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**‘Constitutionalisation’ of the European public sphere- EU public
communication, institutional culture and civil society**

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Abstract

This paper investigates the top-down aspect of the European public dialogue and the opportunities that the EU’s public communication strategy offers to civil society organisations for involvement in shaping the Union’s political nature. More specifically, the research into the EU’s public communication strategy is two-fold, comprising a critical review of the official EU Information and Communication strategy documents and interviews with EU officials directly involved in the designing and/or implementation of the EU’s public communication strategy.

A review of the official EU public communication documents (Michailidou 2007) has shown that the EU institutions have unambiguously committed on paper to facilitate direct communication with the EU public. EU institutions have also prioritised the strengthening of the links with civil society as part of the process of addressing the issues of transparency and democratic legitimation of the EU’s decision-making process. Furthermore, the media are given a central role in the implementation of the proposed EU public communication strategy.

This paper draws on these findings and focuses on the results of the interviews with EU officials. The analysis of the interview material shows that the opinions of the EU officials directly or indirectly charged with the implementation of the EU’s public communication strategy are significantly different not only among the EU institutions but also from the official line of rhetoric found in the EU Information and Communication strategy documents.

Keywords: EU public communication, European public sphere, Constitutional Treaty, civil society, dialogue, participation, institutional culture.

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Introduction

The role of organised civil society is at the core of the debates regarding the European public sphere and the EU's democratic deficit. For some scholars, civil society's involvement in the EU decision-making process constitutes part of the 'democratic deficit' that the Union is faced with (Lord and Beetham 2001; Weiler 1996). For others, the 'institutionalisation' of civil society's involvement in the EU decision-making process is a guarantor of democratisation, grassroots participation and also pluralism of the public sphere (Habermas 1993; Keane 1988).¹

The degree, level and type of participation by civil society actors in EU public communication, for example when compared to the involvement of elites, gives important empirical information on the scale, nature and location of the 'democratic deficit' (Beetham and Lord 1998 in Statham et al 2005). As such, the role of civil society actors in the EU public sphere is at the core of the ESRC-funded project '*The Impact of EU 'Constitutionalisation' on public claims-making over Europe*' (Statham, Firmstone, Gray 2005: 5).² Specifically, the project examines three aspects of civil society involvement in EU political communication: National (focus on the British case), cross-national (comparison with German and Spanish civil society actors) and EU level (EU-level civil society actors and EU institutions). The aim is to assess the contribution of civil society and EU political actors in the building of the Union's '*public constituency*', that is *its potential capacity for 'demos'* (ibid.).

The role of EU institutions, in particular, is addressed by means of a critical review of the EU's Information and Communication strategy documents and semi-structured interviews with senior EU officials in the Commission, the European Parliament (EP), the Council of the EU, the Economic and Social Committee (EESC) and the Committee of the Regions (CoR). The present paper draws on the findings of the EU Information and Communication strategy documents' review (Michailidou

¹ Not surprisingly, organised civil society supports the latter view (Economic and Social Committee 2006).

² 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. For more details on the research outline of this project see http://www.eurpolcom.eu/exhibits/paper_10.pdf. 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.huberlin.de/struktur/constituency/Startseite/home.htm>.

2008) and presents the results of the semi-structured interviews with senior EU officials.

More specifically, when reviewing the EU's Information and Communication strategy, as this appears on paper, a shift emerges from information to communication on all relevant Commission documents produced after 2004, coinciding with the Constitutional process and the rejection of the Constitutional Treaty (European Union 2004) by the French and Dutch referenda. It thus appears that the Constitutional Treaty has significantly influenced the Commission's policy proposals (Michailidou 2007).

Furthermore, the role of collective actors/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 (ibid.).

At the same time, however, there is a difference of approach between the Commission and the EP regarding the EU's public communication strategy. The first focuses on communication with the public while the latter emphasises the importance of informing the public, strengthening the ties with collective actors and maintaining the EU institutions' independence in terms of public communication implementation (ibid.). Moreover, 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 (ibid.).

What are the views of EU officials on the future of the Constitutional Treaty and how do they see it affecting the EU's public communication strategy? Has the Constitutional debate affected the relationship between collective actors and the EU institutions in a similar manner as it has influenced the EU's information and communication policy in paper? How do they understand the nature of the emerging online European public sphere? Does the difference of approach between the Commission and the Parliament regarding the EU's public communication strategy extend to the deployment of the Internet and if so, how is that affecting the presence of the EU institutions in the online European public sphere?

This paper addresses the above questions through three key research questions, namely:

-Research question 1: What has been the role of EU institutions in the EU's Constitutional process and the wider debate over the future of Europe?

This question explores the views of EU officials on their institution's role in shaping the visions of Europe and addressing the issues of democratic participation and legitimacy of the EU decision-making process.

-Research question 2: What is the EU Institutions' role in the EU's public communication strategy?

The main aim of this question is to move beyond the official EU public communication rhetoric and explore the views of the EU officials responsible for the design and implementation of the Union's public communication strategy. The focus is not only on the officials' views regarding their own institution's role in the EU's public communication process but also on their evaluation of the interinstitutional relations and the impact of the Constitutional process on the EU public communication priorities.

-Research question 3: What is the role of civil society in the implementation of the EU's public communication strategy?

The official EU rhetoric emphasises the importance of civil society's involvement in the implementation of the EU's public communication strategy, yet findings of the CONSTITUTION project show a communication gap between national civil society organisations and EU institutions (Firmstone 2008, forthcoming). This question, therefore, explores the views of EU officials regarding the relations between civil society and EU institutions, with reference to the EU's official rhetoric and the issues of representation, legitimacy and democratic participation in the EU decision-making process.

Key research questions 1 and 2 were divided in several secondary research topics. Key research question 3 was given to interviewees in open-end format and they were able to expand on any issues concerning civil society they saw fit. The views of the EU officials on the role of the media and particularly that of the Internet in the EU's public communication strategy and the emerging European public sphere are discussed in relation to all three key research questions.

Methodology and interview schedule

14 interviews were conducted with EU officials in key public communication policy-making and policy-implementation positions in the Commission and the European Parliament (EP), as well as key administrative and consultative positions regarding EU-civil society relations in the Committee of the Regions (CoR), the

European Economic and Social Committee (EESC) and the Council of the European Union (Council) over the three-month period of April 2007 to July 2007.

The interviews were semi-structured with the questionnaire containing a mixture of closed and open-end questions, which were emailed to the interviewees in advance. The questions were adapted from the schedule used to interview representatives of British civil society organisations (Statham and Firmstone 2006) in order to allow standardisation and comparison of the findings across the different research levels of the project.³ The interviews were recorded using an MP3 player, lasted an average of 45 minutes and were fully transcribed.

The positions of the interviewees played a crucial role in determining the quality of the data gathered: All EU officials interviewed were at the time of the interviews in senior management and/or decision-making positions, in departments directly linked to the institutions' public communication strategy design and implementation.

