross-border information channels (aimed at decision-makers and politically aware public) -PRINCE	-EUROPA -EUROPE-Direct -PRINCE

Table 3: Types of EU public communication actions: National public spheres, 2001-2004.
Data source: Commission COM documents 2001-2004 (Annex).

National public spheres	Offline	Online
Collective actors: Government, political parties, parliaments	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Grands Centres (Lisbon, Paris and Rome) -Memorandum of Understanding (MoU)/ Partnership agreements with member states -Europe by Satellite (EbS)/ studios and media library (aimed at information professionals) -Commission's Representations in the Member States -EuroNews and cross-border information channels (aimed at decision-makers and politically aware public) -Public opinion analysis and proximity actions (Eurobarometer) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -EUROPA (official EU web portal) -EUROPE Direct (direct telephone line and online information service)
Collective actors: Civil society	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Information Relays (Info-Points Europe; Rural Information and Promotion Carrefours; European Documentation Centres (EDC); university reference centres; 550 lecturers of Team Europe) -Commission's Representations in the Member States -Europe by Satellite (EbS)/ studios and media library (aimed at information professionals) -Information seminars for journalists -EuroNews/ cross-border information channels (aimed at decision-makers and politically aware public) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -EUROPA and EUROPA services for journalists -EUROPE Direct
The general public	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -PRINCE²⁰ -Information Relays -EuroNews/ cross-border information channels (aimed politically aware public) -EUROPA services for journalists 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -PRINCE -EUROPA -EUROPE Direct

2.2.2 The post-Constitution era

The 2004 'Can the EU hear me?' Friends of Europe, Gallup and Euractiv joint report (Davies and Readhead 2004) has had immense influence on the Commission's proposals in the post-Constitution period, although the report is not referenced in any of the official documents examined here. The report presented the opinions of over

²⁰ The programme is designed to provide assistance to implement the information and communication strategy for the European Union. The focus is on information and communication actions on enlargement issues targeting mainly the general public in EU member states. The focus is on the Priority Information Topics of enlargement, the future of the Union, the area of freedom, security and justice, and the Euro (COM(2004)196, final, COM(2002)350, final/2).

3,000 respondents, including political leaders and opinion makers from EU member-states (ibid.). The data was collected partly through two opinion polls and partly through surveys and study group findings²¹ and was used to formulate a set of recommendations for the Commission with regard to the EU's public communication strategy. These specific proposals are included, at times nearly word-for-word, in the Commission's Plan D.²² Below are two examples.

Example 1: Goodwill ambassadors	
Friends of Europe (<i>Davies and Redhead 2004: 8 and 10</i>).	Commission (<i>COM(2005)494, final: 8</i>).
<p><i>Friends of Europe recommend:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Employ 'goodwill ambassadors' (i.e. well-known people from all fields – culture, sports, films, celebrities) to talk about the benefits of Europe. [...]</i> • <i>Use people who have benefited from EU policies and national experts as EU ambassadors, and provide them with the relevant communications tools to do this'.</i> 	<p><i>Plan D introduces</i></p> <p><i>'European Goodwill Ambassadors:</i></p> <p><i>Good information and communication activities on what we do will be crucial. Good policies must be complemented by good and creative initiatives seeking to connect with the public and the media.</i></p> <p><i>The Commission will [...] invite well known personalities or national and local celebrities from the cultural, business, sport or any other area of interest to target audiences. These 'ambassadors' could be active in the Member State concerned, holding open meetings, workshops and general talks on specific European areas or programmes such as education, anti-poverty, electoral participation, research and development, etc'.</i></p>

²¹ More specifically, the data was drawn from four principal sources:

- a) The input into a working group that met regularly at the Brussels' offices of *Friends of Europe* and Gallup Europe as a forum for senior EU information officials, MEPs, national governments' communications specialists, consultants and journalists. The group's activities culminated in a major brainstorming session in Brussels on September 2, 2004;
- b) The results of an extensive Gallup Europe opinion poll in the spring of 2004. Over 2,000 people replied to 25 questions that had in large part been shaped by the Working Group;
- c) The anecdotal evidence drawn from the opinions expressed by 20 top politicians, journalists and opinion formers who were extensively interviewed by *Friends of Europe* during the summer of 2004; and
- d) The results of an autumn 2004 opinion poll, conducted by Gallup Europe, working in partnership with the EurActiv.com web portal. This online survey put forward 30 questions arising from the Working Group's discussion, and was answered by 1,500 people (Davies and Readhead 2004: 7).

²² Compare Davies and Readhead 2004: 8-10 with COM(2005)494, final: 4-10.

