

COMMUNICATING THE EU TO THE MEDIA: THE DELICATE ROLE OF PRESS OFFICERS AT THE COUNCIL OF THE EUROPEAN UNION

July 2010

Bo Laursen, University of Aarhus, Denmark &

Chiara Valentini, University of Aarhus, Denmark

INTRODUCTION

Most studies in public relations focus on communication within business organizations. Communication in the public sector has largely been ignored, even though it poses unique problems (Gelders & Ihlen, 2010; Graber, 2003; Lee, 2001a, 1999; Heise, 1985). Only few case studies on public sector communication exist (Avery et al., 1996) and in most cases these studies have applied models developed for analysis of private sector communication (Liu & Horsley, 2007; Fairbanks et al., 2007). Within the European context, only a limited number of studies have dealt with EU institutions and their communication management from a public relations perspective (Valentini, 2008, 2007) and even less have focused on the activities and communication practices of government public relations officers¹.

This paper deals with the media relations activities performed in the Council of the European Union and more specifically explores the communication tasks and practices of press officers in the Press Service of that institution. We begin by reviewing the literature on public sector communication and government public relations in relation to the European Union. In the second section we state our research objectives and present our methodology. The third section focuses on the Council press officers' institutional

¹ In this paper the term 'government public relations' refers to all communication and relationship activities planned and managed by public sector organizations, including activities that are often referred to as public information and communication, public affairs and political communication.

environment and provides a brief presentation of the structure and functions of the Council of the European Union and its General Secretariat. The fourth section contains our findings and in the fifth section we conclude by highlighting some of the differences between the media relations activities performed by Council press officers and similar activities performed in the corporate sphere and in the European Commission.

LITERATURE

When it comes to studies on the communication of public sector organizations², literature on government public relations is limited (Windsor, 2001; Dennis, 1996; Fleisher, 1993, 1995, 1997). Within the area of government public relations the bulk of existing research seems to deal with public information campaigns and political campaigns and their effects on public awareness and behaviours. Studies on these two types of communication are numerous and extensively cover different sub-disciplines as well as theoretical and methodological approaches. However, we still need a clear understanding of the role of the government public relations officers who are behind campaigns and/or political communication. As Garnett and Kouzmin (1997) pointed out communication in public sector organizations often seems to be forgotten by communication scholars despite the increasing relevance of communication for major activities in the public sector. Government public relations officers play an important role because they contribute to public understanding of government policies and raise awareness of the roles of decision makers and purview of public institutions, availability of social services, noteworthy trends, and risks to public health and safety (Édes, 2000).

² Throughout this paper the term ‘public sector organizations’ refers to all organizations at national, regional or local/municipal level, including public administrations and government agencies, that are part of a nation-state and or an union of states, such as the European Union.

Studies investigating communication practices in the public sector are mostly country-based or contextualised to a specific service, e.g. health care, transportation, etc., provided by the public agency (cf. Lee, 2009). Within public relations scholarship only a few studies have dealt with public sector communication (i.e. Lee 2009, 2007, 2001a; Grunig and Jaatinen, 1999; Baker, 1997; Adams, 1995), although practices, strategies and tactics of public relations are commonly used by government public relations officers. Baker (1997) further comments on this lack of studies in his work on US government public relations where he uses this term to refer to communication practices performed by public sector agencies with the aim of influencing elected decision-makers, providing information services, developing and protecting positive institutional images, and generating public feedback (Ibid, 1997: 456-457).

Grunig and Jaatinen (1999) pointed out that the traditional models of public relations are also valid for the public sector and acknowledge that, even if the public information model seems to be the most employed among public administrations in several countries, it is possible that other models, such as the two-way symmetrical model, are used in other parts of the world by the public sector. An example of two-way symmetrical communications in the public sector are the European Commission's recent communication activities, which, at least at normative level, seek to promote dialogue with different EU stakeholders by engaging civil society organizations and other parties in discussing EU policies and initiatives (Valentini, 2010).

Gelders and others (2007) further explain that civil servants working in communication have four additional constraints commonly found the public sector compared to the private sector: more complicated and unstable environment, additional

legal and formal restrictions, more rigid procedures, and more diverse products and objectives. Allison (2004) and Beckett (2000) also concur that as public sector management differs in many respects from corporate management, communication practices in the two spheres are far from being identical.

Along with this view, Liu and Horsley (2007) developed a new model of public relations for the public sector called the government communication decision wheel. According to these authors, the wheel provides a useful tool to help government communicators select the most effective means of communication based on the situation, the environment, and the resources available. It also provides an initial framework for reconceptualising how public relations is practiced in government. The wheel, however, has not yet been tested.