More specifically, the Commission's Directorate General Communication (DG COMM), under Commission Vice-president Margot Wallström and her cabinet, is responsible for the overall EU public communication strategy, including media, press relations and public opinion, as well as for the interinstitutional communication process. The Directorate General External Relations (DG RELEX) implements the EU's foreign policy. As such, it also designs and implements public diplomacy campaigns, in other words public information and communication campaigns aimed at foreign audiences.

Regarding the European Parliament interviewees, it was deemed important to obtain the views not only of experienced parliamentarians involved in the Constitutional Affairs (AFCO) and Culture and Education (CULT) parliamentary committees, which work on constitutional and public communication issues but also of senior advisors and administrators responsible for the public communication strategy of the institution, who normally less accessible. Similarly, the officials interviewed from the Council and the Committee of the Regions held at the time positions which are instrumental for these institutions' public communication strategies and relations with the Commission's DG COMM.

³ The schedule for British non-governmental organisations was also used as the basis for the interviews with German civil society organisations. For an analysis of the interviews with British civil society organisations see Firmstone 2008 (forthcoming on www.eurpolcom.eu).

Finally, in the case of the EESC, we sought the opinions both of senior executives in the Directorates of General Affairs and Consultative Work A, as well as of a senior policy-maker from the EESC's Bureau, which is the main coordinating body of the institution.⁴

Because of the senior positions held by the interviewees, they cannot be identified by name or by the exact title of their position within the EU institution to which they belong. Any direct quotes are clearly indicated in the report, but the names of the interviewees have been substituted with numbers, i.e. Interviewee 1, Interviewee 2 etc. Table 1 below presents a short description of each interviewee's position within the EU institutions.

Table 1: Position of interviewees per institution

Institution	Position of interviewees
European Commission 5 interviewees	- Senior official, Directorate General External Relations (DG RELEX), Commission - 4 Senior officials, Directorate General Communication (DG COMM), Commission
European Parliament 4 interviewees	- 2 Members of the European Parliament (MEPs) - Political assistant to MEP - Senior official, Directorate General (DG) Information, Secretariat, European Parliament
Council of the EU 1 interviewee	- Senior adviser, General Secretariat
EESC 3 interviewees	- Senior official, Bureau, EESC - 2 Senior officials, Secretariat-General, EESC
CoR 1 interviewee	- Senior official, Directorate for Press and Communication, Secretariat General, CoR

⁴ The EESC comprises 344 members drawn from economic and social interest groups in Europe. Members are nominated by national governments and appointed by the Council of the European Union for a renewable 4-year term of office. The next renewal will occur on October 2010. They belong to one of three groups:

1. Employers
2. Employees
3. Various Interests

Every two years the EESC elects a bureau made up of 37 members, and a president and two vice-presidents chosen from each of the three groups in rotation. The president is responsible for the orderly conduct of the Committee's business. He is assisted by the vice-presidents, who deputize for him in the event of his absence. The president represents the EESC in relations with outside bodies. Joint briefs (relations with EFTA, CEEC, AMU, ACP countries, Latin American and other third countries, and the Citizens' Europe) fall within the remit of the EESC bureau and the president. The bureau's main task is to organize and coordinate the work of the EESC's various bodies and to lay down policy guidelines for this work (Economic and Social Committee 2007).

Findings

The interview material is examined here in three stages, corresponding to the three key research questions outlined earlier. The three key research questions were designed to explore several secondary issues which are examined in separate sections.

Key Research Question 1: What has been the role of EU institutions in the EU's Constitutional process and the wider debate over the future of Europe?

1.1 'The EU's Constitutional process, institutional reforms and debates over the future of Europe focus on issues relating to improving legitimacy of the EU. How important would the following factors be for improving the legitimacy of the EU?'

The aim of this question is twofold: Firstly, it recorded EU officials' views on the issues regarding the Union's legitimacy, not only in relation to the Constitutional Treaty but also in a wider political context. It thus allowed for the interviewees' more specific responses regarding the Constitutional process and the EU's public communication strategy to be placed in a wider analytical context and offered an insight into the general political outlook of senior policy-making EU officials. Secondly, the same question was used in the interviews with national NGO representatives in the UK (Firmstone 2008, forthcoming) and the online survey of UK MEPS and national parliamentarians⁵ conducted in the context of the 'CONSTITUTION' project, which allows for the comparative analysis of the collected data.

In all cases, the question is presented to the interviewees in a rating-table format and respondents are asked to evaluate the importance of several factors in relation to the EU's legitimacy using a scale from 0 ('Not at all important') to 4 ('Very important'). During the interviews with EU officials, certain interviewees rated some of the factors as 'irrelevant' and explained that although very important, in their opinion these factors were not linked in any way with the issue of the EU's legitimacy. Their answers were classified under the 'Not at all important' category. The resulting data regarding EU officials' responses are presented in Table 2, below. Several of the legitimacy factors, which are included in the table, are frequently mentioned in the official Commission, EP, CoR and EESC proposals regarding the EU's governance and public communication strategy.

⁵ Ongoing survey, expected to be completed by June 2008.

Table 2: ‘The EU’s Constitutional process, Institutional Reforms and Debates over the Future of Europe focus on issues relating to improving the legitimacy of the EU. How important would the following factors be for improving the legitimacy of the EU?’- EU officials’ views, table adapted from Statham and Firmstone 2006: 15,⁶ data source: interviews with EU officials April-June 2007.

Factors for improving EU’s legitimacy	Rank	Total value	Average value ⁷	Very Important (Value=4)	Important (Value=3)	Moderately important (Value= 2)	Only a little important (Value=1)	Not at all important/ N/A (Value=0)	Total valid answers ⁸
Quality coverage of the EU in national media	1	44	3.4	20	24	0	0	0	13
Improving communications between EU organisations and the media	2	37	2.8	12	18	6	1	0	13
Promoting the benefits of the EU to its citizens	3	36	2.8	12	18	6	0	0	13
Promote specific EU policies to citizens	4	36	2.8	8	24	4	0	0	13
Reform the EU budget	5	34	2.6	12	15	6	1	0	13
Simplifying decision making processes to make them more transparent	6	33	2.5	16	9	8	0	0	13
Strengthening European level civil society	7	33	2.5	12	12	6	3	0	13
Improving access to information and documents about the EU on the internet	8	33	2.5	8	12	12	1	0	13
Strengthening nationally based civil society over Europe	9	29	2.2	8	9	12	0	0	13
Giving citizens more access to EU organisations	10	29	2.2	4	15	6	4	0	13
Extend the power of the EU Parliament	11	28	2.3	8	9	10	1	0	12
Hold EU Council meetings in public	12	28	2.2	12	12	3	1	0	13
Improving access to decision making for civil society groups	13	28	2.2	4	15	8	1	0	13
Make the Commission more efficient	14	24	1.8	8	3	10	3	0	13
Make the Commission more accountable	15	24	1.8	0	15	6	3	0	13
Extend the power of national parliaments in the EU	16	23	1.9	8	6	8	1	0	12
Have a President of the Council/establish clear political leaders of the EU	17	22	1.7	4	15	2	1	0	13
Establishing an EU Constitution	18	21	1.6	8	6	4	3	0	13
Promoting a European identity among citizens	19	20	1.5	8	6	4	2	0	13
Establishing an EU wide media	20	17	1.3	4	3	6	4	0	13
Holding national referenda to ratify treaties/a Constitution	21	12	0.9	4	3	2	3	0	13
Holding EU wide referenda to ratify treaties/a Constitution	22	11	0.8	4	3	2	2	0	13

⁶ Based on aspects of legitimacy using definitions by Lord (2003) and as discussed by Neuhold and Versluis (2004) with regard to the Constitution.