Example 2: Visits to member states	
Friends of Europe (<i>Davies and Redhead 2004: 8 and 10</i>).	Commission (<i>COM(2005)494, final: 7</i>)
<p>Recommend that Vice-President Wallström ‘during your first six months visit each EU Member State:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • In each country, hold public forums to hear what people have to say about the EU. • Use local third party endorsers – groups of beneficiaries or supporters – to describe how the EU has helped them. • Meet the most important national media editors and the leading politicians [...] • Make EU officials and Commissioners more responsible for telling their own country nationals about the benefits of the EU. As Commissioner for Communications Strategy, you should visit each EU Member State as often as possible – this will greatly help to increase Europe’s visibility in each country’. 	<p>Plan D proposes</p> <p><i>‘Visits by Commissioners to Member States:</i></p> <p><i>The Commission intends to have a more direct contact with citizens, to listen to their concerns and to become more visible and present in the national and regional debates.</i></p> <p><i>The President and/or the Vice-President for institutional relations will undertake a series of visits to as many of the Member States as possible. [...] They will be accompanied by the Commissioner from the respective Member State and other Commissioners where appropriate. The Commission would recommend that Members of the European Parliament are also involved. They should meet with Governments, national Parliaments, business and trade union leaders, civil society, students and regional and local authorities. Media events and contacts with civil society will be a key feature of each visit’.</i></p>

Furthermore, in the post-Constitution period, once more the Commission identifies the Member States as mainly responsible for informing the public about EU policies and encouraging public debate regarding EU issues. However, the White Paper on Communication continues to give the EU institutions the key role in taking openness and public dialogue further (COM(2006)35: 6-8). In this context, all EU institutions should enhance their visitors’ programmes, complement their websites with online forums and hold joint open debates similar to the EP debates, where officials will accept comments and questions from the public and journalists (ibid.).

Moreover, the Commission is willing to establish a two-way communication process with the European public, in order to offer more opportunities for citizens’ participation in the decision-making process and to gain the trust of the public towards the EU institutions. Crucially, the Commission is eager to create a more homogeneous communication amongst the EU institutions, which, in turn, will reflect a more coherent image of what the EU stands for and help communicate more clearly the EU’s goals and achievements to the European public.

Besides this, throughout the documents examined here democracy is recognised as one of the EU’s central values, while at the same time the Commission recognises that the EU public is questioning the democratic legitimacy of the EU institutions. However, the Commission never really goes beyond merely

acknowledging the existence of this argument. As a result, the wording of the documents is often confusing: Making citizens ‘feel more involved’ (COM(2005)494, final:18-19) in the democratic process is not the same as actually allowing them to be more involved. Similarly, one ‘feeling more involved’ in a decision-making process does not make that process democratic.

However, this shift of focus in the Commission’s public communication strategy ‘post-Constitutionally’ becomes clearer in its most recent policy document, ‘Communicating Europe in Partnership’(COM(2007)568, final). Although no explicit reference is made to the ‘democratic deficit’ argument, and despite the fact that the main responsibility for ‘communicating Europe’ to its citizens is left with the member states, the focus of the document is on ‘active citizenship’. This is understood as a series of actions, such as public-dialogue fora open to all citizens and more possibilities for citizens to give feedback in all stages of the policy-making process, which have as primary aim the strengthening of the Union’s democratic processes (ibid.). The end result that the Commission seems to be aiming for is the development of a democratic European public sphere (ibid.).

The following two tables summarise the Commission’s proposed actions for the period 2004 to-date.

Table 4: Types of EU public communication actions: The European public sphere, 2004-2007.
Data source: Commission COM documents 2004-2007.

European public sphere	Offline	Online
Collective actors: EU institutions/ interinstitutional communication	-Interinstitutional Group on Information (IGI)	---
Collective actors: Transnational/ European civil society	-Citizens for Europe (proposed, to help Europe-wide civil society organisations to run trans-national projects that promote active citizenship and to hold public debates on Europe) -EESC -CoR -EuroNews and cross-border information channels (aimed at decision-makers and politically aware public)	-EUROPA -Margot Wallström weblog -Debate Europe -i2010 Initiative -’.eu’ top-level domain -EUROPE-Direct

Table 5: Types of EU public communication actions: National public spheres, 2004-2007.

Data source: Commission COM documents 2004-2007.

National public spheres	Offline (new actions in bold)	Online (new actions in bold)
<p>Collective actors: Government, political parties, parliaments</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Grands Centres (Lisbon, Paris and Rome) -Memorandum of Understanding (MoU)/ Partnership agreements -Europe by Satellite (EbS)/ studios and media library (aimed at information professionals) -Public opinion analysis and proximity actions (Eurobarometer) -Commission's Representations in the Member States -Commissioners' visits to all EU member-states -EuroNews and cross-border information channels (aimed at decision-makers and politically aware public) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -EUROPA -EUROPE-Direct
<p>Collective actors: civil society</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Information Relays -Europe by Satellite (EbS)/ studios and media library (aimed at information professionals) -Information seminars for journalists²³ -EUROPA services for journalists -Commission's Representations in the Member States -Commissioners' visits to all EU member-states -Code of Conduct or Charter of EU Communication (reference point not only for EU institutions, but for civil society and local, regional and national governments and authorities too) -EuroNews/ cross-border information channels (aimed at decision-makers and politically aware public) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -EUROPA -EUROPE-Direct
<p>The general public</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Local Representations -European Goodwill Ambassadors -Commissioners' visits to all EU member-states -PRINCE -Information Relays -Youth in Action -Europe by Satellite (EbS)/ studios and media library (aimed at information professionals) -Training and recruitment of communication specialists²⁴ -'Independent Observatory for European Public Opinion' (proposed) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -EUROPA -EUROPE-Direct -Youth in Action -Margot Wallström weblog -Debate Europe

²³ This is also included in the Friends of Europe report (Davies and Redhead 2004: 9) although it was also included in the Commission documents from the pre-Constitution era too.

²⁴ Another action proposed by the Friends of Europe report (Davies and Redhead 2004: 9).