Typically, government public relations officers deal with: monitoring media coverage, briefing and advising political officials, managing media relations, informing the public directly, sharing information across the administration and formulating communication strategies and campaigns, and researching and assessing public opinion (Lee, 2007, 2009). Some of these activities are one-way communications, but today government public relations officers are called for a more dialogical approach in communicating with their constituencies (Valentini, 2007, 2010). Because public sector organizations need to keep their publics informed and openly report on their activities, public reporting is one of the government public relations activities that is widely implemented (Fitzpatrick, 1947). Public reporting can be performed indirectly, through news media coverage of agency activity, and directly, through products such as annual reports, websites, TV programmes and newsletters (Lee, 2001b). Public reporting,

external communication and publicity contribute to the democratic accountability (Viteritti, 1997) by informing and enabling citizens to make political decisions, by mobilising citizens towards an issue and/or simply allowing citizens to evaluate the work of their representatives.

Especially for supranational organizations like the European Union government public relations are crucial for providing information to the general public and for getting policy support through the media. For government public relations the media are the most important link between politics and citizens (e.g. Entman and Bennett 2001; Swanson and Mancini 1996), and this may especially apply to an issue as remote and abstract as EU politics (Blumler, 1983). The fact that Eurobarometer surveys³ consistently show that the majority of EU citizens identify the media as their most important source of political information further supports the argument that government public relations, especially media relations, is very important for the EU.

Despite the relevance of the topic, very few scholars have analysed the tasks and communication practices of EU press officers (i.e. government public relations officers). Anderson (2004) studied the extent to which the European Parliament's Press and Information Directorate, DG-III, and to a lesser extent, Members of the European Parliament, are successful in handling their relationships with the mass media, given that the latter is a crucial means of communicating images of the Parliament to the electorate. Meyer (1999) analysed and evaluated the European Commission's media communication activities and placed them in the context of the EU's broader institutional set-up and decision-making procedures. His findings suggested that most of the European

³ More information on Eurobarometer surveys and statistics is available at http://ec.europa.eu/public_opinion/index_en.htm

Commission's media communication problems were related both to the lack of competent staff and to a system of governance that depoliticised conflicts and obscured political accountability. Spanier (2010) investigated the news management activities and practices of the spokespersons of the European Commission and found that the Commission's media relations activities were exclusively oriented toward a transnational expert sphere consisting of Brussels-based stakeholders directly involved in EU policy-making and toward the specialist press (in particular the Financial Times), while leaving apart broader audiences. With respect to the Council of the European Union and its communication activities little is known apart from Beyers and Dierickx's (1998) investigation of the Council working groups. These scholars found that the functioning of these groups contributes to a supranational and intergovernmental communication network. The Council of the European Union appears to be the least studied organization among the EU institutions. This paper aims at filling this gap by investigating the activities of press officers working at the Council of the European Union and providing an overview of their communication tasks and practices as perceived by the press officers themselves.

RESEARCH OBJECTIVES AND METHODOLOGY

This study is a first step in a more comprehensive research project aimed at a detailed understanding of the work practices, roles and environment of press officers in the Council Secretariat. In this paper we intend to explore the press officers' main communication tasks when they communicate with the media as well as the way they perform these tasks.

A qualitative research approach was used to gather in-depth understanding of the press officers' tasks and communication activities (cf. Lindlof and Taylor, 2002; Denzin and Lincoln, 2005). Qualitative research methods are appropriate for investigations of an exploratory nature, since they provide textual descriptions of how people experience a given research issue (cf. Given, 2008). Additionally, qualitative research methods have proven to provide significant contributions when the research intentions are to better understand a phenomenon about which little is yet known (Strauss and Corbin, 1990).

Semi-structured face-to-face interviews with seven out of ten press officers of the Council Press Service were conducted. All interviews were recorded and transcribed. Interview length varied from forty-five minutes to one hour and fifteen minutes. Each interview consisted of a few introductory questions on interviewee's past professional experience and educational background, followed by more specific questions on his/her current position, tasks and functions as well as on his/her communication practices in the Council Press Service. In order to increase the interviewees' openness confidentiality was assured (cf. Given, 2008). In addition, we analysed other internal documents, such as the *General Secretariat Mission Statement*, *Council Secretariat's Regulation and Code of Good Administrative Behaviour* and the *Media Guide* of the Council Secretariat. The final goal of this study is to provide a descriptive, theoretical understanding of the tasks and communication practices of the press officers working at the Press Service of the Council of the European Union.

THE COUNCIL OF THE EUROPEAN UNION

The Council of the European Union is the EU's main decision-making body. It is composed of one minister from the government of each EU member state. The ministers attending Council meetings vary according to the issues under consideration. Therefore the deliberations in the Council take place in different Council configurations depending on the subjects discussed. The Council's main function is to adopt EU legislation. In a large number of policy areas ('Community' fields such as the Internal Market) the Council shares legislative power with the European Parliament and acts on proposals drafted by the European Commission but in some important areas (such as defence and external relations) the Council has sole right of legislative initiative.