⁷ Rounded to the first decimal digit.

⁸ Although the total number of interviewees was 14, one interviewee did not complete this part of the questionnaire and another chose not to respond to two questions on the basis that he did not feel equipped to do so.

Through the analysis of the respondents' answers it emerged that one factor was deemed unanimously of great importance insofar as the EU's legitimation process is concerned: **Quality coverage of the EU in national media**. Further analysis of the data shows that the majority of EU officials interviewed seem to associate legitimacy with public communication in general, as three of the five 'most important'-rated factors are from the Media category and a fourth one is communication-related, as it concerns 'promoting the benefits of the EU to its citizens'. Only one factor in the top-five rated concerns institutional reform and regards the financial aspect of the EU structure, i.e. the redistribution of the Union's budget.

Although it is not surprising that public communication factors were rated so important for improving the EU's legitimacy, considering that legitimacy is at the core of the EU's formal public communication strategy, it is worth noting that the role of civil society is not rated equally highly, despite being among the key targets in all EU public communication documents. The strengthening of the European level civil society was rated seventh most important among all legitimacy factors. At the same time, strengthening nationally based civil society and improving access to decision making for civil society groups received even lower ratings, which places them on the ninth and 13th positions on the ranking table respectively. More importantly, the CoR and EESC officials interviewed were among the respondents who appeared most undecided and contradictory in relation to the official line of their institutions regarding the strengthening of national civil society in particular. The issue of EU institutions-civil society relations is revisited in Key Research question 3, in a following section.

The factors that were considered least important in the legitimation process of the EU by the majority of respondents were the holding of national or EU-wide referenda to ratify Treaties or a Constitution and establishing EU-wide media. Particularly with regard to referenda and direct democracy, the answers of the respondents were influenced by their nationality rather than their position in the case of those who considered referenda to be important (French, Irish and British) while for those who deemed referenda to be of little or no importance, or indeed irrelevant/unnecessary, it was their position rather than nationality that determined their view. The following direct quotes illustrate this very clearly.

In favour of referenda, national of EU-wide, to ratify EU Treaties:

'As a Frenchman, I have to say referenda are important, why not?'
Interviewee 6.

'I think they are important because I come from a country that has them'
Interviewee 13 (Irish).

'If people want to have a referendum, I feel they should have more referenda taking place at the moment. They need to have a referendum not just on the EU issues but also on equally important national issues and that debate is non-existent at the moment'
Interviewee 12 (British).

Not in favour or who find referenda irrelevant:

'I am a parliamentarian, so I have to say 'No', I don't think they are important'
Interviewee 10 (EP).

'I do not think that referenda have anything to do with participatory democracy for the simple reason that we ask one thing and they vote with something else in mind. Besides, I don't know whether there is a legal basis for a referendum on EU-wide level'
Interviewee 7 (Commission).

'I am opposed to holding plebiscites in relation to the Constitution, or any similar Treaties' Interviewee 5 (MEP).

Quite a high proportion of interviewees were opposed, or strongly opposed to the idea of promoting an EU identity as a means to improve EU legitimacy. The consensus was that an EU identity cannot be promoted, as that would be tantamount to propaganda. Instead, the EU identity was thought of as something that will emerge (if at all) on its own through public dialogue and the strengthening of the EU integration process. As a result, this particular legitimacy factor was rated only 19th in terms of importance out of a total 22 factors.

Establishing an EU Constitution was also rated as of little or no importance (ranking 20th out of 22 factors), although the majority of interviewees were quick to explain that the content of the Constitutional Treaty is very important, in terms of EU reform. It is the name (Constitution) that they felt is causing most problems with publics throughout Europe, and thus they considered a Treaty with such a name unnecessary. Several EU officials also predicted that the content of the Constitutional Treaty would be retained in a new treaty. The launch of the draft Reform Treaty (The European Union 2007) confirmed their predictions.

1.2 'From the perspective of your institution, what could the EU do to improve its legitimacy a) in your field and b) more generally?'

This open-ended question gave the interviewees the opportunity to comment and/or elaborate on legitimacy-related issues which were not included in Table 2. It also allowed for a better understanding on how EU officials from different institutions understand the concept of EU legitimacy and how they view their institution's role in the process of democratising/reforming the Union. Although the majority of the interviewees accepted that there is an issue of legitimacy at the EU level which needs to be addressed (9 interviewees), there were also a few who rejected the suggestion

that their institution, or the EU as a whole, lack legitimacy. More interestingly, the data collected under this question revealed that even within the same institution there is a wide range of views among officials on what legitimacy means and how EU institutions can/should act with regard to it.

Of those who accepted that their institution's and the EU's overall legitimacy needs to be improved, nearly half suggested that better communication with the public is a key factor (5 interviewees), although they gave different examples of how they understand improved communication. For example, Interviewee 10 (EP) pointed to the recently-launched webTV project, for which the EP Secretariat General is responsible and which will be transmitting parliamentary debates and the activities of MEPs and other EU officials online. The project is mainly geared towards academic audiences. In contrast to this, another interviewee explained better communication as improving interaction with national parliaments and strengthening the role and activities of the Commission's representations in the member states (Interviewee 3).

Nearly as many officials considered extending their institution's powers or input in the decision making process as crucial for strengthening their institution's legitimacy (4 respondents). Of these interviewees two were EP officials/MEPs and two were EESC officials/members. The EP interviewees specifically understand extending the EP's powers as expanding the application of the co-decision process. Crucially, however, only two interviewees mentioned the strengthening of representative civil society as a factor that could improve their institution's legitimacy.

The interviewees who did not accept that there is an issue of legitimacy with their institution in particular and the EU in general suggested that the issue of lack of legitimacy is a perception-related one (3 respondents). Interestingly, two of the three interviewees who supported this view also focused on communication, explaining that better communication will improve the misconceptions about their institution. Again, better communication is perceived differently by each of the interviewees who opted for that response here, with one associating it with increased open debate and access to information about how the EU works (Interviewee 12) and the other with increased ownership of national parliaments of the decisions taken at EU level (Interviewee 8).

Furthermore, the three respondents who understand the EU's democratic deficit as a public perception-related issue suggested that strengthening the powers of their institution would contribute to changing the public's opinion regarding the

democratic legitimation of the Union (they already consider their institution to be legitimate anyway). For example, the Commission official suggested that the Commission should retain its right of initiative in the legislative process, because it is the only politically independent EU institution, which guarantees it will act in the benefit of all Europeans. Similar answers were given by the other two respondents (CoR and Council officials).