2.3 The position of the other institutions

2.3.1 The European Parliament

Although it is the Commission that proposes and implements the overall EU public communication strategy, the EP is consulted during the policy-making process. It was also the first institution to raise the issue of a comprehensive EU public communication policy, with its 1993 resolution calling the Commission to take action on the issue (European Parliament et al 1993). Of course, all the EU institutions have their own, autonomous public communication policy as well, the EP being no exception.

The resolutions issued by the EP regarding the Commission's proposed EU information and communication strategy during the period 1993-2004 have consistently emphasised the importance of the EU institutions providing the public with reliable, factual and impartial information regarding the Union (European Parliament et al 1993; European Parliament et al 1997; European Parliament et al 1997; European Parliament 1998; European Parliament 2001a; European Parliament 2001b; European Parliament 2003).

Also important for the EP is the interinstitutional cooperation on matters of EU public communication and in that respect the EP has welcomed the Commission's initiative (IGI). Nevertheless, at the same time all resolutions stress that the EU institutions need to preserve their autonomy in matters of information and communication with the public and emphasise the importance of decentralising the political and financial responsibilities of the institutions' information and communication policy, something which the EP practices with regard to its own public communication policy (European Parliament 2003: 402).

Informed citizens are considered the cornerstone of a democratic EU. The EP is aware of the citizens' disinterest and mistrust towards the EU institutions. All its Pre-Constitution resolutions draw attention to the negative Eurobarometer public polls and emphasise the need for a dynamic and coherent EU public communication strategy in order to help change this. According to the Parliament, the focus should be on informing the citizens, through education and the continuous support and expansion of the EU information networks (see for example European Parliament et al 1997; European Parliament 1998).

Of particular interest is the EP's view on the Commission's proposals for effectiveness and coherence, when it comes to the EU's public communication and governance strategies. The EP dismisses the use of such terms as being merely *'technical factors [...] which are not able to lead to legitimacy, for which clear attribution of political responsibility is necessary'* (European Parliament 2001a: 318, point 10.d). In the institution's view, the EP is the guarantor of democracy in the EU, and as such the only way to increase legitimacy in the Union is to ensure that the EP's powers are safeguarded and expanded. Any issues of transparency and democratic legitimacy concern the Commission and the Council, which ought to follow the EP's example and open up their processes to the public (see for example European Parliament 2001a).

In terms of the implementation of the EU's information and communication strategy, the EP vigorously supports the deployment of new technologies, particularly the Internet, in order to increase communication, consultation and direct participation in the EU decision-making process. Nearly all references to increased direct participation concern the organised civil society, and not the general public (see for example European Parliament 2003; European Parliament 2001a).

Another key point in all EP's resolutions, which is also present in most of the written questions directed to the Commission by MEPs during the pre-Constitution period, is the importance of 'going local', in other words of supporting a decentralised network of EU representations/information points (European Parliament 2003). The EP considers that local governments and organised civil society have a significant role to play in this and that the Commission should put greater emphasis on collaborating with them.

Most of the recommendations made in the EP's resolutions are also found in subsequent Commission documents. This is a positive sign that the Commission takes into consideration the proposals and criticism of other EU institutions, although the extent to which these proposals are actually implemented cannot be established by solely looking at the documents. For this reason, interviews with key senior EU officials in the three EU institutions and the two advisory bodies have been conducted in the context of the 'Constitutionalisation' project, the results of which are included in a forthcoming report, to be published at the end of 2007.

The impact of the rejection of the Constitutional Treaty is evident in all EP motions and resolutions regarding the EU's information and communication strategy

after 2004.²⁵ The EP documents of the post-Constitutional era have two core characteristics: Firstly, they are more supportive of all the Commission's proposals, post-referenda, regarding the EU's public communication strategy than they were in the pre-Constitution period. Secondly, they attribute the negative referenda in France and the Netherlands to the failure of the EU's information and communication strategy, and therefore of the Commission, to achieve its aims.

The focus of the EP's proposals remains on information, rather than communication, although the Commission's proposals for two-way communication with the public are supported. Similarly, the EP persists in its calls for wider participation of the organised civil society and local governments in the implementation of the EU's public communication strategy as well as the EU's governance. Furthermore, the EP continues to place the emphasis on its role and the need to safeguard and expand its competencies in order to preserve and strengthen the EU's democratic legitimacy. The importance of the Internet and new media technologies is also highlighted.

What is new in the post-Constitution period is the EP's reference to the European public sphere, for the first time, and its recognition that the EU institutions need to support its creation. According to the EP a European public sphere will be 'primarily structured through national, local and regional media' (European Parliament et al 2006: 5). At the same time, for the first time the EP acknowledges the role of pan-European, transnational organisations and bodies in the construction of a European public sphere and the implementation of the EU's information and communication policy. It, therefore, explicitly urges the Commission to

'prioritise better its communication partnerships by pursuing special relationships with partners with a transnational mission, such as the organizations representing the emerging European civil society, European political parties and journalists' (European Parliament et al 2006: 11).

Furthermore, the EP stresses the importance of including media aimed at young people 'with a view to consolidating a European citizenship area' (ibid.).