In the Council the 27 member states seek compromises through negotiation. Due to opposing national and ideological interests, cultural differences and sitting governments' conflicting political agendas this often entails lengthy and cumbersome discussions both at the preparatory stages – meetings of national experts (working parties) and ambassadors (Coreper) – and at ministerial level. Due to the fact that the Council is the forum where member states often fight their battles in order to maximize national influence, the Council “distils the bottom line in terms of the collective of national interests” (Curtin 2007, 249). Exactly this feature gives the Council its particular institutional flavour. Negotiations among member states' delegations are orchestrated and chaired by the Presidency which is held by each member state, on a rotating basis, for a period of six months. The Presidency seeks to build consensus by mediating primarily between member states, but also between the Council and the Commission and the Council and the European Parliament (Nugent, 2006: 205). Furthermore the Presidency sets the pace and to some extent the political priorities in the legislative and political

decision-making process. It does so particularly by convening meetings, establishing agendas and drafting compromise proposals. The Presidency is assisted in its work by the Council Secretariat.

The General Secretariat of the Council

The press activities of the Council Press Service are embedded in the General Secretariat of the Council and the particular professional situation and behaviour of the Council press officers can only be fully understood in the light of the missions, tasks and culture of this institution. The Council Secretariat provides the practical as well as the ‘intellectual’ and strategic infrastructure necessary for the smooth operation of the Council decision-making machinery. The *practical tasks* performed by the Secretariat include organizing meetings, providing conference rooms, interpreting services and security staff, establishing agendas, translating, reproducing and distributing documents and drafting minutes. These basic administrative tasks have existed since the Secretariat’s early years in the 1950s. Gradually new and more *‘intellectual’ and strategic tasks* and roles have been added. These include functioning as the Council’s institutional memory and as a bridge between the short rotating Presidencies that fosters coherence and continuity in the Council’s work; assisting the Presidency with the formulation of compromise proposals; providing legal and procedural advice to the Presidency; advising the Presidency on negotiation tactics on the basis of the secretariat’s extensive knowledge of member states’ positions on various issues. In certain policy areas (justice and home affairs as well as foreign and security policy) the Secretariat has been entrusted with

executive tasks (Christiansen, 2006; Christiansen & Vanhoonacker, 2008; Westlake & Galloway, 2004).

The principles that guide the work of the Secretariat as a whole and of each member of its staff are impartiality and devotion to the common European interest⁴. This is in keeping with the fact that the Secretariat, besides being of assistance to the Presidency, is at the service of *all* member states. Furthermore the Secretariat needs to have an absolutely unblemished reputation of neutrality in order to be able to fulfil its role as a credible and trustworthy assistant to the Presidency in its efforts to build consensus among member states. The ideals of impartiality and devotion to the collective interest are an integral part of the dominant culture in the Secretariat which seems to encourage members of staff to act as humble and discrete service providers. The official role of the Secretariat and its staff has been qualified as ‘backroom’ (Westlake & Galloway, 2004, 318) and it seems that the less its efforts stand out the better.⁵

As it appears from the following figure the press office is located in DG (Directorate General) F. DG B, C, E, G, H and I (policy DGs) largely concentrate on policy issues dealt with by one or several Council configurations⁶. Each policy DG thus concentrates on one or several policy areas and the main tasks of staff in these DGs are to monitor policy developments and to be of assistance to the Presidency as briefly described above. Thus, e.g. staff in DG B closely follows issues dealt with by the Agriculture and Fisheries Council whereas staff in DG I more or less covers issues

