

COMMUNICATING EUROPE

By Claes de Vreese

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- **Explore how citizens can interact with policymakers in developing a powerful analysis of the role Europe can play in solving problems of national democracy.**
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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- Democracy relies on communication between citizens and power holders. The EU suffers from a democratic deficit which is accentuated by a striking communication deficit. In its institutional reform process, the EU needs to take communication seriously – and not by developing communication plans that are self-congratulatory.
- Media – and in particular television – are key resources for citizens across Europe when learning about the EU. Strikingly, however, we know hardly anything about how the EU is represented in broadcast news. Nonetheless, journalists are often blamed for contributing to cynicism about EU affairs.
- This pamphlet draws on unique studies of media content and public opinion in several European countries. The distinguishing features of news coverage of Europe are that it is infrequent and faceless; but that it is high priority when it does appear, and is no more negative in tone than coverage of national politics.
- The paper proposes a number of changes that the Convention should consider in making the European Union and its institutions more communicable to its citizens:
 1. Redesign the institutions to take account of political communication and news framing. Useful frames include: the human aspect of news, a conflict-driven story, or an economic loss-or-gain story.
 2. Design communication structures to link European level governance with the national systems of political communication. Especially in order to develop effective conflict-driven news, scrutiny in national parliaments has a strong communication potential.
 3. Give the EU a ‘face’ by utilising the communicative potential of Commissioners more and by keeping the EU visible in other places than Brussels by continuing to have Council and other meetings held locally.

SECTION ONE: COMMUNICATIONS STRATEGY = DEMOCRACY STRATEGY

Effective democracy means effective communication. Many of the traditional structures in national politics are based on this precept – paraphernalia ranging from parliamentary debates to select committee reports are designed to have maximum media impact locally, to increase the accountability of government to the people, and to engage the public in debates for and against the issues in play. This observation appears to be stating the obvious. Nonetheless, it is rarely heard in Brussels.

The European Union is particularly challenged in this regard. It is a new and highly complex political system, without an easy constituency to reach into – with the possible exception of the *Financial Times*' high-level, internationalist audience. In the case of European politics, a number of the democratic challenges are magnified. Citizens know and feel the implications of Westminster, The Hague, and other national parliaments directly and frequently, but few people even know who takes decisions in the EU. Generally, 60-90% of citizens turn out to vote in national elections. In the 1999 European elections, turnout plummeted below 50%. While all citizens can recognise their Prime Minister, only a few can identify Romano Prodi, let alone the President of the European Parliament or the High Representative for the Common Foreign and Security Policy.

The European Union comes across as paralysed and impervious to change. Those democratic structures that exist fail to pass the test of structuring political debates. Scrutiny mechanisms lose much of their power if the decisions made by those mechanisms do not find their way back to the public – who, at the end of the day, have the capacity to approve or disapprove a government's or a legislature's activity. Electoral mechanisms are also meaningless if communicable information about the political position of parties and representatives does not filter through to the public, who can use this information to make their choice at the ballot box.

Considerable effort has been invested in trying to expose and analyse the so-called democratic deficit of the European Union, particularly within the European Convention currently under way. This is due to report its blueprint for the future of Europe in June 2003, specifying the division of competences between Brussels and the nation states, or the method of election of some European representatives. Arguably, though, the communication deficit is as important as these more technocratic questions.

This is particularly true given the critical importance of the media in today's age of 'permanent campaigning' in which politicians (and their spin-doctors) increasingly plan their activities around the requirements of the media, not only during campaigns preceding elections, but also in daily politics.¹ Governing has become campaigning and politicians are held accountable through frequent opinion polls and performance ratings.

Given, on the one hand, that any citizen's impression of the EU and European integration is more than likely to be a result of media coverage of the EU, and, on the other hand, that politics has become increasingly professionalised, we would expect professional, stream-lined communication efforts from the European Union institutions. Nothing is less true. Even if never stated formally, the European Union's communication policy for years could best be characterised as 'no news is good news'.

'No news is good news'

Whenever Europe has developed a communications strategy, it has tended to be elitist, self-congratulatory, and without an understanding of how the news media actually work. The aim has been to make people love Europe, not to give people the information they need in order to be able to understand and tolerate it.

This is not the fault of the communications teams – the structures of the EU have left them very little to play with.

Earlier studies concluded that the *Commission's* communication "suffers from the fragmentation of political authority, a pervading technocratic mindset and a lack of adequate staffing".² In general, these problems were located in the fragmented structure of the Commission's Directorates General and in the system of governance without politics and without political disagreement, which has obfuscated political debate and accountability.

The *Council*, on the other hand, suffers from being an institution in flux. The core communication activities are largely at the discretion of the incumbent EU presidency. And the different countries use different standards and techniques in their presidency communication. This discontinuity does little to advance coherent and professional communication efforts.

¹ See, for example, Nimmo, 2000.

² Meyer, 1999.

Initially, the *Parliament* has been ridiculed for its lack of political authority. But even though competences have shifted to the Parliament, the institution, its activities, and its representatives are still seen as peripheral by journalists and news editors: The Editor-in-Chief of the national Danish public service broadcasting news program, when asked about the 1999 elections, noted:

If you ask the politicians what the agenda is, then it is totally different. Then you get big, abstract things like the enlargement [of the European Union] to the East, very diffuse themes that in terms of news coverage have been extremely difficult to make some concrete political stories about 'what is this election all about?' What you have here is a gap between what the voters think is interesting, what they would like to see addressed – corruption, which we have done a number of stories on – and what the politicians want. This has meant that we have all the Members of the European Parliament criticising us, saying that we have derailed the debate...

In the Netherlands, the Deputy Editor-in-Chief succinctly stated that also the political arena for European elections was less engaged compared to national election campaigns:

[T]here was no campaign. Even the political parties reduced their campaign activities to an absolute minimum.

At the end of the day, political communication is perceived by the institutions as a reactive and peripheral activity, not a proactive one, key to daily governance. Keeping decisions and debate from the public has been seen as a lesser risk than having closer and more intrusive media coverage and, with it, public scrutiny. In the words of Jeffrey Lewis, “we all knew that if the discussion was put a certain way, we would never reach agreement”.³ In other words, conventional wisdom has been to keep a low-key media profile with little public debate and scrutiny, all of which has amounted to a de facto ‘no-news-is-good-news’ policy.

Communicating Europe, communicating the EU

In discussions of how the EU - and the process of European integration more broadly - is communicated, a common assumption is that the best strategy for communicating Europe is to send out rigidly pro-European messages. However, feel-good messages about the benefits of being European do little to solve the communications deficit. Navel-gazing institutional

³ Lewis, 1998, p. 494.

communication, inward-focused and for the ear of specialists or enthusiasts only, is one-directional and neither generates debate nor provokes the interest of the media or of public opinion. For example, in the European elections, the problem is not getting people to vote yes or indeed to be in favour of any one party over another – it is to get people to vote at all. A communication strategy must be developed and put into practice which is aware of the principles used by the media to engage people's interest. It should not seek to convince them and create 'euro-enthusiasm' at the cost of telling an interesting story.