More crucially, the EP asks a vital question: Exactly how is the Commission planning to incorporate the feedback it has been collecting from citizens, civil society bodies, local governments etc regarding the Constitutional Treaty and their views and expectations of the EU in the decision-making process? (ibid.: 7). This question lies at

²⁵ See Annex, No.P6_TA-PROV(2005)0183; No.P6_TA-PROV(2006)0500; European Parliament et al 2005; European Parliament et al 2005; European Parliament et al 2006; European Parliament 2005.

the core of the investigation into the relation between the EU institutions and other collective actors in the post-Constitution European public spheres.

2.3.2 The Council of the European Union

As far as the EU's information and communication strategy is concerned, it is the Council that attracts most of the criticism by the EP, the EESC, the CoR and, more subtly, the Commission during the pre-Constitution era, for lack of openness, reluctance to cooperate with the other institutions on the issue and delays in acting upon the Commission's recommendations.

At the time that the Commission Communication on A New Framework for Co-operation on Activities Concerning the Information and Communication Policy of the European Union (COM(2001)354, final) was published, the Council had a different information and communication policy from that of the EP and the European Commission (ibid.: 11). It operated its own relations with the press and media and shared some means of communication with the other Institutions. However the Helsinki European Council asked that the Council be associated with the effort of providing general coherent information on the European Union. The European Council also called on the Commission to improve co-ordination between the Representations in the Member States and the National Information Authorities. At the time, the Council participated in the EUROPA web-site and in 'Europe by Satellite' alongside the other Institutions. The Council was also represented on the editorial and managerial committees but did not otherwise take part in the formulation of the Information and Communication policy.

Until 2001 the Council was not a member of the IGI but the 2001 Commission Communication stated that future developments could include information and communication from the Council on second and third pillar issues. At the time when the Communication was published the Council had not put forward a comprehensive strategy regarding its role on the Information and Communication policy of the EU. Nevertheless, the Communication identified, as possible developments, the establishment of a joint Visitors' or Information Centre in Brussels and closer co-operation on libraries, as well as co-operation among the two Institutions in the joint production of press cuttings and reviews (COM(2001)354, final).

Despite its seeming inactivity on the issue, there are two Council documents published in the pre-Constitution period which are of particular significance. The first

is the ‘Future of the EU- Laeken Declaration’ (Council of the European Union 2001), issued by the Belgian Presidency of the European Union, which introduces the concept of the Constitutional Treaty and the issues justifying the need for such a document. Although the Laeken Declaration does not make specific proposals, it acknowledges the EU’s ‘democratic challenge’, the high expectations of the EU citizens and the need for more openness, transparency and efficiency in the EU governance apparatus. These are issues featuring in all of the EU’s information and communication documents, and of course are at the core of the Constitutional Treaty.

The second Council document worth noting from this period is the Council Decision establishing a Community action programme to promote active European citizenship (No.2004/100/EC), which finally gave legal status to the proposals made by the Parliament, the Commission, the EESC and the CoR for increased participation and support of the organised civil society and of local/regional governments in relation to activities which promote the role of the EU to its citizens and contribute to the establishment of the European identity. This is exactly how the role of organised civil society, local governments and non-governmental bodies has been identified in the EU’s information and communication strategy documents.

In the post-Constitution period the Council also emerges more dynamic and involved in the EU’s information and communication strategy than during the period 2001-2004.²⁶ In the several Presidency declarations and conclusions issued in the period 2005-2006 the European Council reaffirms its commitment to ‘a Union that delivers the concrete results citizens expect, in order to strengthen confidence and trust’ (Presidency of the European Council 2006: 3).

The European Council highlights the responsibility of the Member-States in the implementation of the EU’s information and communication strategy and repeatedly proposes that the heads of governments in the member states sign a **political declaration** setting out the EU values and ambitions and confirming their shared commitment to deliver them (ibid.: 18).²⁷ This time the European Council goes beyond merely listing the problems surrounding EU governance and shifting the responsibility of overcoming these issues to the Member-States. Responding to the

²⁶ See Annex, Council of the European Union 2005; Presidency of the European Council 2006; Presidency and General Secretariat of the Council of the European Union 2006a; Presidency and General Secretariat of the Council of the European Union 2006b.

²⁷ The Council proposed that this declaration is adopted on 25 July 2007 in Berlin, on the date commemorating 50 years since the signing of the Treaty of Rome.

constant calls from the Parliament, the Commission, the EESC and the CoR²⁸ for more transparency of its procedures, the European Council introduced an overall policy on transparency in 2006, making all the deliberations on co-decision acts, the first deliberations on non co-decision acts and certain other categories of Council deliberations open to the public (Presidency of the European Council 2006). Any deliberations held in public are to be broadcast in all official EU languages through video streaming, and archives will be kept on the Council's website for a certain length of time. Furthermore, the Secretariat is to hold publicity campaigns and inform the public in advance of the dates when the deliberations will take place in order to ensure that transparency principles are adhered to (ibid.).

2.3.3 Committee of the Regions and Economic and Social Committee

The positions of CoR and EESC, the two advisory bodies of the EU, have remained by and large unaltered throughout the entire period examined here, with their main point of criticism focusing on the limited role reserved for them in the Commission's proposed public communication strategy. At the same time, both bodies appear supportive of the Commission's proposals in principle.