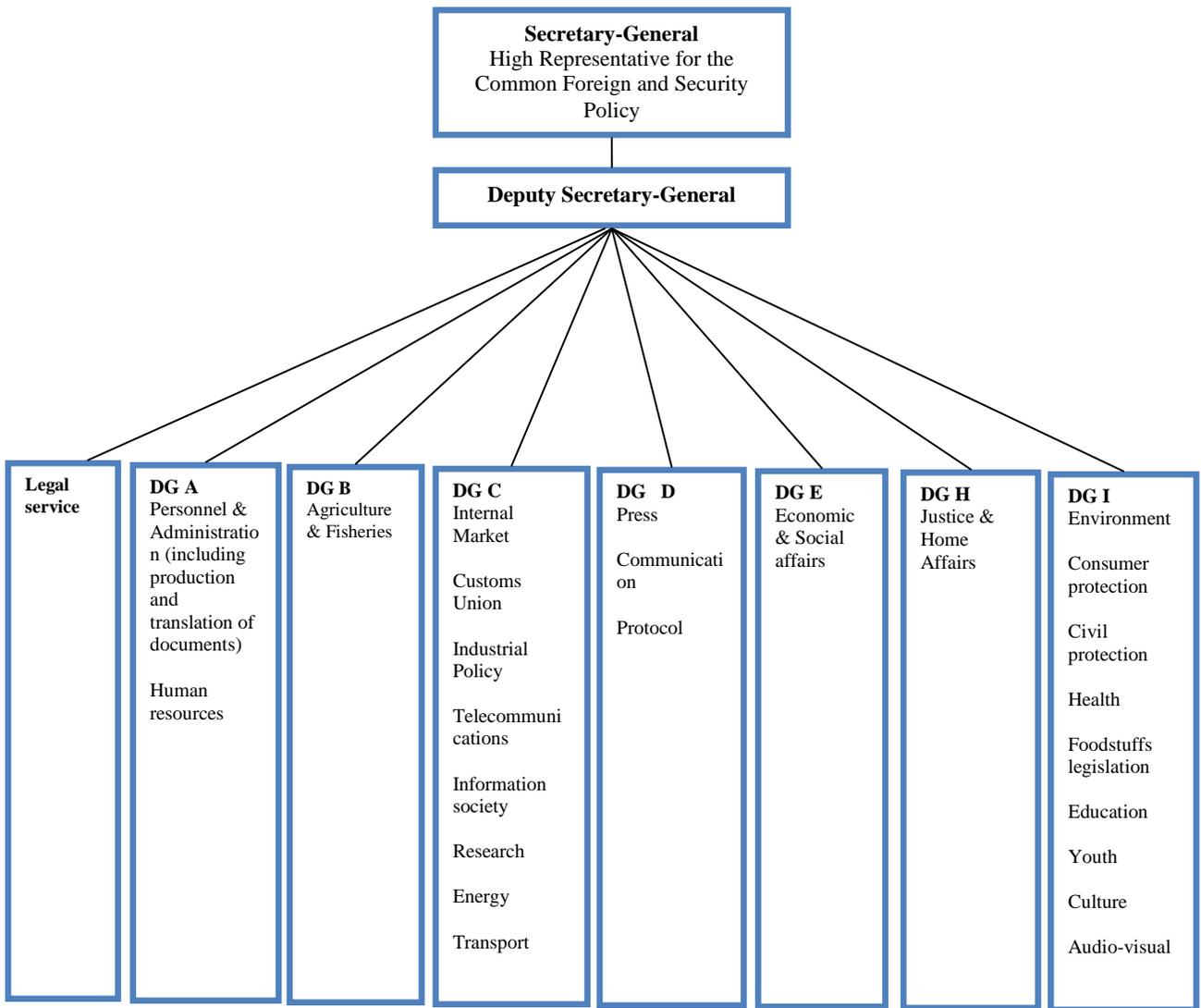
⁴ Cf. *Mission Statement of the General Secretariat of the Council; Staff Regulations of Officials of the European Communities* and the *Council Secretariat's Code of Good Administrative Behavior*

⁵ It has been argued that in reality the Secretariat plays a much more important and influential role in decision-making than that of the humble servant (see Beach, 2008; Christiansen, 2006; Christiansen and Vanhoonacker, 2008; and Curtin, 2007 for similar views on the Secretariat's role).

⁶ The Legal Service and DG A are of no importance for the purpose of this work.

discussed in the three Council configurations “Employment, Social Policy, Health and Consumer Affairs”, “Environment” and “Education, Youth and Culture”. The staff in the policy DGs is among the press officers’ closest internal collaboration partners since they are the Council staff with the most detailed and up-to-date knowledge of the issues under way in the Council machinery.

Organisation of the General Secretariat of the Council⁷



⁷ Adapted from ‘Organigram of the Council Secretariat, 2005’ in Hayes-Renshaw and Wallace (2006)

COMMUNICATION TASKS AND PRACTICES IN THE COUNCIL PRESS SERVICE

The Council press officers, who are civil servants like the majority of the staff of the Council Secretariat, are attached to the Press Service which is one of three units of DG F⁸. Besides providing the media with written and oral information on Council matters, the activities of the Press Service include managing a press centre, organizing press conferences, monitoring of the coverage of Council related issues by selected European media (press clippings), and producing photographic and video based material related to the Council's activities. In the Press Service currently ten full time press officers provide written and oral information on a daily basis to the media on the activities of the Council and its preparatory bodies. Each press officer specializes in subjects and policy areas covered by one or two specific Council configurations. They are, as one interviewee said, "the main entrance for information on the Council". The bulk of the press officers' communication activities concerns Council meetings whereas the activities in the preparatory bodies (working parties and Coreper) in general are of less interest to the media and therefore tend to be communicated only if requested by journalists. The account below of the press officers' tasks and practices therefore only deals with communication pertaining to Council meetings. The rhythm of the press officers' work is dictated by meeting activities: before, during, after and between Council meetings.

⁸ The main activities of the two other units of DG F include respectively communication with the general public (mainly through small articles posted on the Council website and paper based publications) and managing the Council's archives and the general public's access to Council documents (transparency).

Before Council meetings: drafting background notes and briefing journalists

Before each Council meeting the press officer responsible for that particular Council configuration drafts a note, officially labelled ‘information note’ but internally known as ‘background note’. This document (available from the Council website before the meeting) accounts for all items on the agenda of the meeting (established by Coreper). The background note is a highly structured document drafted on the basis of information contained in minutes of meetings (held at working party, ambassadorial, and ministerial level), information obtained from colleagues (so-called ‘desk officers’) in other DGs who have in-depth knowledge of the policy areas covered in that particular Council meeting, and information gathered from attending meetings at various levels where the agenda items have been discussed. Since the core activity of the Council is adopting EU legislation most items on the Council agenda are related to legislative proposals and for each such item general information, such as history, background, motivations, aims, and procedural matters is provided. In drafting the background note the press officer seeks to identify the main issues of the Council meeting with the purpose of helping journalists to “know which are the subjects dealt with and where (...) problems can arise” (Interviewee no. 2).