Those with responsibility for communicating Europe must make a distinction between *long-term communication goals* and *short-term communication objectives*. A long-term goal of the EU is to communicate – and in fact brand and promote – the notion of Europe to its citizens and beyond. This involves a process of strategic, long-term image-building which projects a positive, emotionally appealing European narrative, based on 'European' values (such as democracy, equality, tolerance etc.) and a history of European integration as that of a continent which overcame division and achieved a morally and rationally superior form of coexistence among peoples. The long-term goal is probably most effectively reached through existing initiatives such as education, expansion of the Socrates program, and culturally expressive events.

However, these mechanisms will not achieve the short-term European communications goals, which are to present Europe as a responsive, disputatious political system which reflects its citizens' priorities. The information which is communicated needs to cover three aspects:⁴

1. What is the story about? What issues are being discussed, what are the arguments involved and what is about to be decided?
2. What is happening? The procedural dimension: At what stage of the decision process are the issues under discussion? What are the means, actors and access points to influence the outcome of the process?
3. The accountability dimension: Who is advocating what? Who is responsible for a decision taken or the implementation of a policy?

Clear information about issues and procedures, access to and feedback into the decision-making process, and accountability to the public are prerequisites for public debate and in the end political legitimacy. If these

⁴ Based on Meyer, 1999, pp. 622-3.

structures are to be communicated, the goal should not be to use communication structures – most notably the media - to send out rigidly pro-European messages, but to present EU affairs, ranging from key Council meetings to directives on standards for professional work clothing, as a communicable story.

A European public sphere?

One proposed solution to the communication deficit has been to invigorate a 'European-wide public sphere' in which citizens and elected power holders deliberate and interact across borders in the same way as they interact within them. This largely theoretical argument, traditionally part of the attempt to build a 'European demos', may come across as appealing and, in terms of democratic theory, ideal. However, the proposition is naïve. Previous top-down attempts to stimulate a common communication system have shown that a monolithic European public sphere does not work in practice.

The ill-fated newspaper *The European* and the suffering *Euronews* are examples of these failed attempts. Such initiatives appear to be targeting specific markets and segments, and are perhaps not an appropriate forum for a larger audience. Since most people don't belong to these high-interest groups, the news comes across as boring, particularly in televisual terms, and it almost encourages the audience to change channel. The vast bulk of political communication is organised along firm national lines. It is better to take account of these differences, rather than to expect national newsmakers to conform to European norms.

The tendency, among Brussels-watchers, has been to shoot the messenger. Whenever public support has gone down, the media have always been the first to be blamed. There are several studies of the role of the media in the process of European integration and one solution repeatedly provided is to educate the press in the systems and structures of European integration. A much better solution would be to provide better material for them to use.

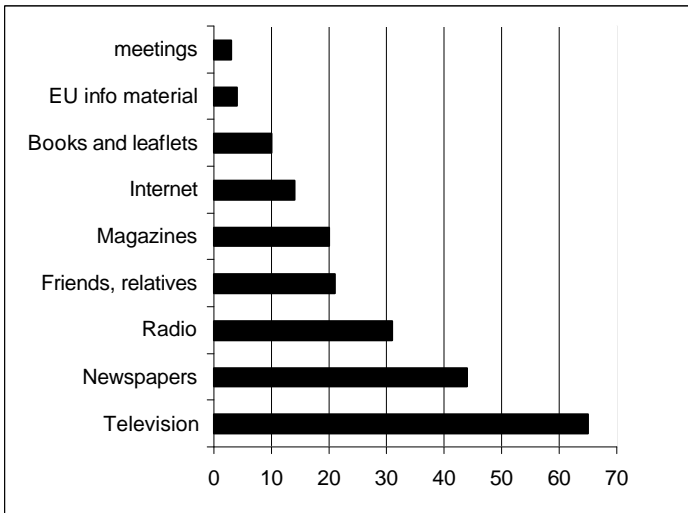
For understandable reasons, most studies of the media's role in Europe cover the printed press. Such studies have shown that the Council and the European Parliament are under-represented in the press coverage of EU-affairs and that the Commission tends to generate negative press coverage.⁵ A number of studies have investigated the coverage of the EU in the written press in Britain, documenting the partisan and 'biased' coverage.⁶

⁵ Euromedia/Fundesco 1996/97; Norris, 2000.

⁶ Anderson & Weymouth, 1999.

But this concentration on the print media is very odd given that television is repeatedly identified as the most important source of information to a majority of citizens (see Figure One) and national television news reaches far larger audiences than any printed newspaper. While press coverage is undeniably easier to track, all available data show that it is the broadcast media that really matters. This pamphlet, therefore, will focus on TV news coverage of European issues.

FIGURE ONE
Most frequently used sources for information about the EU (in %)



Source: Eurobarometer 57.1, p. 18. Respondents were shown a card listing 15 sources and asked to name all those they use when they look for information about the EU. Multiple answers were possible. The most frequently mentioned sources are listed in Figure 1.

Unfortunately, there is very little evidence to assess the actual broadcast media coverage of the European Union. The EU has monitored its media coverage in a number of national television news programs⁷. Beyond these descriptive sources, however, the discussion of the media coverage of EU affairs suffers from the almost total absence of data.

This pamphlet relies on public opinion surveys collected as part of a research project about opinion dynamics around the enlargement of the EU. It draws on data from a large cross-nationally comparative study by ASCoR, The Amsterdam School of Communication Research at the University of Amsterdam. The studies provide the opportunity to assess a number of the

⁷ See Euromedia reports. These reports were commissioned by the European Commission to provide an overview of the coverage in the EU in a number of countries.

assumptions about the way news media deal with European affairs. To investigate this, television news coverage was investigated in all EU member states during the campaign leading up to the 1999 European Parliament elections.⁸ Furthermore, television news in five countries was analysed during the year 2000 to gain insights into the characteristics of news about European affairs outside the specific context of an election.⁹

⁸ The analysis does not include Luxembourg.

⁹ For more detailed information about the studies, see de Vreese (2002) or contact the author at cdevreese@fmg.uva.nl.

SECTION TWO: THE BROADCAST MEDIA AND EUROPE

This section assesses four assumptions about the television news coverage of European affairs:

1. *The EU is invisible in the news.* EU politicians and representatives of EU institutions increasingly complain about the lack of attention devoted to their work. This section assesses whether it is correct that the EU is absent on the evening news.
2. *The EU has low priority in the news.* EU representatives and members of the Brussels press corps often complain that even when the EU *does* make it in to the news, it is often hidden away at the end, sandwiched somewhere between domestic local news and sport. This section answers the question whether the EU suffers from double trouble: is the visibility low and does it receive low priority?
3. *The EU is faceless.* When the EU makes it into the news, who then represents the issues at stake? In other words, which actors are the face of the Union? This section provides an analysis of the extent to which the EU is successful in getting its actors in national television news.
4. *EU news is negative.* Europhiles often contend that the EU is portrayed negatively when in the news. Is this observation justified? This section assesses the tone of the coverage towards the EU and compares this to the tone of news about national politicians.