More specifically, in the 'pre-Constitution' period CoR appeared overall approving of the Commission's proposals and satisfied with the way the Commission had incorporated CoR's recommendations in its proposed strategy (Committee of the Regions 2002; Committee of the Regions 2003a; Committee of the Regions 2003b). Nevertheless, it also criticised the Commission for being too information-oriented in its public communication strategy and failing to recognise the role that Euro Info Centres (EICs), European Documentation Centres (EDCs), the Europe Houses and the representations and delegations could play in the implementation of the proposed EU Information and Communication strategy (Committee of the Regions 2003b: 48-49). Moreover, CoR dismissed the Commission's plan to implement a common reference framework upon which the Information and Communication Strategy will be based ('common thread' principle),²⁹ as being '*too close to institutional concerns to meet*

²⁸ For the EESC and COR recommendations and calls for action see list of relevant documents in Annex.

²⁹ The Commission's 'central thread' would be in effect '*translating in simple and non-controversial communication terms the EU's main objectives as stemming from the Treaty of the European Union*' (COM(2002)350, final/2: 12). These main objectives are identified in the Commission's document as follows:

public expectations’ and to establish public dialogue (Committee of the Regions 2003b: 48).

Interestingly, CoR also warned the Commission that the Convention on the future of the EU (i.e. the Convention that drafted the Constitutional Treaty)³⁰ did not figure prominently in the proposed Information and Communication strategy. ‘Post-Constitutionally’ this warning turned into wider criticism against the Commission, for not actively supporting the Constitutional campaign. Of course, from its side the Commission defended its actions (or rather, non-actions) on the basis of operating in accordance with the principle of subsidiarity- a principle which CoR has always defended very strongly as well.

Above all, the issue of CoR’s role in the implementation of the EU’s public communication strategy as well as its role in the decision-making and governance procedures of the Union is recurring in all CoR documents produced in the ‘pre-Constitution’ period. Strengthening the role of local and regional authorities in the consultation and decision-making process is seen as key in safeguarding subsidiarity, transparency and democracy at EU-level and increasing the success of the proposed public communication strategy (Committee of the Regions 2003a; Committee of the Regions 2003b).³¹

This concern regarding the safeguarding and expansion of CoR’s role in the EU decision-making and policy-implementing processes is maintained during the ‘post-Constitution’ period, when CoR also becomes more critical of the Commission. Its Opinion (Committee of the Regions, Commission for Constitutional Affairs and

a)The virtue of exchange (liberties, diversity, humanism);

b)Value added in terms of efficiency and solidarity;

c)The concept of protection; and

d)The role of Europe in the world (ibid.)

The ‘central thread’ of the EU’s Information and Communication Strategy would also draw upon certain ‘essential’ values, which the EU stands for, such as rapprochement and exchange; opportunity; equality; solidarity; prosperity; protection; security (ibid.: 13). These values were identified after studies were carried out on behalf of the Commission (OPTEM study, May 2002 quoted in COM(2002)350, final/2: 13). As far as the main topics and messages that the ‘central thread’ would cover are concerned, these are identified as follows:

a)Enlargement;

b)The future of the EU;

c)The area of freedom, security and justice; and

d)The EU in the world (ibid.: 13-15).

See also COM(2001)428, final. The proposed topics are also in keeping with the Commission’s strategic plan for 2000-2005 (COM(2000)154, final).

³⁰ See The European Convention 2003.

³¹ See also Committee of the Regions, Commission for Constitutional Affairs and European Governance, Vesey 2004.

European Governance, Bresso 2006) on the Commission's Plan D and White Paper on a European communication policy (European Parliament Resolution 2006; COM(2006)212, provisional version) points out that in order for the Commission's proposals to be effective, it is necessary to add '*decentralisation*' to the Commission's concept of '*democracy, dialogue and debate*' (Committee of the Regions, Commission for Constitutional Affairs and European Governance, Bresso 2006: 4).³² Moreover, it accepts the EU's democratic deficit and need for institutional reform more explicitly than the Commission and sees the Constitutional Treaty as a catalyst in achieving further democratisation (ibid.: 2). Hence, CoR expresses its support to the Constitutional Treaty and calls for its ratification by 2009, in spite of the problems encountered in France and the Netherlands, where the Treaty was rejected by referendum (ibid.). At the same time, it warns that '*all communication policies will prove fruitless unless they are based on recasting European integration in democratic terms*' (ibid.) and criticises the White paper on Communication as lacking '*political vision*', as it reserves only a '*marginal role*' for CoR, despite the document's acknowledgement of the important role of local and regional authorities in establishing dialogue with citizens (ibid.: 4).

Similarly, during the 'pre-Constitution' period EESC appeared overall very supportive of the Commission's proposals and formally committed to assist the Commission with the implementation of its Information and Communication policy (Economic and Social Committee, Rapporteur-General(98) 2002; Economic and Social Committee 2003). Nevertheless, during the same period EESC repeatedly expressed its concern regarding the very limited role given to social partners and organised civil society in the implementation of the EU's public communication strategy, as this was proposed by the Commission (ibid.).³³ Also, similarly to the CoR recommendations from the same period, the EESC Opinions underline the need for openness and participation of citizens in the EU decision-making processes and consider that '*an active information and communication strategy is an essential tool in that effort*' (Economic and Social Committee, Rapporteur-General(98) 2002: 129). Where the EESC Opinions deviate from those of CoR is in the way the call for more

³² See also Committee of the Regions, Commission for Constitutional Affairs and European Governance 2006.