Furthermore the press officer is present at the off-the-record briefing that the Presidency gives before the Council meeting on the basis of the background note. Immediately after the Presidency briefing the press officer is available to the press for further oral information on the agenda items.⁹

⁹ Council Secretariat DG F. Rapport d’activité 2008, p. 20-21; Council Secretariat: Media Guide. Practical Information. October 2009, p. 9

During Council meetings: attending meeting and (possibly) briefing journalists

In general the press officer is present at the Council meeting in order for him or her to be able to draft a press release on the outcomes immediately after the meeting. Press officers may leave the meeting room in order to brief journalists on important developments in the negotiations.

Furthermore and in order for the journalists to cover the Council meeting in real time the Press Service makes available to the press the Council's conclusions on each agenda item (prepared by the preparatory bodies and adopted – and possibly amended – by the ministers) immediately after they have been adopted as well as in some cases 'flash releases' and 'fact sheets' that are more targeted documents prepared by the press officer in advance with more detailed information on selected issues and decisions.¹⁰

After Council meetings: drafting press release

Immediately after the Council meeting the press officer drafts a press release (available from the Council website) accounting for the outcomes of the meeting. If ministers did not reach agreement on a legislative proposal the press release often contains information as to what will be the follow up to the discussions. To the extent that legislative proposals on the agenda of the Council meeting are adopted much of the information from the background note will also appear in the press release. However, one important difference between the background note and the press release is that whereas the former is written exclusively for journalists and needs not be approved in any way by the member states, the latter is of a more official nature since it is the first official account

¹⁰ Ibidem.

of the ministers' discussions and all member states in a certain way have to agree to what the press officer writes. As one interviewee puts it,

“There are certain things that we can't say in the press release that we would say in the background note (...). What we write there has to be of a nature that won't upset anybody, whereas if we say something in a background note which is maybe not the same universal view shared by everybody then that's just too bad, people aren't going to start ringing us up about what we put in the background, but they would do if we put it in a press release”. (Interviewee no. 1)

Between Council meetings: keeping updated on dossiers in the pipeline

For the individual press officer the workload tends to peak around meetings of the Council configuration that he/she is responsible for. Between Council meetings press officers keep themselves updated on the dossiers that are underway in the Council machinery, i.e. at working party, Coreper and ministerial levels, and replies to phone calls and emails from journalists who seek information on particular issues.

In order to provide correct and relevant information to the media press officers need to have a thorough knowledge of the issues and dossiers dealt with by “their” Council formation. To be updated the press officers read documents drafted by the Commission (e.g. legislative proposals), the European Parliament (e.g. documents related to legislative proposals in numerous areas where the Council shares legislative competence with the European Parliament) or other Council officials, mainly staff in the relevant policy DGs (reports, minutes of meetings, progress reports) but also experts from the Council's legal service (notes on legal aspects of legislative proposals under

discussion). Consequently they depend on staff in the DGs for updated information on the individual dossiers. The following quote illustrates this dependency:

“So there [in the relevant DG] I know which person is responsible for which dossier. And then if I have questions of understanding, or questions of procedure or questions of history then I try to get in touch with these people to clarify that for myself first of all, in order to be able to answer as much as possible any question that comes from journalists straight away, which is not always possible. So when there are questions I can't answer I give a hold answer and say please let me get back to you as soon as possible. And then I get in touch with the same desk officer again.” (Interviewee no. 7)

Besides reading documents and liaising with DGs press officers attend a considerable number of meetings at different levels in the Council machinery. Most of them only occasionally attend meetings of national experts (working party level) as discussions at this level tend to be technical and of limited interest to the media, whereas meetings at ambassadorial and ministerial levels must be attended in order to grasp the nuances of the different and often conflicting ideological and national views on each dossier.

Written and oral communication

Press officers provide information in writing (background notes, press releases and flash releases/fact sheets) as well as orally (face-to-face and telephone briefing). They perceive written and oral communication to be very different activities highlighting

particularly the difference in degree of flexibility in terms of style and content. The room for maneuver in briefing is much wider than in written communication and several interviewees characterize briefing as being the main communication form.

In terms of *style* written information tends to be bureaucratic - “in order to identify the institution and to be precise” (Interviewee no. 2) -, formal and highly structured. As for briefing no particular standards seem to exist, and press officers characterize briefing as being informal and “totally unstructured” (Interviewee no. 1). The main difference between the two modes of communication, however, concerns *content*. Whereas background notes and press releases must contain information on all agenda items the topics dealt with during briefing sessions mainly depend on which questions journalists raise themselves or what the press officers believe to be of interest to journalists. Council press officers thus do not seek to act as agenda setters, neither in writing nor orally. All interviewees concur that they are in the business of reactive, not proactive, communication. The below quotes illustrate this.

“Journalists in Brussels are bombarded with information and I would create adverse feelings if I were to bombard them with things that are not of their interest.”