With reference to the EU in general, the majority of respondents (10 out of 12 interviewees who responded to this question) accepted that there is an issue of legitimacy and, again, better communication was the factor that was mentioned by most (5 respondents) as the most important way to improve legitimacy. Most of the respondents who mentioned improved communication associated it one way or another with more coordinated and improved public communication at national level. Three interviewees referred to structural reform and the remaining four gave varied answers, ranging from strengthening the process of participatory democracy and simplifying the EU procedures to putting more emphasis on social issues and reforming the political elites in the member-states.

Two of the 12 respondents who answered this question felt that the EU is already legitimate but needs to work on improving people's perception of its legitimacy, which they both agreed can be achieved through improved public communication, although the term had different meanings for each respondent. For example, improved public communication meant better communication with national parliaments and civil society for one respondent and promotion of an EU identity for the other.

1.3 'How would you evaluate your institution's involvement in the EU's Constitutional process and efforts at institutional reforms and debates on the future of the EU over the last five years?'

The responses of the EU officials to this question have been regrouped here in four categories, according to which component of the Constitutional process the interviewees evaluated, namely the Convention concept/ idea (component 1); the Convention process, in terms of deliberation, transparency and inclusiveness (component 2); the impact of the Convention/Constitutional process on EU processes or policies (component 3); and finally, their institution's role in the Convention (component 4). This grouping emerged from the analysis of the respondents' individual answers, as the question was initially given to them in open-end format.

All 14 interviewees answered this particular question. Only one respondent referred to the Constitutional process from an ideological perspective (component 1) and evaluated it in a positive way. Component 2 of the Constitutional process (the Convention process) was mentioned by 10 respondents in total, five of whom evaluated it in a negative way (they found the Convention was not inclusive/publicised/representative enough) and five evaluated it in a positive way (they felt the Convention achieved openness, inclusive public debate, transparency and representativeness of opinions and public actors).

Respondents' opinions also appeared divided in relation to component 4 of the Constitutional process, i.e. the role of their institution in the Convention. More specifically, two interviewees evaluated the Constitutional process negatively with reference to component 4, i.e. they felt that their institution had a weak/limited role in the Convention. On the other hand, four respondents thought their institution played an active and important role in the Convention and in that respect they evaluated the Constitutional process in a positive way. For example:

Positive view of their institution's role in the Convention:

'The CoR went with a shopping list of demands, or proposals, all of which were accepted bar one. [...] As a result of that Convention there was a protocol on subsidiarity and proportionality, which was attached to the draft Constitutional Treaty, which really does make it very plain that the Commission has to take on board the local and regional perspective where appropriate [...] And, also very importantly in my view, probably more symbolic than practical importance, [...] that the Constitutional Treaty stated that the CoR would have the right to the European Court of Justice (ECJ) to ask for laws to be annulled if they were made in breach of subsidiarity', Interviewee 11.

Negative view of their institution's role in the Convention:

'There were at least two amendments on the table in the Convention calling for the abolition of this institution (the EESC) and the Commission seemed to be veering towards that idea as well so we would like to believe that we have a lot of influence but we have the sort of influence [...] of a man lined up waiting for the firing squad might have. [...] So, it was in our interest to try and raise our profile and to demonstrate that we had a role to play, because otherwise [...] those who argue that the EESC should be done away with could have won the argument', Interviewee 9.

In contrast, the impact of the Convention (component 3) received only positive references by the interviewees (four respondents). More specifically, respondents based their evaluation of the Constitutional process on the impact that the Convention process has had overall on their institution, in terms of improved policies and/or increased powers in the decision-making process.

EP officials evaluated the role of EP in a positive way, deeming the Constitutional process a ‘*huge step forward*’ overall, as Interviewee 2 put it,⁹ while the Convention that preceded the Constitutional Treaty was considered ‘*an example of deliberative democracy*’ (Interviewee 10). Nevertheless, EP officials accepted that there have been shortfalls, and in the case of one EP official even failure, in the Constitutional process but attributed these mainly to the inadequate support that the Constitutional Treaty received from the member-states and the Commission.

More critical amongst interviewees appear the Commission officials. They were the only ones to express a negative view of their institution’s role in the Convention while three of the 5 respondents who gave a negative evaluation of the Convention process were Commission officials. Only one EP official expressed a negative view for one of the components of the Constitutional process (Convention’s limited mandate), while all other officials who gave a negative evaluation of the Convention process found that the Convention had failed to achieve its aims and had been overrated by the EP. For example, according to Interviewee 3,

‘The Convention was preceded by a phase which was referred to as the ‘Listening phase’ and nobody did the listening phase. So that when the Convention was actually set up no one took it seriously [...] So when the thing finally got going, yes it was the first time that in the process of a Treaty review discussion that a) things happened to a certain extend in public and b) it was the first time that civil society organisations in theory had an access [...] in the process, but the reality was that they weren’t ready. I mean there were few that did get involved but it was belated, too late to have a real impact and in fact it was sort of afterwards that organisations suddenly woke up to the fact that they could have (made a contribution).’

1.4 Regarding your field, how do you perceive the process of European integration going? What direction do you think it is taking? Do you agree with that direction? How do you see the role and performance of the EU institutions in this context?’

This is one of the few questions where nearly all respondents were found to be in agreement: Of the 12 interviewees who answered the question, 10 evaluated the process of European integration in a positive way, i.e. they agreed with the direction it is taking. Furthermore, all these 10 respondents perceived European integration as being more citizen-driven than before the Constitutional process, when they all

⁹ *‘What I speak about is the Convention [...] and there the EP played a crucial role, not only because it had more than a quarter of the delegates in the Convention but also because most of the agenda-setting and coordination was done from within the EP groups. [...] Without the involvement, or the division into parliamentary groups or party groups inside the Convention, this would have been nearly impossible. So EP’s played quite a strong role and the whole result of the Constitution to have much easier, readable language, to have much easier structure, to have a good overview of what’s going on, [...] you see a huge development in terms of reader-friendliness and being close to the citizens. And that was due to the involvement of the EP and the national parliaments’* (Interviewee 2).

expressed the view that integration was happening for its own sake. All respondents linked citizen-driven European integration with increased subsidiarity and with policies driven by ‘real’ needs of the people. The following quotes are indicative:

‘When consulting the citizens about their visions for European integration we have received some remarkably clear and initiated wishes for the future European cooperation. [...] When putting forward new proposals I believe the EU should always have these kinds of overall visions, stemming from the people concerned in mind, in order for the union to succeed and develop in a way that is of most service for the people inhabiting it’ Interviewee 14.

‘[...] suddenly you find that indeed those countries who were, some of them, against (the common energy policy) in the Convention, now backing strongly a move towards an energy policy and you’ve ended up with a March European Council which produced some quite forward-looking and quite ambitious goals in terms of energy policy and also some on climate change. And so I would class that as a sign of Europe integrating, not institutionally integrating but it is a sign that they are coming behind a particular policy direction. Why? Not because they think ‘we need to integrate’ but because they think there are real issues behind energy security, which is driving that policy. And I think that will be the trend for the future’ Interviewee 8.