³³ See also Annex, Economic and Social Committee 1999; Economic and Social Committee, Subcommittee(98), Rapporteur-General(98), Rodriguez-Garcia-Caro 2001; Economic and Social Committee, Subcommittee(98), Engelen-Kefer 2002; Economic and Social Committee 2000; Economic and Social Committee 2001; Economic and Social Committee 2004.

participation and openness is framed: While CoR links citizens' participation with the EU's democratic deficit, EESC views participation and dialogue as a prerequisite for '*overcoming barriers of ignorance*' (ibid.: 130), which prevent EU citizens from '*understanding the visions that have been shaping the development of the Union, and of the objectives and work of the EU institutions*' (ibid.: 129).

The focus of the EESC's documents does not shift in the 'post-Constitution' period. If anything, the tone of the more recent documents is even more critical of the fact that the EESC's role and that of the wider organised European civil society in the implementation of the EU's public communication strategy is largely absent from the Commission documents.³⁴

A second point of EESC criticism in the early 'post-Constitution' period (i.e. immediately after the negative referenda in France and the Netherlands) is the lack of concrete Commission measures with which to achieve the Commission's core proposals of increased citizens' involvement in the EU's political process; increased public dialogue; and openness and transparency of the EU decision-making process. EESC goes as far as to call on the Commission to '*consider putting forward a proposal for a true communication policy*' (Committee of the Regions, Commission for Constitutional Affairs and European Governance, Bresso 2006: 3).

Nevertheless, the latest documents produced by EESC, particularly after the publication of the Commission's White Paper on a European communication policy (European Parliament Resolution 2006), are significantly toned down in terms of the type of language EESC uses to criticise the Commission's proposals. Certainly, EESC appears more supportive of the Commission's most recent public communication policy, although the concerns regarding the role of EESC and the wider organised European civil society remain (Economic and Social Committee 2006b).

With regard to the impact of the Constitutional process on the official opinions produced by CoR and EESC, it is hardly surprising that the latter's documents are more 'polemic' in tone and language 'post-Constitutionally': During the Convention that preceded the Constitutional Treaty, the Commission tabled a proposal to abolish EESC altogether while CoR succeeded in having most of its proposals incorporated in

³⁴ See Annex, Economic and Social Committee 2005a; Economic and Social Committee 2005b; Economic and Social Committee 2006b; Economic and Social Committee 2006c; Economic and Social Committee 2006f. See also Economic and Social Committee 2006a; Economic and Social Committee 2007 in Annex.

the draft Constitutional Treaty (apart from the request to give CoR and EU-institution status).

Discussion

The review of the EU information and communication strategy documents shows that the Constitutional Treaty appears to have significantly influenced the Commission's policy proposals, as well as the recommendations and actions of the other EU institutions and advisory bodies. The Constitution, and particularly its rejection by the French and Dutch publics in 2005, is often mentioned in the post-Constitution documents. Furthermore, although the role of civil society in the implementation of the EU's information and communication policy as well as the democratisation of EU governance is recognised by all EU institutions, particularly 'post-Constitution' civil society is considered key in the public debate regarding the future of the Union and of the Constitutional treaty.

In addition, there is a shift in the Commission's proposed strategy 'post-Constitutionally', with the emphasis now on communication rather than information. Part of the new strategy is to encourage two-way communication, in order to obtain regular feedback from citizens and collective actors. However, it is not always clear how this particular strand of the strategy is going to be implemented. Specifically with regard to the term 'civil society', the Commission refers to it in a general and rather vague manner, without really offering its definition for this contested concept. More crucially, the proposed EU communication strategy does not address the issues regarding the representativeness of civil society organisations, which have been highlighted by several scholars and are associated with the issues of the EU's democratic deficit (for example Bignami 1999, Weiler 1996).

What also became evident from the documents reviewed was that the Commission is aware of the issues regarding the emerging European public sphere and the openness, accountability and democratic legitimation of the EU institutions, particularly after 2005. Through its Information and Communication documents, the Commission has thus:

- I. Declared its intention to establish a two-way communication process with the European public, in order to offer more opportunities for citizens' participation in the decision-making process and to gain the trust of the public towards the EU institutions; and*
- II. Committed itself to the creation of a more homogeneous communication amongst the EU institutions, which, in turn, will reflect a more coherent image of what the EU stands for and help communicate more clearly the EU's goals and achievements to the European*

public.

III. Similar commitments are made by the EP and the Council, and also appear in the recommendations of the EESC and the CoR.

Despite these basic commitments with regard to the EU's public communication strategy, there are several problems with the Commission's proposals. To begin with, the terms 'EU citizens' and 'Europeans' or 'European citizens' alternate in the documents. As a result, it is not always clear if the institutions, particularly the Commission, are referring to EU member-states and citizens only, or to the wider European community, thus sending confusing messages to the public (intra-EU and foreign alike). The references to non-EU audiences are rare, and there are no clear policies proposed in addressing these audiences.

Moreover, the Commission recognises that the EU public is questioning the democratic legitimacy of the EU institutions yet never really goes beyond merely acknowledging the existence of this argument. In addition, while most of the Commission documents examined rather tactfully dismiss the claims that the EU has a democratic deficit, several of the EU's public communication materials addressed to the public, both online and offline, blatantly reject such an argument.³⁵ Not accepting the lack of democratic legitimation of the EU institutions undermines the Commission's emphasis on citizens' participation in the decision-making process and on further openness of the EU institutions' procedures. In other words, it is not clear whether the Commission intends to actually address the EU's democratic deficit by introducing new possibilities for the citizens to give feedback and monitor the decision-making procedures on EU level, or these measures aim to change the public's perception regarding the EU's democratic deficit.