(Interviewee no. 5)

“Mostly we do reactive communication. Journalists call me, which allows me to get a good impression of what interests them. I can choose to put certain issues to the fore by writing flash releases. But also this is determined largely by my impression of how interested the press is.” (Interviewee no. 5)

One thing is the topics raised, another is the nature of the information provided. The information that press officers provide is mainly of a background nature. This includes information on the issues under discussion, procedural questions, reasons why the discussions are taking place at the EU level and not in the member states, what the consequences of adopting or not adopting a proposal will be etc.

Information provided in writing has an official status which is not the case with information provided during briefing. As one interviewee puts it, “because they’re published, there are certain things you can’t say in a background note that you can say very easily verbally” (Interviewee no. 1). This is due to the fact that contrary to the European Commission’s spokespersons press officers speak ‘off the record’ i.e. they cannot be quoted by the media. Sometimes the media refer to statements made by the press officers as “an EU official said”. This anonymity leaves the press officers with a significant leeway in terms of the kind of information they are able to provide to journalists verbally.

“But the fact that we can’t be quoted allows us to be quite free in what we say, without having constantly to say ‘oh what’s he going to be writing’. (...) We can maybe relax a little bit more and be quite frank. Obviously when we’re talking we remain constantly attentive to what the implications of what we’re saying might be, so obviously we’re on our guard at the same time, but the main thrust of the relevant information that we’re providing in terms of what’s new is from what we say not from what we write.” (Interviewee no. 1)

“The written form is very very constrained, because everyone is going to read it. The oral communication is more open and freer. Journalists respect confidentiality and respect the off-the-record information, which is of great value to them.” Interviewee no. 2)

As a general rule press officers are only allowed to provide background information¹¹. In reality, however, a grey zone exists where in certain situations they provide information of a more delicate nature. Among the information that journalists value most is information on the bargaining process that takes place when the 27 member states’ ministers meet in the Council. Writing mainly for their national audiences, journalists value such information highly because it allows them to evaluate the performance of “their” ministers. In principle press officers are not allowed to reveal the positions of individual member states or groups of member states but in some situations most of them do under the cover of anonymity. In this area press officers are in a difficult dilemma. On the one hand they are supposed to explain what goes on in the meeting room but on the other hand they are not allowed to reveal national positions. As one interviewee puts it, “this is the most tricky part of our job” (Interviewee no. 2). Among the factors that influence the extent to which press officers nevertheless reveal information about individual member states’ negotiation practices and positions are whether journalists already are familiar with national positions and only seek confirmation by the press officer and whether the individual journalist can be trusted. It is a grey zone where each press officer must decide for him- or herself how far he or she

¹¹ Council Secretariat: Media Guide. Practical Information. October 2009, p. 8.

will go. Consequently practices differ considerably among press officers as the following quotes illustrate:

“You cannot say to journalists “Spain was against; France was in favour”. You just have to explain what the main difficulties are, why ministers did not agree; sometimes they understand why but sometimes you have to explain the reasons.”

(Interviewee no. 3)

“In principle, I should not [state the position of member states]. But sometimes it’s unavoidable. [...] So if the minister is very proud of his position and communicating on it, I can relay it. But I’m very cautious not to give something to the outside which is not public. I’m always checking that it is in the newspaper.” (Interviewee no. 3)

“If they [journalists] really push me I will confirm the country that they proposed to me, but it depends.” (Interviewee no. 7)

DISCUSSION & CONCLUSIONS

The Council press officers perceive themselves as an important source information to journalists covering EU issues and if they did not exist many insights of political negotiations and discussions would most likely not be available to the general public. At the same time communicating about negotiations in the Council is quite complex and as it appears from our findings certain issues are delicate and can only be communicated to a certain extent.

Gelders and others (2007) have pointed out that public sector communication differs significantly from communication in the corporate world because public sector organizations and private sector organizations operate in different environments and under different conditions. By comparison to private organisations, public sector organisations thus operate in a more complicated and unstable environment, are subjected to additional legal and formal restrictions, are characterized by more rigid operational and decision-making procedures, and tend to offer more diverse products and to have ambiguous objectives (Gelders and others, 2007). Our study corroborates the hypothesis of differences in terms of communicative environment since press officers at the Council Press Service affirm to be subject to at least three constraints that are of a different nature from constraints found in the corporate world, i.e. dependency on other DGs for detailed information, the Council Secretariat's general guidelines for conducting media relations and member states' and the Presidency's often competing media agendas.

All interviewees report that they strive to be open and to give journalists the information they seek but on a number of occasions they are not able to fully deliver. Occasionally they fall prey to explicit limits to openness posed by highly placed bosses or the general resistance by individuals in the DGs on whom they depend for updated information and who see openness as disturbing and unnecessary.

Due to their position as civil servants in the Council Secretariat the press officers perform their duties in a very particular cultural environment that is far from any corporate environment and that seems to encourage them to act as humble and discrete service providers. The ideals of impartiality and devotion to the collective interest prevent them from acting in proactive and agenda setting ways.