Each of these four indicators are important to move the debate on communicating Europe beyond an exchange of views and convictions towards a discussion based on data and information. Based on cross-nationally comparative studies of the broadcast media over a number of different occasions, it becomes possible to assess some of our assumptions about European news coverage, look at the ways that the broadcast media deal with political issues, and therefore make recommendations about how the EU needs to be redesigned in order to make itself more communicable.

In the second part of this section we discuss the notion of ‘news-framing’. For the EU to improve its communicability, the understanding of the dynamics of political news journalism is in need of improvement. News framing refers to the spin given to an issue in the news. The section identifies recurrent frames

in political and economic news and reviews how the communication of the EU may be optimised to fit our knowledge about news framing. These are the factors which determine how an issue travels between press release or interview and news report.

Assumption 1: The EU is invisible in television news: mostly TRUE

Studies written for the EU suggest that EU news is not very prominent on the national news agendas. Other studies dating back to the 1979 and 1989 European Parliament elections confirm this impression and suggest that, even in the days of higher turnout, the campaigns leading up to the elections were marginally visible in national television news, except in the final weeks before the election¹⁰.

During the final two weeks prior to the June 1999 elections, national television news programs such as, for example, the BBC and ITN in Britain, NOS and RTL in the Netherlands, TVE and Antenna3 in Spain, and RaiUno and Canale5 in Italy, spent between 2% (the Netherlands) and 8% (Italy) of their news programs on the elections.¹¹ On average, the main national news programs in the EU member states devoted 8% of the news to the elections. Belgium, Britain, Germany, Ireland, the Netherlands, and Spain stand out for devoting less than 5% of the news to the elections during the campaign. In Austria, Denmark, Finland, France, Greece, Italy, and Sweden, between 8% and 13% of the news dealt with the European elections, while Portuguese television news devoted 27% of the news to the elections.

There are three identifiable reasons for these differences. Generally speaking, public service broadcasters provided more coverage of the election than commercial news shows – therefore countries with large public sector broadcasters tended to have more coverage. Second, there tended to be more coverage in countries with polarised elite opinion, that is countries in which the political parties took outspoken and differing standpoints on European issues. Finally, there was more coverage in countries where citizens are less satisfied with domestic democracy.¹²

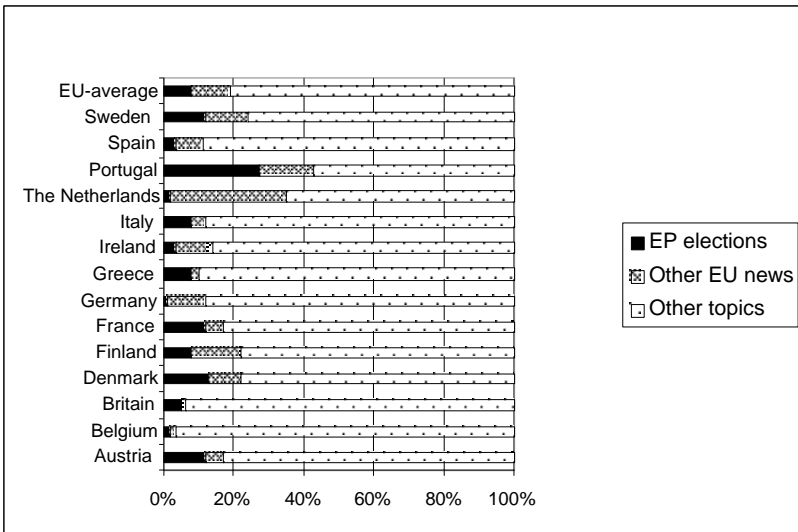
¹⁰ Blumler, 1983; Leroy and Siune, 1994.

¹¹ News about the elections was defined as “Explicitly (only if the story or somebody in the story says so): Is the European Election Campaign mentioned? Does the story at least mention or make reference to the campaign or the elections of the European Parliament in June 1999?” It should be noted that the war and peace negotiations in Kosovo in former Yugoslavia occupied a significant part of the news during the campaign in most countries.

¹² See Peter, 2003 for a further discussion of the explanations of the country differences.

Is there a decline in these figures compared to previous (higher turnout) European election campaigns? It is hard to tell since there are no comparable studies of the campaigns on television news in 1984, 1989, and 1994. One indicator from the first elections in 1979 suggests that between 40 (the Netherlands) and 100 (Britain and Denmark) minutes in the news bulletins of the public broadcasters were devoted to the European elections.¹³ By 1999, these figures were 4 minutes (NOS Journaal in the Netherlands), 15 minutes (BBC) and 47 minutes (DR TV1 in Denmark). While the European Parliament has become more important politically and has seen its competences grow over the past 20 years, the Parliament has become less important in broadcast news.

FIGURE TWO
Visibility of the 1999 European elections on national television news.



Source: News content analysis, European election study, University of Amsterdam. 'EP elections' refers to news specifically about the European Parliament elections, 'Other EU news' refers to political and economic news including the EU, 'Other topics' is a miscellaneous category of all other news during the campaign.

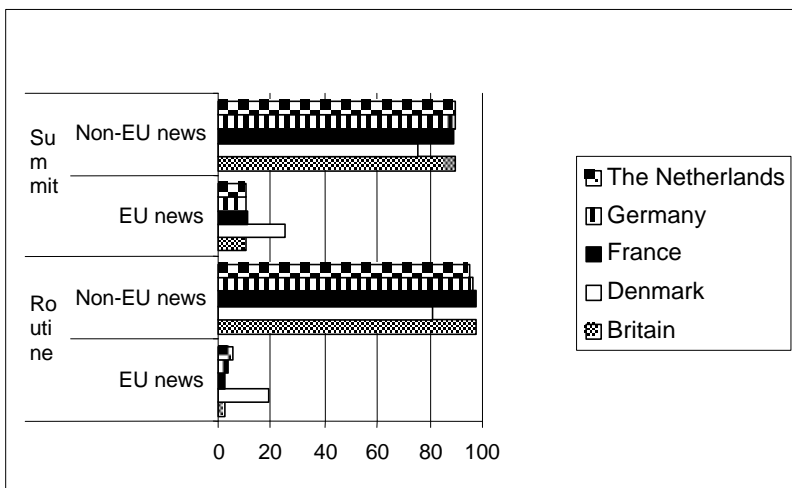
Compared to national elections, the European Parliamentary elections gain nowhere near the same amount of news coverage. For example, in Britain in 1997, BBC Nine O'Clock news was extended with 20 minutes per evening for the general election, and the election led the news show on 38 of 44 of the

¹³ Kelly and Siune, 1983.

days of campaigning.¹⁴ During the national election period in the Netherlands, NOS news (the public broadcaster) spent 32% and 27% of the time in the news on the elections in 1994 and 1998. In comparison, NOS news devoted 5% and 1% respectively to the European elections in 1994 and 1999.¹⁵

Turning to the visibility of EU news during a ‘regular’, non-election period, we find that national news programs devote most attention to EU news during the periods in which the European Council of heads of state meets. In the days around the EU summits, about 10% of television news in Britain, France, Germany and the Netherlands is devoted to EU topics, with Danish news at more than 20%.¹⁶ In the weeks outside the pre-scheduled council meetings, the national news programmes devote about 2-5% of the news to EU topics. Again, Denmark stands out with almost 20% of the news devoted to EU topics, but this number is inflated given the September 2000 referendum on the euro in Denmark which is included in the period studied.