Overall, although the Commission refers to the European public sphere several times in its Information and Communication documents, its understanding of the concept appears to be different from the normative model of the EU public sphere used in this project (Figure 1). More specifically, the documents' review has shown that the Commission identifies three key actors of the public sphere as fundamental in the implementation of the EU's public communication strategy, namely national media, governments at national and local/regional level and civil society at EU, national and local level. Public dialogue at EU level is understood mainly in terms of two-way communication with these three actors, on whom the Commission is then

³⁵ See Annex, EUROPA 2006h; EUROPA 2006g; EUROPA 2006d; Fontaine 2003.

relying to convey its messages to the general publics at national and regional/local level.

At the same time, the Commission identifies specific groups within general audiences that require particular attention, such as young Europeans, women and EU-specialised audiences (academics, EU and national governmental officials). For these audiences, the Commission proposes direct two-way communication, as in the case of national media actors, civil society and national/local governments. It also identifies electronic media as the main vehicle of two-way communication with these groups of EU citizens.

Interestingly, although the Commission emphasises the importance of the member-states taking responsibility and becoming more proactive in the implementation of the EU's public communication strategy, it is also keen to establish and strengthen direct communication channels with civil society and governments at regional/local level. This is part of the 'going local' strategy proposed in the 'post-Constitution' period and indicates a possible intention on behalf of the Commission to 'colonise' the competence areas of other EU institutions and advisory bodies, mainly CoR and EESC. This is not unusual for an organisation, as Allison and Zelikow explain:

Most organisations define the central goal of 'health' as synonymous with 'autonomy'. They therefore seek growth in their budget, personnel and appealing new territory. Thus issues that arise in areas where boundaries are ambiguous and changing, or issues that constitute profitable new territories, are dominated by colonising activity (Allison and Zelikow 1999: 181).

Thus far, the member-states have been reluctant to proactively contribute to the implementation of the EU's public communication strategy. Moreover, national governments, as well as national media, have their own agendas and issues that they wish to promote. These may not always be compatible with the messages that the Commission wants to put across. Bypassing its key public communication 'partners' (national media and national governments), enables the Commission to ensure that its messages reach the general audiences with as little 'distortion' as possible.

The following figure summarises the concept of the EU public sphere as this emerges from the Commission's public communication documents' review. Similarly to the theoretical model (Figure 1), the EU public sphere is still understood, in terms of official rhetoric, as a multi-level communicative space, comprising several publics (depicted in the Figure 2 as layered circles). Also similarly to the theoretical model,

two-way communication features prominently in EU public communication documents, particularly in the 'post-Constitution' period. Moreover, the four core factors of public dialogue identified in the theoretical model, namely, government, civil society, media and the public, are also found in the EU public communication documents.

Despite the basic components of the theoretical EU public sphere model being present in official EU public communication rhetoric, the structure of the EU public sphere is understood in different terms by the EU institutions. More specifically, the interconnectedness of the national and local/regional publics found within the EU communicative space is not acknowledged in EU public communication documents. Rather, these publics are identified as separate entities, which require different public communication tactics. In addition, the Commission in particular identifies two more types of audiences, namely 'priority' or 'vulnerable' audiences, such as women and young people, and 'specialised' audiences, comprising EU and national officials, academics and any other groups which already have an interest in and knowledge of EU issues. These specific publics also require targeted public communication strategies.

Although two-way communication is a key component of the EU's proposed public communication strategy, particularly in the 'post-Constitution' period, this does not extend to all types of publics. Instead, two-way communication (double-ended arrows) is understood to be taking place primarily between the EU institutions and national media, national governments and EU/national civil society. These three public sphere actors in turn act as mediators and convey the EU's messages to the national publics (singled-ended, dotted arrows).

There are two instances when public dialogue in the EU public sphere takes the form of direct communication between EU institutions and the public, without of other public sphere actors, namely communication with local/regional publics and 'priority' and 'specialised' audiences. Nevertheless, the method of approaching these publics differs. In the case of local audiences, the Commission's 'going local' strategy involves the increase of the EU institutions' visibility at local/regional level, with the help of local/regional political and economic actors (not necessarily in organisation format), without relying on national media and civil society organisations to filter the EU's messages through to the local/regional publics. On the other hand, direct communication with 'specialised' and 'priority/vulnerable' audiences will mainly be

facilitated by the deployment of electronic media/ the Internet. In the theoretical model the electronic media are understood as enabling an electronic public sphere, which permeates all other level of public dialogue within the EU communicative space. However, the electronic public sphere is not acknowledged in the EU public communication documents. Rather, the Internet is seen merely as a tool (and not a public sphere actor) which facilitates direct two-way communication with specific audiences. Hence, electronic media is depicted in Figure 2 with broken line around it, to distinguish it from the EU public sphere actors and to show that two-way communication between the EU institutions and their priority/specialist publics takes place through electronic media.