The Presidency and occasionally individual member states can influence the type and quantity of information that press officers offer to the media due to the fact that the Council Secretariat's *raison d'être* is to assist the Presidency and only act in ways that are acceptable to all 27 member states. This may appear to be in contradiction with the principles of impartiality and transparent reporting that the majority of the interviewees adhere to.

The three restrictions are perceived by press officers to have an impact on what they can say and how much they can say on a particular issue and clearly distinguishes the conditions under which Council press officers work from the conditions of their colleagues in the corporate sphere.

The Council's media relations activities not only differ from those of the corporate sector. They also seem to be of a different nature from those performed by the European Commission. As it appears from our findings Council press officers communicate in a reactive and a non-promotional way. In the Commission communication of a more proactive and promotional nature is not unusual. Since Council press officers need to perform media relations activities that are compatible with the cross-section of European interests, including those of EU sceptical member states, they are under more scrutiny by various actors in "the EU game" than the Commission press officers. The latter institution seems to have more room for maneuver and, due to its role in the EU institutional framework, often seeks to be agenda setting and to promote the interests of the European Union as such although some EU sceptical member states and members of the European Parliament occasionally seek to prevent it from going too far in its pro-EU communication efforts.

REFERENCES

- Adams, W. C. (1995), "Marrying the Functions: The Importance of Media Relations in Public Affairs Planning", *Public Relations Quarterly*, 40(3), pp. 7-11.
- Allison, G. T. (2004), "Public and private management: Are they fundamentally alike in all unimportant aspects?". In J. M. Shafritz, A. C. Hyde & S. J. Parkes (Eds.), *Classics of public administration*, pp. 396–413. Belmont, CA: Wadsworth.
- Anderson, P. J. & McLeod, A. I. L. E. (2004), "The Great Non-Communicator? The Mass Communication Deficit of the European Parliament and its Press Directorate", *Journal of Common Market Studies*, 42(5), pp. 897-917.
- Avery, G. D.; Bedrosian, J. M.; Brucchi, S. J.; Dennis, L. B.; Keane, J. F. & Koch, G. (1996), "Public Affairs in the Public Sector". In L. B. Dennis (eds.), *Practical Public Affairs in an Era of Change. A Communication Guide for Business, Government and College*, (pp. 169-185). Lanham, Maryland: University Press of America
- Baker, B. (1997), "Public Relations in Government". In C. L. Caywood (ed.), *The Handbook of Strategic Public Relations & Integrated Communication*, (pp. 453-480). New York, NY: McGraw-Hill

- Beach, D. (2008), "The facilitator of efficient negotiations in the Council: the impact of the Council Secretariat". In D. Naurin and H. Wallace (eds.), *Unveiling the Council of the European Union. Games governments play in Brussels*. Basingstoke: Palgrave MacMillan.
- Beckett, R. (2000), "The 'government should run like a business' mantra", *American Review of Public Administration*, 30(2), pp. 185– 204.
- Beyers, J. & Dierickx (1998), "The Working Groups of the Council of the European Union: Supranational or Intergovernmental Negotiations", *Journal of Common Market Studies*, 36(3), pp. 289-317.
- Blumler, J. G. (1983), "Key Features of Research Design". In J. G. Blumler (ed.), *Communicating to Voters: Television in the First European Parliamentary Elections*, (pp. 25-37). London: Sage
- Curtin, D. (2007), "Transparency, audiences and the evolving role for the Council of the European Union". In J. Fossum and P. Schlesinger (eds.), *The European Union and the Public Sphere. A Communicative Space in the Making?*, (pp. 246-258). London, UK: Routledge.
- Christiansen, T. (2006), "Out of the Shadows: The General Secretariat of the Council of Ministers", *The Journal of Legislative Studies*, 8(4), pp. 80-97.
- Christiansen, T. and Vanhoonacker, S. (2008), "At a Critical Juncture? Change and Continuity in the Institutional Development of the Council Secretariat", *West European Politics*, 31(4), pp. 751-770.
- Denzin, N. K. & Lincoln, Y. S. (Eds.) (2005), *The Sage Handbook of Qualitative Research* (3rd ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

- Dennis, L. B. (1996), *Practical Public Affairs in an Era of Change. A Communication Guide for Business, Government and College*. Lanham, MA: University Press of America/PRSA.
- Édes, B. W. (2000), "The role of government information officers", *Journal of Government Information*, 23, pp. 455-469.
- Entman, R. M. & Bennett, W. L. (2001), *Mediated Politics: Communication in the Future of Democracy*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press
- Fairbanks, J.; Plowman, K.D. & Rawlins, B.L. (2007), "Transparency in government communication", *Journal of Public Affairs*, 7, pp. 23-37.
- Fitzpatrick, D. (1947), "Public Information Activities of Government Agencies", *The Public Opinion Quarterly*, 11(4), pp. 530-539.
- Fleisher, C. S. (1993), "Public affairs management performance: An empirical analysis of evaluation and management", *Research in Corporate Social Performance and Policy*, 4, pp. 139- 167.
- Fleisher, C. S. (1995), *Public Affairs Benchmarking: A Comprehensive Guide*. Washington, DC: Public Affairs Council.
- Fleisher, C. S.; Blair, N. and Hawkinson, B. (1997), *Assessing, Managing and Maximizing Public Affairs Performance*. Washington, DC: Public Affairs Council.
- Garnett, J. L., & Kouzmin, A. (1997), *Handbook of administrative communication*. New York: Marcel Dekker.
- Gelders, D. & Ihlen, Ø. (2010), "Government communication about potential policies: Public relations, propaganda or both?", *Public Relations Review*, 36(1), pp. 59-62.