FIGURE THREE
Visibility of EU news (routine and summit periods)



Source: News content analysis, European routine and summit news, University of Amsterdam

¹⁴ Norris et al., 1999.

¹⁵ de Vreese, 2001.

¹⁶ News about the EU is defined as: 1) stories which mention in at least two complete, independent sentences one or more of the following: EU events (summits, meetings of EU ministers), decision-making on EU level ("Brussels decided..."), involvement of EU institutions (EU commission, EU parliament, Council of ministers etc.), or 2) Programmatic/policy stories (EU enlargement, EU common foreign policy, speeches on particular EU-related problems). A story is NOT an EU story when the EU is only referred to marginally (e.g. mentioned once) and when EU institutions, persons etc. are merely shown in footage.

As a general pattern, it seems fair to conclude that the EU is not very successful in establishing its topics and priorities on the national television news agenda. While considerable national variation was found in the amount of news devoted to the European elections, some countries scored rather poorly in terms of information provision about the elections.

In the light of the extended competences of the Parliament and the March 1999 (parliament-initiated) resignation of the Commission, it may seem surprising that Dutch and German television news, for example, devoted only two news stories to the elections: one on each national network on the night prior to the elections. In Britain, the little election news that there was was taken up by the euro (which has nothing to do with the European Parliament) and by the anticipated voter apathy (see Figure Four). The assumption that television news, which reaches the largest audiences and is the preferred means for citizens to obtain information about EU affairs, is largely negligent of EU matters can – with the exception of few countries – largely be supported.

FIGURE FOUR
1999 European Parliament election campaign on British TV news

	<i>BBC</i>	<i>ITN</i>
June 9	Final day of campaigning (3, 3:20) Proportional representation ballot (4, 2:00)	Turnout expected to go down; big ballots (8, 2:37)
June 8	Euro is battleground. Britain to “lead or leave Europe” (5, 3:00)	---
June 7	---	Three days away: persistent predictions of low turnout (8, 2:00)
June 6	---	---
June 5	---	---
June 4	---	---
June 3	Conservatives pressured to deny EU-leaving policy (7, 1:57)	
June 2		Campaign stepping up, fear for low turnout (10, 2:01)
June 1	William Hague calls for government to ban the euro (6, 2:45)	

Note: Table entries are ‘headlines’ of news stories on BBC Nine o’clock news and ITN News at 6:30 in the 10 days prior to the 1999 European elections. Numbers in brackets are the number of the story in the news program and the length of the story in minutes: seconds. Source: de Vreese (2002).

Assumption 2:
The EU has low priority in the news: NOT TRUE

Given this evidence about little news coverage of the EU, it would seem fair to assume that not only are EU news partially neglected, they are also likely to be given low priority. In television news terms, this would entail being pushed back to the middle or last third of the program. This is not the case. When the EU manages to enter the news, it is fairly prominent in the program. EU stories are generally placed in the first third of a news bulletin and are, compared to other political news, not disadvantaged by being lumped together at the end of the news programme.

From this finding of low visibility but, interestingly, relatively high priority, a pattern of EU news emerges that is *cyclic* in nature.¹⁷ The EU, it seems, is often absent from the news agenda, and then enters the agenda, peaks and vanishes. In effect, this means that the news provision about the EU is rather sporadic and that no stable level of news and information is present.

Assumption 3:
The EU is faceless in the news: TRUE

For a representative democracy to operate, elected political representatives must be publicly visible. The media, and specifically the broadcast media, are one of the key ways of achieving this visibility. During national elections, the visibility of political representatives on television is generally monitored closely to ensure a degree of balance in the reporting. With respect to the representation of the EU, on the other hand, we have only little knowledge about *who* the EU is, i.e. the faces and institutions that represent the EU in the news.

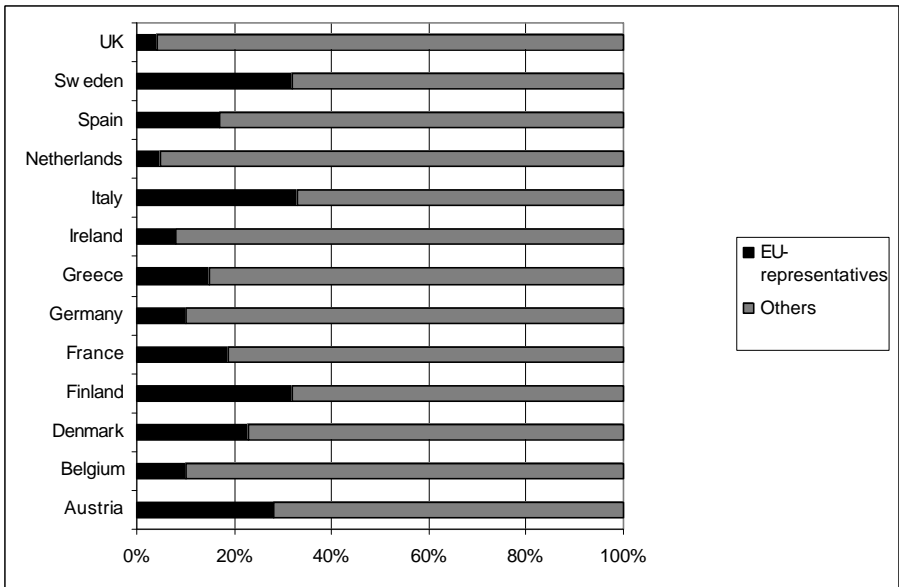
Looking at political television news¹⁸ during the 1999 European elections, EU representatives (that is members of EU institutions such as the Commission

¹⁷ See also Norris (2000) for a dovetailing analysis of the data collected by the EU for the period 1995-1997.

¹⁸ Political news is defined as a story that meets one of the following three criteria: first, politics is explicitly mentioned; second, politicians, political groups, political institutions, or political organisations are verbally mentioned *and* depicted at least once; third, politicians, political groups, political institutions, or political organisations are verbally mentioned at least twice. For news about Kosovo, a major topic in the news during the 1999 election campaign, political coverage as defined here includes political stories about the war in Kosovo only if, first, politics of the EU are explicitly mentioned, or if, second, politicians, political groups, political institutions, or political organisations of the EU are verbally mentioned *and* depicted at least once, or, third, if

and the Parliament, members of EU parties or associations, and candidates for the European Parliament), constituted between 4% (Britain) and 33% (Italy) of the representatives in all political news on television during the campaign.¹⁹

FIGURE FIVE
Visibility of EU-representatives and other actors in political television news during the 1999 European Parliamentary election campaign



Source: News content analysis, European election study, University of Amsterdam (see Peter & de Vreese, 2002).

The share of EU representatives varied considerably between the countries. In general, news in countries that entered the EU more recently (e.g., Austria, Finland, and Sweden) included EU representatives in the news more often than older members (with the exception of Italy).²⁰

any of the above are verbally mentioned at least twice. This may lead to a potential *overestimation* of the overall coverage of EU representatives and should be borne in mind when interpreting the results. The special treatment of the Kosovo war stories was necessary in order to keep this large-scale content analysis feasible.