1.5 ‘Regarding your field of activity, which achievements of the EU do you evaluate as most positive and which as the most negative over the past 5-10 years?’

The respondents’ evaluation of their institutions’ achievements were positive in their majority, with 12 of the 14 EU officials who answered this question giving positive examples in contrast with 7 who (also) mentioned negative issues. Table 3 below summarises the respondents’ views. The analysis of the answers has resulted in the respondents’ views being regrouped under three categories, namely politics, economy and society, according to the type of achievements they referred to. For example, one interviewee referred to the positive developments regarding EU enlargement from a political point of view, i.e. with regard to the political stability, peace and prevailing of the democratic governance system in Europe. Another interviewee mentioned Enlargement as one of the positive achievements of the EU in terms of economic prosperity and free trade. Where more than one respondent gave the same answer, this is indicated next to the answer.

Table 3: Most positive and most negative achievements of the EU in the last 5-10 years

Areas of activity	Positive achievements	Negative achievements
Politics	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - EP reassessed itself that reform is necessary and decided to salvage as much of the Constitutional Treaty as possible - Huge improvement in involving civil society in the decision-making process - Making communication a Commission policy in its own right/ shift towards political communication (2) - Establishment and extension of the co-decision procedure - Establishment of common statute for MEPs - Improvement of public communication (2) - Convention: example of representing citizens - Progress and development of regulatory issues - Progress and development of soft-power issues - Relations with WTO, UN/multilateralism - Progress and development in regional cooperation - Press pack in Brussels largest of its kind in the world, which shows there is particular interest and interaction with media regarding EU and Commission activities - Enlargement - Increasing recognition of CoR's role 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Lack of loyalty of politicians towards their signing of the Constitutional Treaty - Communication strategy followed on the Services Directive - The 'wandering' EP - No targets for member states - Lack of accountability from Commission, Council and EP - Member states still holding on to the idea that the EU is made of member states and not citizens - Lack of openness of the Council - Constitutional process, due to repercussions of 'No' votes - Constitutional Treaty, for not clearly reflecting the results of the Convention - 'Dinosaur' views of parts of the Commission and EP towards the CoR
Economy	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Enlargement - Progress and development in financial regulatory issues - Economic and monetary Union (2) 	
Society	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Progress in education, such as Erasmus, Erasmus Mundus - EESC first to draw up paper on European Youth Policy - EESC's forthcoming 'Roma in Europe' study 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Budgetary cuts on education, culture and information

From the above table it becomes apparent once more that communication is a significant factor influencing the EU officials' views (answers in bold).

Key Research Question 2: What is the EU Institutions' role in the EU's public communication strategy?

2.1 'Process through which the EU public communication is decided: interinstitutional relations, evaluation of the consultation process. How do you think the Constitutional process has affected this relationship?'

The EU public communication document review conducted for the CONSTITUTION project (Michailidou 2007) has shown that the EU institutions often approach the topic of public communication from different perspectives, while the EESC and to a lesser extent CoR and EP, have been quite critical in their documents of the Commission's White Paper on Communication (COM(2006)35).

Consequently, one of the aims of Key Research Question 2, as discussed earlier, is to move beyond the official rhetoric found in EU public communication strategy documents. Sub-question 2.1 aimed to obtain the officials' evaluation of the interinstitutional relations and the impact of the Constitutional process on the EU public communication priorities and on the process through which these are decided.

Of the seven Commission and EP officials who answered sub-question 2.1 (out of 13 interviewees who answered this question in total), four thought that the relations between the two institutions are good or improving and gave the same opinion on the way the Commission consults the EP. Two viewed the relations between the two institutions as 'difficult' and evaluated the consultation process negatively, on the basis that there is not enough/no cooperation between the two institutions. Finally one EP official pointed out that both the Commission and the EP wish to retain their autonomy but did not evaluate this as either positive or negative.

With regard to the other three EU institutions/advisory bodies, their officials' views regarding the relations with the Commission and their role in the consultation process were also generally positive. This is rather surprising of the EESC officials, in particular, considering how critical they appear elsewhere in the interviews towards the Commission, which in itself is expected, since the Commission tabled a proposal during the Convention to abolish the EESC.

The second part of this question concerned the impact of the Constitutional process on the relations between the institutions and on the consultation process that the Commission follows. Of the 13 interviewees who commented on the current state of interinstitutional relations, nine went on to evaluate the impact of the Constitutional process in this context.

The consensus among respondents (five out of nine who answered this part of the question) was that the Constitutional process and particularly the 'No' votes in France and the Netherlands served as a 'wake-up call' for the EU institutions. More specifically, the Constitutional process led to the realisation that there is an urgent need for institutional reform and better interinstitutional cooperation. Two interviewees felt it is impossible/too early to evaluate the impact of the Constitutional process on the interinstitutional relations and the consultation process. Finally, two respondents attributed any changes, positive or of little significance, in the relations between the Commission and the EP or the CoR as a result more of the appointment

of Margot Wallström than of the Constitutional Treaty. This is a view which several of the other respondents also share, as will become apparent in later questions.

2.2 'The Constitutional process appears to have significantly influenced the Commission's public communication strategy proposals, as well as the recommendations and actions of the other EU institutions, as these appear in paper. How do you evaluate the impact of the Constitutional process on the present and future EU public communication strategy?'

This question aimed to clarify the reasons behind the Commission's change of public communication strategy after 2004. As official EU documents' analysis conducted for the 'CONSTITUTION' project has shown, this strategy change appears to have been influenced by the developments regarding the Constitutional treaty (Michailidou 2007).

Nevertheless, despite the negative results of the referenda on the Constitutional Treaty in France and the Netherlands, most EU officials evaluated the impact of the Constitutional process as positive. More specifically, four out of the 11 interviewees who answered this question thought that the Constitutional process spearheaded the changes in the EU's public communication process. For example, according to Interviewee 13, the Constitutional Treaty

'has had an impact yes! Now the Commission, in the last year, are talking about employing communications' people and also allowing the Commission officials to speak, to be spokespersons, so that they can speak authoritatively on a subject, so that when we get some wonderful story in the media, there is somebody who can authoritatively speak out on that issue',

while for Interviewee 9, the Constitutional process meant that

'People had woken up to the fact that they needed to get their act together. So you could argue that the Constitutional Treaty, this big mass and very emotive term of the Constitutional Treaty, had convinced them that they had a job to do, a communication job to do'.

Another four expressed the view that, although these changes had started long before the Constitutional process, the negative referenda in France and the Netherlands speeded up the process of change, as they made the citizens' demand for change in the EU institutions and structures clearer to EU officials and national politicians. As Interviewee 12 put it, for example,

'It is a combination of factors. [...] before the 'No' referenda you could see that the institutional decision process, the interinstitutional decision process was clogging up. There were just too many decisions in the pipeline, too many languages, which had to go through the Commission's, Council's and EP's decision process. [...] there was a decision that was made in 2003, even before 2003; the whole question of improved legislation, better regulation, that first came up in the end of 1994, sorry, the end of 1999 and 2000 [...] And there was an attempt on the part of the Commission to reduce the amount of legislation it

was producing and this was carried through irrespective of anything else; it gained speed after the ‘No’ votes but it’s a process that was already there’.