- Gelders, D., Bouckaert G., & van Ruler, B. (2007), "Communication management in the public sector: Consequences for public communication about policy intentions", *Government Information Quarterly*, 24, pp. 326-337.
- Given, L. M. (Ed.). (2008), *The SAGE Encyclopedia of Qualitative Research Methods* (Vols. 1 & 2). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Graber, D. A. (2003), *The power of Communication. Managing Information in Public Organizations*. Washington D.C: CQPress
- Grunig, J. E. & Jaatinen, M. (1999), "Strategic, symmetrical public relations in government: From pluralism to societal corporatism", *Journal of Communication Management*, 3(3), pp. 218-234.
- Hayes-Renshaw, F., & Wallace, H. (2006), *The Council of Ministers*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Heise, J. A. (1985), "Toward Closing the Confidence Gap: An alternative Approach to Communication Between Public and Government", *Public Administration Quarterly*, 9(2), pp. 196-218.
- Lee, M. (2009), "The Return of Public Relations to the Public Administration Curriculum?", *Journal of Public Affairs Education*, 15(4): pp. 515–533.
- Lee, M. (2007), *Government Public Relations: A Reader*, Boca Raton, FL: CRC Press
- Lee, M. (2001a), "The agency spokesperson: connecting public administration and the media", *Public Administration Quarterly*, 25(1), pp. 101-130.
- Lee, M. (2001b), "Intersectoral differences in public affairs: The duty of public reporting in public administration", *Journal of Public Affairs*, 2(2), pp. 33– 43.

- Lee, M. (1999), "Reporters and Bureaucrats: Public Relations Counter-Strategies by Public Administrators in an Era of Media Disinterest in Government", *Public Relations Review*, 25(4), pp. 451-463.
- Lindlof, T. R. & Taylor, B. C. (2002) *Qualitative communication research method* (2nd edition). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.
- Liu, B. F. & Horsley, J. S. (2007), "The Government Communication Decision Wheel: Toward a Public Relations Model for the Public sector", *Journal of Public Relations Research*, 19(4), pp. 377-393.
- Meyer, C. (1999), Political Legitimacy and the Invisibility of Politics: Exploring the European Union's Communication Deficit. *Journal of Common Market Studies*, 37(4), pp. 617-639
- Nugent, N. (2006), *The Government and Politics of the European Union*, 6th edition. London, UK: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Spanier, B. (2010), "Trying to Square the Circle - The Challenges of Being an EU Commission Spokesperson". In C. Valentini & G. Nesti (eds.), *Public Communication in the European Union. History, Perspectives and Challenges* (pp. 191-215). Newcastle upon Tyne, UK: Cambridge Scholars Publishing.
- Strauss, A., & Corbin, J. (1990), *Basics of qualitative research: Grounded theory procedures and techniques*. Newbury Park, CA: Sage Publications, Inc.
- Swanson, D. L. & Mancini, P. (1996), *Politics, Media, and Modern Democracy: An International Study of Innovations in Electoral Campaigning and Their Consequences*. West Port, CT: Praeger.

- Valentini, C. (2010), "The EU, Europe Direct centres and Civil Society Organizations. An Enchanted Partnership?". In C. Valentini & G. Nesti (eds.), *Public Communication in the European Union. History, Perspectives and Challenges* (pp. 139-163). Newcastle upon Tyne, UK: Cambridge Scholars Publishing.
- Valentini, C. (2008), *Promoting the European Union: Comparative analysis of EU communication strategies in Finland and in Italy*, Jyväskylä: University of Jyväskylä Press
- Valentini, C. (2007), "EU media relations – Views of Finnish and Italian journalists", *Global Media Journal- Mediterranean Editions* 2(2), Fall 2007, pp. 82-96.
- Van Ruler, B. & Verčič, D. (2004), **Public Relations and Communication Management in Europe: A Nation-by-Nation Introduction to Public Relations Theory and Practice**, Berlin, Germany: Mouton de Gruyter.
- Viteritti, J. P. (1997), "The Environmental Context of Communication: Public Sector Organizations". In J. L. Garnett and A. Kousmin (eds.), *Handbook of Administrative Communication*, (pp. 79–100). New York, NY: Marcel Dekker.
- Westlake, M., & Galloway, D. (2004), *The Council of the European Union*. London: John Harper Publishing.
- Windsor, D. (2001), "Public affairs, issues management, and political strategy: Opportunities, obstacles, and caveats", *Journal of Public Affairs*, 1(4), pp. 382-415.