¹⁹ EU representatives are defined as people who are members of EU institutions or EU parties or who are clearly associated with them (e.g., a spokesperson of an EU institution), see Peter & de Vreese, 2002.

²⁰ Peter, 2003.

Assumption 4: EU news is negative: TRUE, but no more than other news

In addition to the important features of visibility, priority, and facelessness of the news, the tone of the television coverage is also important as it influences public opinion in the long run. News in general tends to be negative – as succinctly stated by credos such as ‘if it bleeds, it leads’. The critical stance of journalists was to some degree a surprise to the EU. A spokesman in the former Santer Commission admitted that the significance of critical, investigative journalism was underestimated and that new journalists have entered the Brussels stage:

We used to deal mainly with militant EU supporters. Now we are faced with more sceptical journalists who look at the Commission like a national government. The home editors have become more critical and more interested, which increases the incentive for journalists to attack a little bit more.²¹

Based on the media data collected by the EU, Norris concluded that the directional bias of television and newspapers is consistently negative and that “the coverage of the European Community in newspapers and on television therefore often proved anti-Europe”.²² This conclusion is partially supported in the study of EU news throughout the year 2000 reported here. Television news is generally neutral, but if slanted, then more often slightly negatively.

However, this finding must be put in an appropriate perspective. While Norris sees an “endemic bad-news or eurosceptic frame”²³ characterising most EU coverage, this ‘negativity bias’ is not exclusive of the EU but is a general rule in the media coverage of political news. Based on the analysis of the European election campaign, the summit and the routine news periods, our study suggested that while EU news is generally negative and with a moderately negative slant, so is other news about politics too.²⁴ The more appropriate conclusion is therefore that news media tend, in general, to be negative about (or critical of) politics and not about the EU in particular.

To sum up, EU news on television is moderately visible and the coverage is cyclic in nature, with ‘priority peaks’ after which the news vanishes from the

²¹ Deputy spokesman T. Damanm cited in Meyer, 1999.

²² Norris, 2000.

²³ Norris, 2000, p. 199.

²⁴ See de Vreese, 2002 for more information.

agenda. The EU is largely faceless in the news, and its coverage is neutral or slightly negative, like political news in general.

Framing Europe

The Convention, as it discusses Europe's future constitutional arrangements, should make a point of considering how its recommendations will work in communication terms. Good communication is not something that is automatic: it needs to be embedded in the institutional design. The problem with Europe is that institutions which work very well a national level, such as plenaries in national parliaments, do not work at all at European level.

One way for the Convention to think about how to communicate is through the use of frames. A frame is a term referring to how journalists shape raw material into stories.²⁵ News is more than selecting and giving weight to different events and issues. A frame is *an emphasis on the salience of some aspects of a topic*.²⁶ Journalists and politicians use frames when they discuss political, economic and social events or issues, by presenting them as *alternatives* which emphasise contrasting aspects and make the information more interesting and understandable. In terms of news production, framing refers to the spin given to an issue and a story in the news. Events as such have little intrinsic value, unless they are embedded in a meaningful framework or context that organises and lends coherence to the interpretation of the event.

NEWS FRAMING

A news frame is a template for journalists to compose a news story in order to optimise audience accessibility. In turn, news frames are potentially important resources for public thinking about, understanding of, and support for contemporary political and economic issues, such as the EU. As Denis McQuail puts it, "news is presented within frameworks of meaning which derive from the way news is gathered and processed". Standard organisational procedures, work routines, and news values all function as 'guidelines' in the quest for fast and regular news output. News in itself has little value unless embedded in a meaningful framework which organises and structures it.

Given the centrality of the television media in informing the public about the EU, it is necessary to develop a better understanding of the dynamics of

²⁵ For a comprehensive overview of framing research, see de Vreese, 2002.

²⁶ de Vreese, 2002.

political communication and political news journalism in particular. Those designing the new constitution need to be thinking creatively about how the institutions they design will play in the broadcast, print, and digital media.

With journalists forced to select and prioritise to tell a story in the news, framing also plays a central role in the production of news. 'Framing in the newsroom' is therefore the starting point. Journalists have to tell a story within a limited time or space, so they need certain frames to simplify and give meaning to the flow of events, and to keep audiences interested. Frames guide journalists, editors, and news executives to structure and organise news stories, and framing helps audiences to make sense of the information provided.

This applies particularly to European news. To the Editor-in-Chief at the BBC, the interpretative tone adopted when covering European affairs is a function of the fact that many European news stories are highly specialised:

Just telling what has happened or what somebody said is of no use to the audience at all unless you give them some background and context, a bit of explanation, where it all comes from and where it is all leading. [...] We employ journalists with specialist knowledge to give that sort of information and guidance. They lay out the arguments for you by saying why a person is saying this or that.

Though news may be framed in numerous ways, scholars agree on the fact that a number of recurrent frames exist. This observation is in line with the notion of generic news frames as being 'detached' from a specific issue. These studies link news frames to more general features of news coverage such as journalistic conventions, norms, and news values.

Work conducted at The Amsterdam School of Communications Research developed this line of research and identified five generic news frames: 'conflict', 'human interest', 'attribution of responsibility', 'morality' and

1. The **conflict frame** emphasises conflict between individuals, groups, institutions or countries. Research has observed that political debate between elites is often reduced to conflict in the news.
2. The **human interest frame** brings a human face, an individual's story, or an emotional angle to the presentation of an event, issue or problem. This frame personalises and "emotionalises" news.

²⁷ See, for example, Semetko and Valkenburg 2000.

3. The **responsibility frame** presents an issue or problem in such a way as to attribute responsibility for causing or solving the issue to either the government or to an individual or group.
4. The **morality frame** interprets an event or issue in the context of religious tenets or moral prescriptions. For example, such stories may contain moral messages, judgments, and offer social prescriptions about majority behaviour.
5. The **economic consequences frame** presents an event, problem or issue in terms of the economic consequences it will have on an individual, group, institution, region or country.

In an analysis of national print and television news coverage surrounding the 1997 EU summit with European Heads of Government in Amsterdam during the Dutch EU presidency, they found that the attribution of responsibility frame was the most commonly used followed by the conflict and economic consequences frames.²⁸

However, when EU news frames are compared across nations, some local or national 'spins' emerge together with the general frames. De Vreese et al. found that although there were some common conflict and economic consequences frames used in television news in Britain, Germany, the Netherlands, and Denmark, national news organisations still provided a significant local or national 'spin' to the news stories²⁹. This is important because it suggests that news coverage of the EU, when it takes place, is constructed in one or more of the generic frames outlined above, as well as in a specific frame which is national or local in focus.

The next section discusses the practical ways in which these frames can be used to increase news coverage of EU issues and public engagement with the institutional and policy debates. It also outlines some more general policies which may improve the political communication of the EU.

²⁸ Semetko & Valkenburg, 2000.

²⁹ De Vreese et al, 2000.