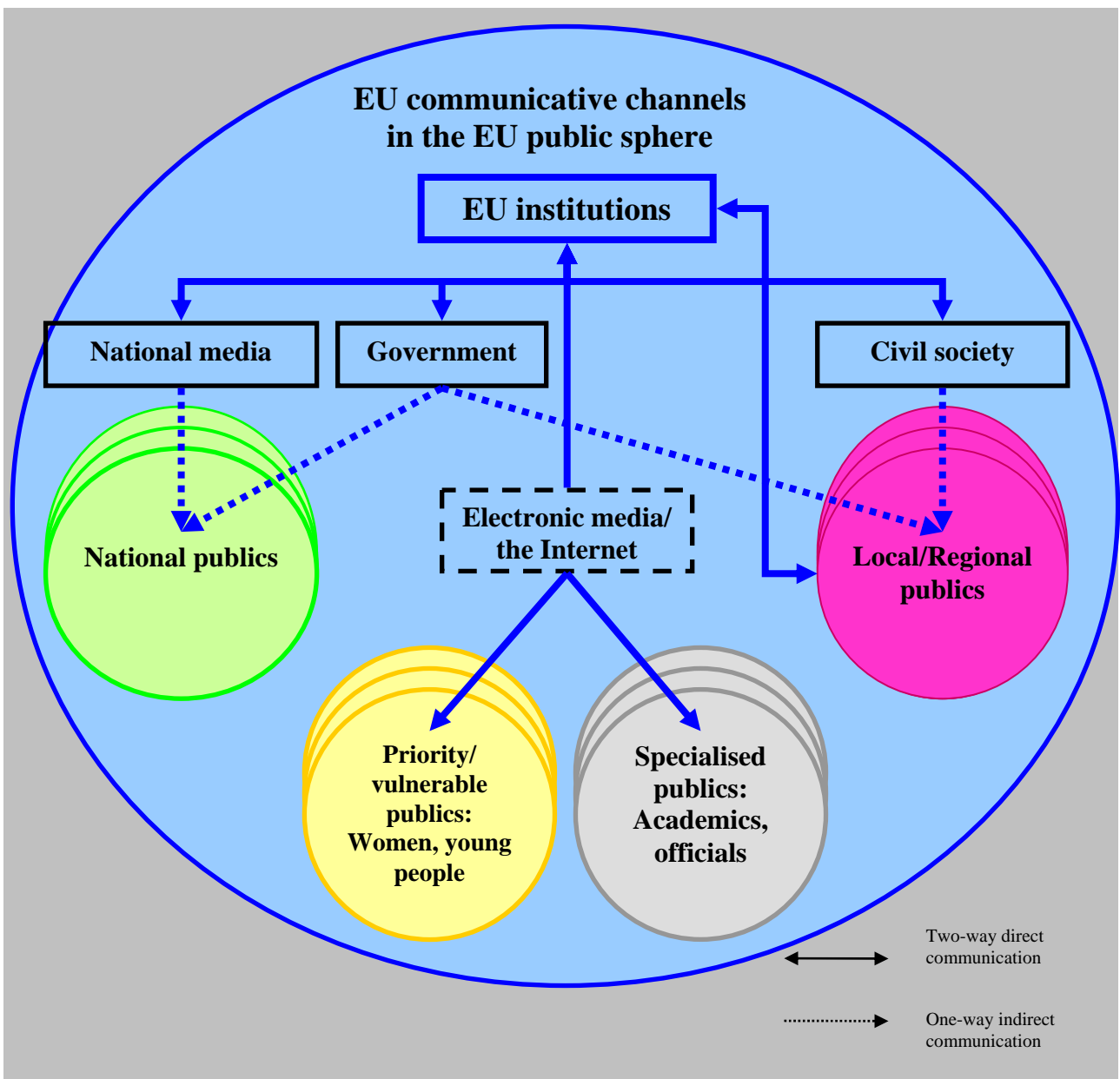


Figure 2: The EU public sphere according to EU official rhetoric

As far as interinstitutional relations are concerned, the EP and Council, as well as the EESC and CoR, appear to support the Commission's proposals in general. However, there is a difference of approach between the Commission and the EP regarding the EU's public communication strategy, with the first focusing on communication with the public and the latter emphasising the importance of informing the public, strengthening the ties with collective actors and maintaining the EU institutions' independence in terms of public communication implementation. Furthermore, the two advisory bodies, CoR and EESC, and to a lesser extent EP, put a lot of emphasis on their own role as mediators/communicators between the EU establishment and the EU public and continuously request that the Commission amend its public communication strategy to allow for local/regional authorities and organised civil society to have a greater input in the policy-making and implementation of the EU's public communication. This position of the other EU institutions and advisory bodies on the Commission's public communication proposals is not surprising, considering that organisations tend to emphasise the objectives most compatible to their special capacities and to the hierarchies of beliefs in the organisation's culture (Allison and Zelikow 1999: 177).

In order to assess the effect that the Constitutional process has had on the EU's public communication and in particular the relations between EU institutions and civil society, it is necessary to obtain a greater understanding of the institutional mechanism and culture within which these documents were produced. For this reason, interviews with key EU officials from the Commission, the Council, EP, EESC and CoR were conducted. The results of these interviews are presented in the EURPOLCOM Working Paper '*Constitutionalisation' of the European public sphere- EU institutional culture, public communication and civil society*' (forthcoming, 2008).

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Appendix- List of EU Information and Communication strategy documents

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