Three of the respondents who expressed a positive view of the Constitutional process or of the referenda also mentioned the role Margot Wallström has played in the shift of the Commission’s public communication strategy from information to interaction-oriented.

The two respondents who evaluated the impact of the Constitutional process as negative based their answer on the negative results of the referenda in France and the Netherlands, while the respondent who felt the Constitutional process has not had any impact on the institutions’ public communication process based his view on the fact that

‘The desire of the institutions to retain their autonomy is very strong and it was not going to change with the Constitutional process. Because it comes back to the point that we are not like them (the Commission), [...] we necessarily see the world differently, we are more process-oriented, they are more product-oriented. So Constitution or no Constitution, I don’t see that as such a big issue’, (Interviewee 10).

2.3 ‘Post-Constitution, there is a shift in the Commission’s proposed strategy, with the emphasis now on communication rather than information. Part of the strategy is to encourage two-way communication in order to obtain regular feedback from citizens and collective actors. How do you think the EU institutions could incorporate the feedback on the future of the EU from collective actors and the general public into the decision-making process?’

The purpose of this sub-question was to record the interviewees’ views specifically on the new type of public communication introduced by the Commission ‘post-Constitutionally’, in other words after 2004-2005. Not surprisingly, given the official Commission proposals on the EU public communication, particularly after 2004,¹⁰ nearly all Commission officials were in favour of two-way communication (four out of five Commission officials interviewed). The majority of the officials from the other EU institutions remained sceptical of the feasibility and indeed of the legitimacy of such a concept, as Table 4, below, illustrates.

¹⁰ See Michailidou 2008, for more details on the EU’s public communication strategy proposals.

Table 4: EU officials' views on two-way communication

Institution	In favour of two-way communication with civil society and the public	Sceptical towards two-way communication with civil society and the public
Commission	4	1
CoR	1	-
Council	-	1
EESC	1	2
EP/MEP	1	2
Total	7	6

The officials supportive of the two-way communication strategy based their views on the democratising potential that incorporating feedback from collective actors and individual citizens can have on the decision making process. One interviewee used the Commission's Green Paper on Climate Change, the first of its kind, as an example of how civil society consultation can result to beneficial, if not groundbreaking, EU legislation.¹¹ Some saw the process as fraught with difficulties yet inevitably moving towards two-way communication. More specifically, interviewees expressed the view that it is not always possible to guarantee citizens' participation or the quality of the opinions brought forward. As Interviewee 3 put it,

'one thing that we did was to introduce minimum standards for consultation which means that, for example, the representations in the member states are now involved in the consultations and doing outreach to actually encourage people of all sides of an issue nationally and the very civil society that you told me about who say that they don't feel involved, to get involved for that, to have some kind of impact on what legislative proposals will end up putting forward [for that. You can never guarantee that they will use that thing but] you can set up structures and then either, like with the Convention, if you set it up, people have the ability to [have opinions on it], whether people end up doing that, you can't control but you can try and make it easier or more possible for people to do that'.

It is also worth noting that the two EESC and CoR officials in favour of the strategy expressed the view that two-way communication can be legitimised provided that the role of their institutions in the decision-making process is strengthened.

On the other hand, the officials who appeared sceptical of this shift in public communication strategy mainly focused on the democratic legitimacy of the initiative. In particular, it is precisely this lack of quality guarantee as far as civil society input is concerned that concerns EU officials. In other words, the interviewees who criticised the Commission's turn to a direct-participation model of communication, pinpointed

¹¹ On 29 June 2007 the European Commission adopted its first policy document on adapting to the impacts of climate change. This Green Paper "Adaptation to climate change in Europe - options for EU action" (COM2007/0354 final), builds upon the work and findings of the European Climate Change Programme (Commission of the European Communities 2008).

to the lack of representativeness of civil society organisations, and therefore, to their lack of democratic mandate. For this reason, Interviewee 7, for example, expressed concerns that

The concept of direct democracy is slightly demagogical, in my opinion, because we have the institutions, elected, and therefore there exists a legality, which we then question with an opinion which may be coming from lobbies or organised minorities, which are not representative. Representative is the government. Direct democracy is interesting but it cannot guarantee representativeness. So, when we create communication channels we need to take into consideration that these channels may not represent the majority of Europeans. Direct democracy is very fashionable but it should exist avec moderation’.

Similarly, according to Interviewee 4,

‘We have only recently started doing impact assessment and there’s now people working at the Secretariat General, who push for legislation to do impact assessment. A lot of the consultation prior to legislation often takes place with representative organisations.[...] I think that’s the problem, the representativeness of the representative organisations in Brussels. That’s why national parliaments, national organisations, consultations have to [take place]’.

2.4 *‘There is a difference of approach between the Commission and the EP regarding the EU’s 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 though institutionalised channels and maintaining the EU institutions’ independence in terms public communication. There is also a rivalry among EU institutions and advisory bodies regarding their roles in the public communication strategy. How do you think this is impacting on the implementation of the strategy?’*

This sub-question is based on the findings of the EU public communication documents’ review (Michailidou 2007), according to which the priorities of the different institutions with regard to the EU’s public communication strategy do not always coincide. It was necessary to investigate this further and establish whether the differences in official institutional rhetoric reflect competitive interinstitutional relations or are merely a matter of wording.

Nearly all of the respondents who answered this question (nine out of 13) accept that there is a difference of approach among institutions regarding the EU’s public communication strategy. Furthermore of the nine respondents who accept that a difference exists between their institution’s proposals regarding the EU’s public communication strategy, five believe that this is affecting the implementation of the strategy and four do not see an impact. Six out of nine assessed this difference of approaches between the two institutions as ‘normal’, due to the different roles they fulfil (6) or because also of the Commission’s ‘selfish’ attempt to be sole communicator with the public (1). Of the nine respondents only two thought that the

rift between Commission and EP communication proposals is caused by the EP's wish to retain the role of public representative for itself.

The three respondents who did not agree with the view that Commission and EP approach public communication in a different, let alone contradicting, way mainly based their answer on the fact that official documents are written by individuals and therefore the words chosen by them may have caused the impression that institutions compete with each other in this policy field. One respondent suggested that in fact the proposals and views of the institutions are moving more and more towards the same direction, as a result of the Constitutional process. Another interviewee pointed to the limited budget DG COMM has at its disposal as main cause of problems in the implementation of the EU's public communication strategy rather than the differences of opinion between Commission and EP.

Key Research Question 3: What is the role of civil society in the implementation of the EU's public communication strategy?

Analysis of the interview data is particularly revealing when it comes to how the EU officials evaluate the role of civil society in the implementation of the EU's public communication strategy and the Constitutional process.

Firstly, there was confusion and uncertainty among the interviewees regarding the actual concept of 'civil society'. Of the six interviewees who explained or indicated what their understanding of 'civil society' is, four used the term 'civil society' interchangeably with 'NGOs', one included industry and NGOs in his definition and only one interviewee gave the official EU definition, which is found on the EUROPA portal and is itself quite vague.¹² Two more interviewees requested further clarification on the term, concluding that there is no satisfactory definition for it. In a similar way, most interviewees were unclear about the concept of the European public sphere, with several of them considering the term a purely academic 'invention'.