SECTION THREE: SOLUTIONS

'Communicating Europe' should not be about simplistic, self-congratulatory messages reinforcing European ideals. The central objectives should be to present EU affairs, ranging from key issues such as the enlargement of the Union to details on minimum standards for food production as a communicable story. The goal should be raising the profile of EU affairs, not by applauding initiatives and work from its institutions, but by increasing media attention, public debate, and political discussion. In particular, this needs to be done through institutional reform and a change of mindset, which gets away from the prevailing 'shoot the messenger' mentality.

Three key proposals emerge from on-going research on the EU in the news and public opinion about European integration:

1. *Redesign political communication to take account of journalistic frames.* Several news frames hold the potential to improve the communication of Europe. Political conflict is a news frame with great democratic potential. Understanding news framing is more than revamping a press strategy, but should be built into the institutions.
2. *Link European governance with national communication systems.* Covering European issues from Brussels is not enough, as communication tends to happen at a national level. European stories need to be discussed in the national context. One way of doing this is that national parliaments need, more actively, to scrutinise the European level of governance. This process increases visibility and transparency and, ultimately, legitimacy.
3. *Give Europe a face.* The EU is faceless. Making use of existing communicative potential, such as EU Commissioners, and keeping EU Council meetings locally and not only in Brussels, contribute to giving the EU a face.

1) Redesign Europe to take account of news framing

Communication efforts need to be rethought to take account of the rules of political journalism. Journalistic frames inform us which events, and packaged in what ways, may or may not become news. Why is this important? Frames interact with individuals' predispositions and knowledge, so that framing effects are conditional upon finding resonance with an

audience. Frames give direction to viewers' thoughts, they affect evaluations of policy issues such as the enlargement of the EU,³⁰ and may, in certain circumstances, affect real policy support and the intention to turn out to vote.

A bulletin editor at Danish national news summarised these points in her characterisation of what an issue or event must contain:

Two things are important: First, what does this mean for ordinary Danes? That is to say, what are the consequences, financially, politically, personally? Second, who are the domestic political stakeholders? Do the EU countries agree? Is there unanimity? Any vetos, why and how?

Frames can help get these points across. An example of a frame being used successfully is in referring to a historical context for a story. Research shows that a few sentences on this historical context can evoke some powerful ideals such as peace or shared European values, which, as a result, the EU comes to represent in the minds of the audience.³¹ However, the other frames referred to in Section Two can be used more creatively to feed into news broadcasts to inform and engage the public.

a. Finding the human story

One news frame that pervades is the human interest frame.³² Finding an example to be used as a journalistic peg in the story is nothing new. But this frame is not often used in stories about European politics.

Journalists consider EU affairs complex and not readily accessible. One solution is to 'translate' the broader issues at stake to personal, illustrative examples. Journalists do this, but European institutions may as well use this frame in their communications. Good examples of EU-related human interest stories that manage to portray broader policy issues include a number of BBC News stories. For example, around the first step introduction of the euro in 1999, the BBC broadcast stories on cross-border workers commuting daily between Germany and France, stressing how using the euro made life easier to them. Using this angle, rather than providing the official exchange rates between German Marks and French Francs, made the EU communicable, as well as being good television journalism. EU institutions should encourage news coverage by lining up people to comment on stories and by framing press releases themselves rather than just issuing fact sheets. A second example, also from the BBC, was a story which

³⁰ de Vreese, 2002.

³¹ de Vreese and Boomgaarden, 2003.

³² Bennett, 1992; Neuman, Just and Crigler, 1992; Semetko & Valkenburg, 2000.

Now things are more

³³ de Vreese, 2002.

complicated and we are still learning to accommodate a more sophisticated story in relation with the EU.

The implication of this view is that political news about the EU is less easily reported due to the absence of conflict. This in fact hampers the EU in getting into the news. Again, the EU and issues of European integration are much more likely to hit the news when presented as a political system with conflict, disagreement and tension, rather than as an integrationist, single-minded, unstoppable force.

Moreover, some research suggests that the audience of conflict-framed news often reacts in a more reflexive manner to the information, and develops a fairly balanced point of view.³⁴

How do we get more conflict-driven news? How can journalists be encouraged to see EU issues in this way and frame them in terms of disagreement and political debate? The problem is that disagreements in the Commission or European Council about policies which are being negotiated are not voiced in public. When there is a contested policy issue being decided at the national level, it is clearer what the key steps to legislation are, and thus Parliament is in the limelight and political opposition is quite strident.

This happens to a much lesser extent in the UK than in other countries, where the parliament is more powerful or there is a coalition government. By contrast, at the EU level compromises are either reached in diplomatic negotiations held between governments behind closed doors, or by the Commission, which does not voice political disagreements because of its bureaucratic nature and lack of democratic accountability. When there is conflict-driven news about the EU, it is simplified in terms of Commission vs. governments, and there is no communication of the real issues. EU decision-making must become more transparent, a bigger effort must be made to voice disagreements, and the culture of the Commission must be changed and become more openly political to reflect a role which is far more political than that of a typical national bureaucracy.

2) Link European governance with national communication systems

Political communication is national. Previous attempts to organise deliberation on EU issues through pan-European newspapers and television have failed. With this observation as a starting point, the institutions need to be inviting national-level media attention. The role of national parliaments is

³⁴ See for example Valkenburg et al., 1999; de Vreese, 2002.

key in feeding in to national communication circuits and providing a structured political debate that can make it into the news.

In order to develop conflict frames, scrutiny in national parliaments has strong communication potential: it fosters conflict and it feeds the national news media. For example, when Tony Blair headed off to Nice for the European Council meeting in December 2000 he was questioned in parliament on the negotiation strategy (prior to the summit) and the outcome (after the summit). The clashes with former Tory leader Hague made the evening news on both instances. A second example from the same summit: when the Danish delegation headed for Nice the European Affairs Committee and a debate in parliament made the news because political parties disagreed on the mandate to be given to the Danish government.

All national parliaments in the member states have established some kind of European affairs committee (EAC) within their parliament to improve parliamentary scrutiny over the decision making of their own government concerning EU matters. These committees typically focus on the negotiating position taken by the national governments in Council of Ministers meetings.

National parliaments' ability to scrutinise their governments' decisions at the EU level varies from country to country for constitutional, statutory or electoral reasons. Generally, parliaments with minority governments have the greatest power to scrutinise their governments, followed by parliaments with coalition governments.³⁵

One study compared the parliamentary scrutiny in Britain, Denmark, and Germany and concluded that Denmark appears to be the most powerful parliament for scrutinising government decisions in the EU.³⁶ The Danish Parliament has the right to give or deny a mandate to negotiate in the Council of Ministers. It also has a system of overlapping membership between the European affairs committee and the specialised policy committees, thus concentrating expertise in the European committee.

The German Bundestag (or lower house of parliament) also has relatively effective scrutiny powers on EU issues. Although it does not have the right to give or withhold a mandate from the government, it does have the right to be consulted and to guide EU policy (*Mitwirkungsrechte*). The system of overlapping membership with the European affairs committee also strengthens oversight.³⁷ The power of the British House of Commons to

³⁵ Holzacker, 2002.

³⁶ *ibid.*

³⁷ *ibid.*

scrutinise their government's decision making over EU matters is normally quite low. There are only weak constitutional and statutory bases for scrutiny.

Effective scrutiny mechanisms, even when they produce criticisms, should be welcomed by the EU. Although they will increase negative as well as positive news coverage of the EU, this type of political communication is the only mechanism through which real public legitimacy of the European construction can emerge. Enhanced scrutiny will also foster opinions of EU policies which, when negative and critical, will nonetheless be better informed and intelligent, and which are anyway preferable to the present voters' apathy. One starting point to do this is strengthening the scrutiny role of European Affairs Committees. Active, visible and influential European Affairs Committees are remedies to ensure that the reporting of issues and processes takes place. This happens at a point in time in the decision-making process when policy change is still possible.

3) Give Europe a face

a. Use current assets: make national commissioners key communication agents

The EU suffers from low-profile politicians. Analyses of the profile of members of the European Parliament suggest that a Parliament term is oftentimes a step towards a 'serious' domestic political career or a 'gentleman's career exit'. This impression finds resonance with newsmakers. During the 1999 election campaign, national television in Denmark (TV2) ran a story on the 'Mickey Mouse elections', making reference to the number of 'celebrities' running for office. Moreover, only very few MEPs make it to national news on a regular basis. Thus the Parliament is perhaps not the best institution to take on responsibility for political communication of EU news and providing the public faces to come across to the public. This may be best done by the Commission.

European Commissioners are often well-known politicians. They have a clear function in the EU, and by virtue of the Commission's fragmented political authority, they have a clear area of expertise and a recognisable portfolio. In the communication of European issues, Commissioners should be utilised to a greater extent. Fulfilling the goal of putting issues on the media agenda, at an early stage of the EU decision-making process, can be realised by using Commissioners as key communication agents. The Commission's agenda-setting role within the EU dovetails with the goal of initiating issues on the news agenda.

The main reason this has not happened in the past has been a reluctance by Commissioners to speak on briefs outside their own area of competence. While this would be entirely appropriate to a national civil service, it is a shame if the most recognisable political figure in Denmark on European matters, Commissioner Poul Nielson, is only allowed to speak about development aid. It also presents a very skewed vision of the breadth of European competence.

Suggestions about the election of the Commission President equally need to take account of national media structures. While it can be expected that a democratic contest, whether in the European Parliament or directly in member states, would raise the profile of the campaign, perhaps there are better ways of achieving this. For example, Simon Hix has suggested that the Commission President should be elected by national parliaments: this would link the contest directly into existing national media structures.³⁸

b. 'Out of Brussels, going local!'

One relatively simple tool in generating public debate and attention to EU issues is to maintain – in one form or another – the 'EU road show'. Currently, the EU presidency rotates on a biannual basis between the member states. The six month Presidency term typically involves a number of meetings in specialised policy areas and one or two key European Council meetings. In the past, the country holding the presidency has hosted these meetings. However, the Nice summit negotiations stipulated that these should be held permanently in Brussels. While this decision may seem cost-reductive and efficient, a number of underestimated advantages of the 'road show' and the changing meeting location are likely to be lost. A country's EU presidency is an opportunity to literally bring the EU closer to its citizens.

To give an example: during the 1997 Amsterdam summit, media coverage in the Netherlands boomed.³⁹ The presence of Kohl, Chirac, Blair etc. generated public debate and the images of the European leaders on bicycles along the canals of Amsterdam did more for public awareness of the EU than any caravan of limousines cruising through Brussels. Moreover, the summit boosted support for Dutch EU membership which increased to an even higher than usual approval level.

³⁸ See *Linking National Politics to Europe* by Simon Hix, The Foreign Policy Centre, 2001. Available from www.network-europe.net.

³⁹ Semetko et al., 2001.

Another striking example in favour of holding EU summits in the presidency countries is the December 2002 EU Council meeting in Copenhagen. In a parallel study by the author, public opinion was monitored closely before and immediately after the December 2002 Copenhagen summit.⁴⁰ Nationally representative samples of the Danish (host-country) and Dutch (non-host country) electorate was interviewed to investigate, amongst other things, the effects of hosting the summit locally.

The evidence collected shows that the summit had the following effects in the host country:

1. It boosted media attention and public debate in the host country.
2. It increased the public's attention to EU news in the host country.
3. It increased the frequency of debating EU issues with family or friends in the host country.
4. It increased the level of support for the key policy issue of the summit in the host country: the enlargement of the EU.

Evidence from not only the Danish and Dutch, but also the English and Spanish news coverage of the summit suggests that media attention in Denmark was indeed extraordinarily high. Danish public service television, for example, broadcast an hour of EU council news during prime time before and during the summit.

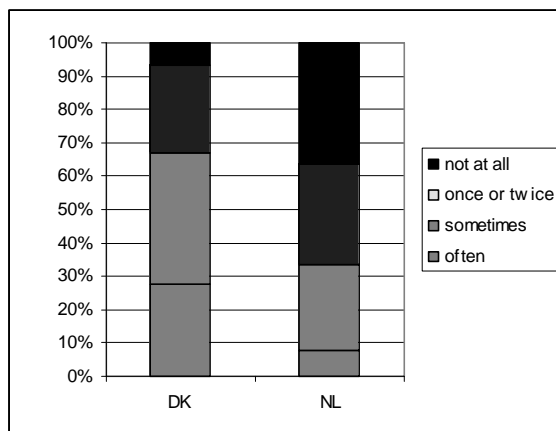
The result from the public opinion surveys suggested that Danish respondents, on the aggregate level, paid somewhat more attention to news about the EU in the period around the summit. 63% reported paying 'a lot' or 'some' attention to EU news in Denmark while this was 59% in the Netherlands. Also, the Danish engaged more often in interpersonal conversations about EU topics than the Dutch. 28% of the Danes reported talking 'often' about EU affairs, while this was 8% in the Netherlands. 40% of the Danish respondents reported talking about EU affairs 'sometimes' while this was 26% in the Netherlands. Conversely, 7% of the Danes reported not discussing the EU at all while this was 36% in the Netherlands (see Figure 6).

We also investigated the development of public support for EU enlargement around the summit. The same groups of respondents were interviewed in both countries about three weeks before and immediately after the summit. Two things emerged from the study: first, Danish respondents were, in general, more supportive of the enlargement than their Dutch counterparts.

⁴⁰ The study is part of a larger cross-national research program on 'Public Opinion and the enlargement of the EU' directed by Claes de Vreese, The Amsterdam School of Communications Research. The research is supported by a grant from the Danish Social Science Research Council.

This pattern is in line with data collected by the Eurobarometer⁴¹. The Danish approval rate was in the range 47-56% compared with 26-29% in the Netherlands.