¹² According to Eurojargon, civil society is

'the collective name for all kinds of organizations and associations that are not part of government but that represent professions, interest groups or sections of society. It includes (for example) trade unions, employers' associations, environmental lobbies and groups representing women, farmers, people with disabilities and so on. Since these organizations have a lot of expertise in particular areas and are involved in implementing and monitoring European Union policies, the EU regularly consults civil society and wants it to become more involved in European policymaking.' (EUROPA 2006).

Contrary to the official documents produced by the Commission and the EP, which stress the importance of building strong links with civil society, Commission, Council and EP officials interviewed find that the involvement of civil society organisations in the EU decision-making process is already significant. However, their views varied with regard to whether the EU institutions need to further improve their relationship with civil society organisations and their access to the decision-making process, or the responsibility for establishing communication with EU institutions lies with civil society organisations themselves. As Interviewee 8 put it,

‘If you have interests which are being affected by the decisions taken in Brussels, well, then you need to take the responsibility to make sure that your interests are adequately represented and that your point is fed into the policy-making process. [...] I mean the primary responsibility is with those who have interests which they see are being affected by the decisions made in Brussels. (You cannot have) the attitude that “the world owes us a living”.

In contrast, EESC and CoR officials emphasised the importance of civil society involvement in the EU decision-making process but most of them expressed concern regarding the Commission’s recent strategy of approaching trans-European civil society organisations directly, bypassing the EESC, which in their view is the institution that guarantees the representativeness and accountability of European and national civil society. The exception to this was Interviewee 13, an EESC key official according to whom NGOs and the Commission do not try to bypass the EESC but

‘of course they (NGOs) go directly to the Commission and the EP and I encourage them to do it, because civil society organisations are autonomous. Nobody says there’s only one route into the EU. So, of course they do! They should! [...] I go directly to the Commission and the EP because if we are lobbying on an issue, we want to get as many people convinced. If I’m advocating for a position of course I want to advocate to as many people as I can.’

The role of Margot Wallström was deemed to have been catalytic in improving the relations between EU institutions, particularly the Commission, and civil society at national/local level. However, the evaluation of Wallström’s role proved a rather controversial issue: For Commission officials, in particular, the Vice-President’s actions are a positive step towards more citizen-oriented communication and the solution to the problem of non-representative EU civil society umbrella organisations. As Interviewee 9 put it, for example,

‘they (EU NGOs) play an important role but curiously they’ve become almost a barrier and you can sense that in the way that Wallström particularly, being more in favour of mass popular movements than institutionalised approaches, the way she wants to get beyond Brussels and out into the member states. So they play an important role but in a sense it can be a negative role’.

On the other hand, EESC officials saw Wallström's moves as part of the wider Commission attempt to undermine and bypass the EESC. As Interviewee 9 explained, the relations between the Commission and the EESC as well as between national civil society organisation and the EESC are very 'touchy' as

'The EESC [...] is always hurt that the Commission listens to them (national civil society organisations) rather than to it. So, it's an extremely touchy relationship and I'm sure that [...] explained to you the creation of the liaison group which is an attempt to gradually reel them in from their independence, into a cooperative relationship with the EESC, which gives them effectively a Treaty-based role, because the EESC is in the Treaty and they aren't. There's still a lot of suspicion out there though and it's an extremely touchy relationship' (Interviewee 9).

In either case, Wallström is considered a 'policy entrepreneur' (Kingdon 1995) by her peers, in the sense that she is recognised a central role in driving the EU's public communication policy reform forward.

With reference to the Constitutional Treaty and the consultation process that preceded it, the majority of the interviewees agreed that the EU institutions did not do all that could possibly be done to establish public dialogue with civil society and evaluated the overall process as unsuccessful, regardless of whether they had earlier evaluated the concept of the Constitutional process positively or not.

Discussion

Crucially, the analysis of the interview data has shown that EU officials associate public communication with the legitimacy of the EU institutions. The EU officials interviewed for this project appear to understand the EU's democratic deficit more as a result of insufficient or distorted information available to the public than a result of lack of democratic representation and openness of the EU decision-making process. Furthermore, while the Commission's official public communication strategy, particularly since 2004, has given new communication technologies (particularly the Internet) a central role, most EU officials consider national media representation of EU issues as one of the most important factors in improving the legitimacy of the EU.

On a theoretical level, the views of the EU officials are very close to the scholarly approaches which see in the national media discourse the potential 'Europeanisation' of the national public spheres, and consequently, the potential for emergence of a European public sphere (for example Koopmans et al 2004; van de Steeg and Risse 2007). The assumption of EU officials here is that an increase in

positive/accurate media reporting of EU issues would lead to an increased visibility of the issues surrounding European governance in national public debates, i.e. to *'intensified communication about European governance'* (Latzer and Sauerwein 2006: 17 in Trezn 2007: 15). Since public debate of EU issues is closely linked to the legitimacy of EU governance, the assumption is that increased coverage in national media will allow for greater/closer public scrutiny of the EU institutions, and thus contribute to the legitimization of the Union (Trenz 2007).

However, as Trezn points out, *'such a linear relationship between growing competencies of the EU and growing public attentiveness to European integration has so far not been corroborated by empirical analysis.'* (ibid.: 15). The analysis of the interview data indicates that rather than having an empirically substantiated basis, the EU officials' belief in the legitimizing potential of national media stems from their understanding of public communication: A number of the EU officials interviewed (six out of 14) were sceptical towards two-way public communication as they thought it raises issues of representativeness and legitimacy of the EU decision-making procedures. Even the officials who were in favour of two-way communication with the public and civil society referred to the 'dangers' of such a strategy, as potentially undermining parliamentary procedures. In other words, even EU officials who are keen on strategies that may increase public debate and public contributions to the EU decision-making process are also aware of the 'agency' problem that goes hand in hand with greater participation: As Allison and Zelikow explain

'Increasing the number of participants in a decision process beyond a single mind helps a decision-maker dodge many obvious pitfalls. [...] But these benefits have a price: namely, the inclusion of additional, autonomous interests' (Allison and Zelikow 1999: 271).

In this context, increased and improved public information is seen as a more preferable option and one for which EU institutions therefore have to rely on national media, for practical reasons, i.e. absence of widely-established EU media appealing to the general public. For most interviewees, increased and factual information regarding the EU institutions and the decisions taken at EU level, as opposed to occasional 'tabloid' type of reporting on EU issues, can have a two-fold effect: Firstly, it will help dispel the myth of 'the Brussels bureaucrats' trying to suffocate national sovereignty and will enable EU citizens make informed decisions regarding the future of the Union. On a second level, the increased reporting on EU issues will also

increase transparency of the EU decision-making process and will allow for *deliberative processes* to emerge regarding the EU polity.