FIGURE SIX
Interpersonal communication about EU affairs



Source: Public opinion and the enlargement of the EU, Claes de Vreese, University of Amsterdam, January 2003. (Data collected in the week after the 2002 Copenhagen summit with a nationally representative sample of 1,400 Danish respondents and 2,300 Dutch respondents). Question wording: "How often did you discuss EU matters with family, friends or colleagues in

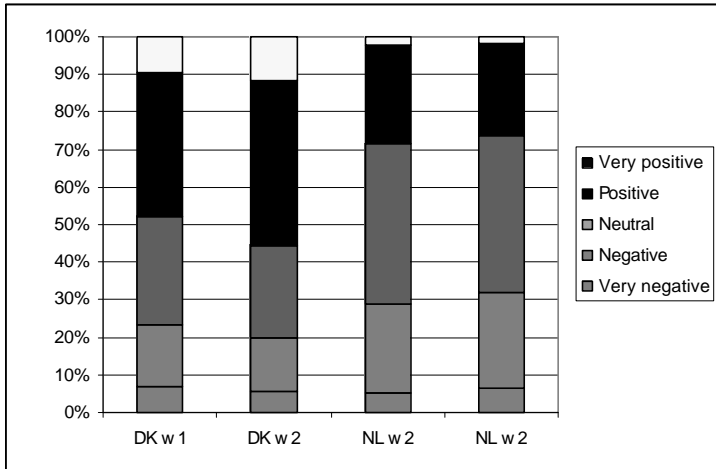
The panel surveys also suggested that the Dutch remained stable in terms of their support for the enlargement. The share of support decreased from 29% before the summit to 26% immediately after the summit. By contrast, the Danes showed an increase in the support for enlargement. The approval rate (respondents reporting to be 'positive' and 'very positive') went up from 47% before the summit to 56% after the summit. At the same time the share of sceptics (respondents reporting to be 'negative' and 'very negative') went down from 23% to 19% (see Figure Seven).

In sum, the data from the public opinion surveys in Denmark and the Netherlands provide evidence for the argument that a locally-hosted EU summit is an excellent communications opportunity. The level of attention to the subject is higher, citizen engagement in discussion is more frequent, and

⁴¹ See for example Eurobarometer 56, 2002.

(at least in this case) there was an increase in support for the key policy area addressed during the summit.

FIGURE SEVEN
Support for the EU enlargement



Source: Public opinion and the enlargement of the EU, Claes de Vreese, University of Amsterdam, January 2003. (Data collected three weeks prior to and in the week after the 2002 Copenhagen summit with a nationally representative sample of 1,400 Danish respondents and 2,300 Dutch respondents. Only participants interviewed in both waves are included in the analysis.) Question wording: "Generally speaking, what is your opinion about the enlargement of

Obviously, a higher level of news coverage and public engagement is no guarantee of an increase in public support for specific policies. It can only guarantee greater awareness. Council meetings such as the 2000 Nice meeting may not contribute positively to support for the EU given the political rows at the summit. But the tension, disagreement and conflict during the summit generated tremendous press and television coverage. In sum, a locally hosted summit provides one of the more prosperous opportunities to 'communicate Europe'.

Thus, from a communication perspective, the Council's rotating presidency has clear benefits. The European 'road show' would be lost if the Convention decides to propose a fixed president of the Council, as suggested in the Franco-German plan for the dual presidency.

SECTION FOUR: A FINAL THOUGHT

The three proposals listed above do not provide *the* solution to the EU's communicative deficit. They aim to provide an input that attempts to revamp the debate on how to tackle these challenges. As mentioned at the outset, the challenges faced by the EU are far greater than those confronting national political systems.

That said, communicating Europe should *not* be about sending out a monolithic pro-European message that might 'rekindle a European spirit'. It is about generating media attention, debate and discussion. This might come at the cost of volatility in public opinion and support, but politicians must be able to overcome this. Neglecting the task of communicating Europe in the institutional reform will enlarge the gap between 'Brussels' and European citizens and do little more than reinforce public perceptions of a democratic deficit.

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Any shortcomings, errors, and points of view are of course entirely my responsibility.

Claes de Vreese
Amsterdam, March 2003

THE WAY AHEAD

The 'Next Generation Democracy' project explores the theme of legitimacy in an enlarging Europe, organised around five themes: Matching Policies to Public Priorities, Accountability, Political Competition, Participation and Representation.

The initial output of each theme is a policy brief, which aims to direct the thoughts of the next generation of policymakers towards solving key problems thrown up by debates about democracy, legitimacy and accountability in Europe. Policy briefs engage key stakeholders throughout Europe, who may be from the political, academic, public, private or voluntary sectors, at local and national level.

Each publication is published on the www.network-europe.net, which is publicly available, and which aims to bring together these ideas and responses to them.

The policy briefs will be collected together, along with the best of the contributions from the online 'workshops' in a publication, entitled 'Next Generation Democracy: Legitimacy in Network Europe.' This will be launched at the end of the project in summer 2003. The issues were also discussed at Next Generation Europe, the first in a series of yearly conferences bringing together the successor generation from across Europe, which took place in Taormina in November 2002.

We are looking to publish responses to this series on our website, www.network-europe.net. If you would like to make a response, please contact networkeurope@fpc.org.uk.

The Foreign Policy Centre and the British Council would like to thank Weber Shandwick Public Affairs for their generous support for the Next Generation Democracy Programme.

Weber Shandwick has emerged as the most powerful public affairs and government relations resource in Europe. With offices in all major European political centres, Weber Shandwick offers the most comprehensive network and range of services in its field.

PREVIOUS POLICY BRIEFS IN THE ‘NEXT GENERATION DEMOCRACY’ SERIES

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Can Brussels Earn the Right to Act?

By Mark Leonard and Jonathan White, July 2002

Many argue that the problem of the European institutions is that they are unelected and remote. Leonard and White take a different view: the problem is a delivery deficit. EU institutions must earn their powers by proving their ability to execute them effectively. Ultimately this is the only EU that can count on the sympathy of its citizens.

“Provides interesting ideas for my work at the Convention.” *Gisela Stuart MP*.

Linking National Politics to Europe

By Simon Hix, March 2002

The European institutions are increasingly disconnected from the citizens they are meant to serve. Part of this results from the divorce between national politics, which tend to be the focus of popular and media attention, and European policies. In this policy brief, Hix explores how the election of the Commission President by national MPs could rectify this.

“Very interesting document”, *Ana Palacio, Foreign Minister, Spain*

“The Convention may choose not to endorse [Hix]’ ideas, but it should at least give them serious consideration.” *European Voice*

Next Generation Democracy: Legitimacy in Network Europe

By Mark Leonard and Tom Arbuthnott, November 2001

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“A most important policy brief... It is good to see new and clear thinking on
Baroness Nicholson of Winterbourne MEP

“It certainly is an intriguing project, which I shall follow with interest.” *Sir John Kerr, Secretary General, The European Convention.*

FORTHCOMING

Reforming the European Parliament (April 2003)

By Nick Clegg and Michiel van Hulten

The European Parliament must be reformed if the only elected transnational assembly of the world is to have any legitimacy with the people. These two respected MEPs argue that the European Parliament needs more political and less technical debates, in order to produce better quality EU legislation.

Next Generation Democracy (June 2003)

Edited by Tom Arbuthnott and Mark Leonard

This pamphlet will bring together all the outputs from the Next Generation Democracy project. It will be launched in London and Brussels to stoke debates about the role of democracy in the new European constitution.