This view of the media is very close to the Habermasian model of the bourgeois public sphere, where the media contribute to the rational critical debate (Habermas 1989). Nevertheless, such an approach does not take into consideration that the media are autonomous organisations that operate under their own institutional rules and culture- which means that national media will not always report on EU issues within the timeframe and context that the EU institutions want. A case in point is the Constitutional process, which, it was hoped, would generate national and transnational public debates on the future of the EU and would increase the opportunities for citizens' views to be heard in the public sphere. Through the newspaper-coverage analysis of the Europeanised communication patterns that have emerged in the British public sphere in response to the Constitutional process, Firmstone and Statham (2007) have shown that these expectations did not materialise.

Similarly to the views expressed regarding national media, although most EU officials interviewed are in favour of two-way communication with civil society actors, at the same time they appear very reserved insofar as civil society organisations' involvement in the EU decision-making process is concerned. The main reason for their scepticism towards civil society organisations, particularly at EU/trans-European level, is again the organisations' mandate (or lack of it) as well as the fact that consultation of civil society actors takes place outside the EU governance system outlined by the Treaties. In this context, there is a discrepancy between the official EU institutions' position regarding the role of civil society organisation in the shaping of the EU's polity and the views of the EU officials.¹³

As far as the Constitutional process is concerned, analysis of the interview data indicates that some of the differences which appear in the documents of the EU institutions regarding the aims of the EU's public communication strategy are reflected in the perceptions/views held by the EU officials regarding the role of their institution in the overall public communication strategy of the Union and in the more specific Constitutional process. More specifically, EP officials support a communication strategy which recognises the representative role of the EP and provides reliable information to the public while Commission officials defend the

¹³ See Michailidou 2007 for the results of the EU institutions' public communication documents' review.

Commission’s proposals to establish two-way communication with the public and with civil society directly. In addition, the analysis of the interview material has shown that for several EU officials the Constitutional process was not the cause of the changes found in the EU’s public communication strategy but merely an accelerating factor of changes in the institutional culture that had started much earlier.

The following figure illustrates the concept of the EU public sphere as this has emerged from the analysis of the EU officials’ interviews.

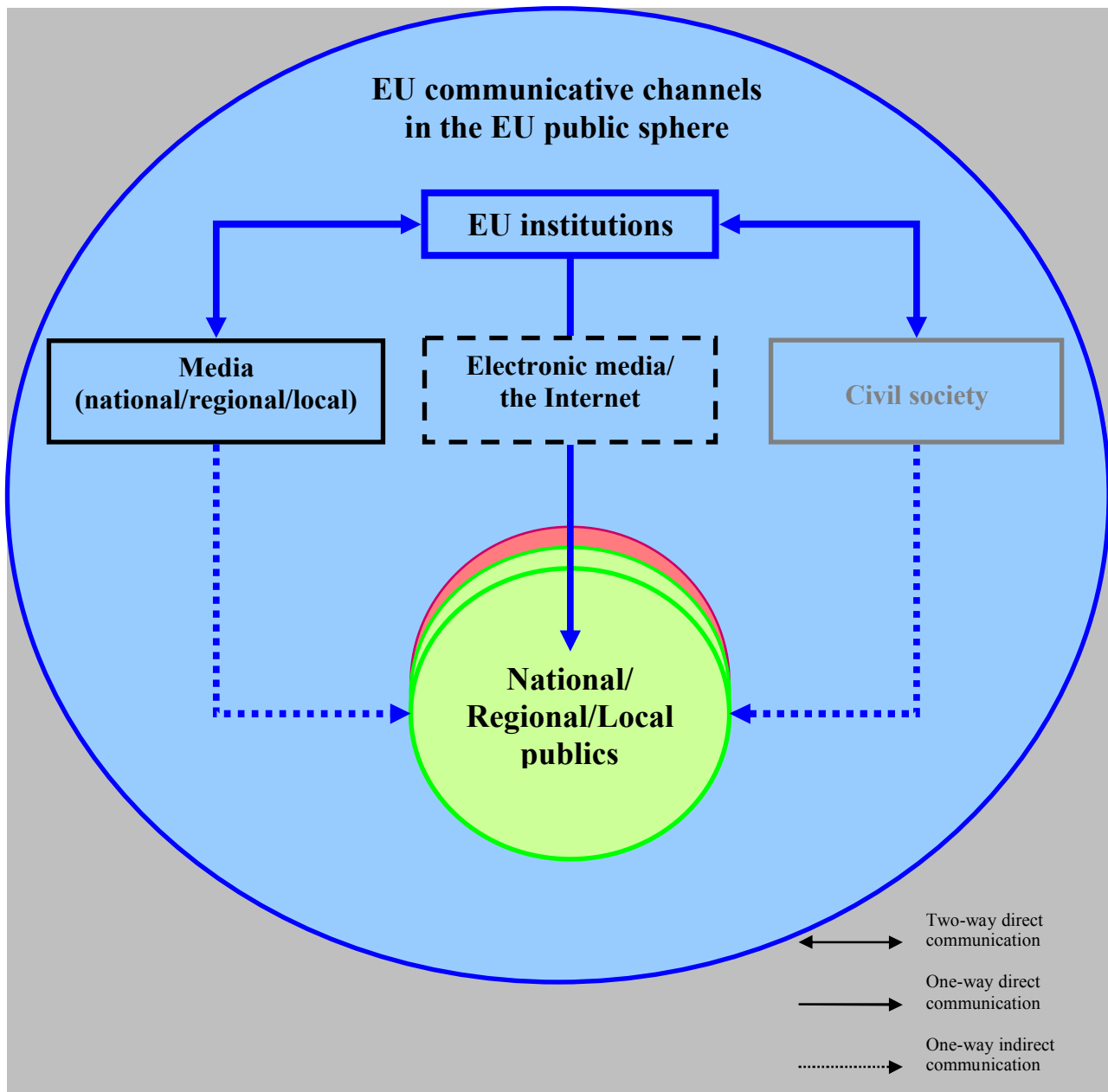


Figure 1: Institutional culture- The concept of the EU public sphere

Here the concept of the EU public communication appears similar to the communicative model which emerged from the analysis of the official EU public communication strategy documents (Michailidou 2007). National media are

considered a key ‘player’ in the European public sphere and EU officials emphasise that it is important for EU institutions to establish stronger two-way communication with media actors (namely reporters and journalists). Electronic media, specifically the Internet, are seen merely as tools which the EU institutions can deploy in order to reach wider and/or more specialised audiences. Hence, electronic media appear in broken-line frame in the figure above, to distinguish them from national media and civil society, which are seen here as EU public sphere actors.

The role of civil society in the implementation of the EU’s public communication strategy and the decision-making processes of the Union remains a ‘grey’ area, as there is no consensus among EU officials regarding the level of civil society organisations’ involvement and its impact on the EU’s overall democratic legitimacy. Nevertheless, EU officials did not make a distinction between national and local audiences or civil society organisations, unlike the official EU public communication documents. On the contrary, the interviewees often referred to European and national civil society organisations in distinct terms and emphasised the need to establish direct communicative links with national civil society organisations, albeit within an institutional framework that will guarantee representativeness and accountability of all actors involved in the EU policy-making process.

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