

**CCC Forum: *Competition - Cooperation - Cohesion***

**Preliminary Meeting, Lisbon**

**24-25 February, 2005**

**Presentation on “The Role of the Media”**

**(updated 24-11-05)**

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The last page of the European Commission’s official Communication to the Spring European Council on re-launching the Lisbon Strategy refers to the need to get across the message of the document, and says that the Commission will treat this agenda for growth and jobs as a central communications priority throughout its mandate.

Perhaps this should have been the second paragraph on the first page of the document. As a former practitioner of public communications, first as a journalist specialising in Europe and secondly as a European Commission official specialising in public communications, I remain convinced that effective information and communication is about 50 per cent of the value of any policy initiative. Yet one of the weakest aspects of the European Union, and specifically of the Lisbon agenda, is its ability to communicate with the public. This is not a criticism, or blame, it is a question of a deep structural or operational defect compounded by a market – the media - which in some respects is unreceptive – a media which doesn’t want to know. It’s almost a sort of pharmaceutical problem of rejection, which has not yet been solved.

If this Forum is to have any success beyond the culture of academia, think tanks and, with luck, government, it must address this problem. So, indeed, must the Lisbon Strategy.

The Financial Times has pointed out the difficulties of matching the romance of economic renewal with such achievements as a single market, the euro and the enlargement: Jacques Delors famously said it was hard to fall in love with the single market. The Lisbon Strategy has perhaps a colder heart than even the single market. Yet the media has the capacity and the power to be a driving force behind the Lisbon Strategy, especially the new version launched by the Commission's President Barroso on February 2<sup>nd</sup>. The new version is shorter, less complicated, more focussed and pretty clear for those who take the trouble to read it. At least the FT supports it, and even helpfully suggests a trade-off between some current EU-spending and the Lisbon objectives in order to avoid a catastrophic deadlock on the forthcoming budgetary perspectives. Recent indications that the FT has given up on the Lisbon Strategy are regrettable.

Of course, there are different types of media, ranging from top-shelf near-pornographic dailies through the standard popularist tabloids to the middle-class, essentially well-intentioned quality dailies and finally to the more specialised but easily readable newspapers such as the Financial Times and Il 24 Ore. Yet they all suffer from pressure of space, on a day to day basis, the space to allocate to an important new EU Strategy which can affect everyone's quality of life vis a vis a celebrity divorce, a football scandal, a big fire or car bomb in

Iraq or the arrest of a household name for fraud. Almost anything which has more zing can knock the important new EU strategy, or an important development within that strategy, off the front page or out of the paper altogether.

Radio and Television are different. In the case of radio, in my country, the BBC domestic radio in particular is essentially adversarial in its approach to news: It seeks immediately to challenge it, going immediately to the Opposition, or a single-issue NGO, even before explaining properly what the substance is about. Television is even more difficult to captivate: In the United States television news time is now so restricted as to be almost unavoidably misleading; in Europe the competition of other news, particularly our obsession with celebrity, shrinks the time available to serious news of which the majority is likely to be given over to national political news.

We cannot hope to catch the attention of that large proportion of the public who are not interested in how they are governed, except at election time, and even less interested in the EU which seems to them to be a remote entity which doesn't affect them, even when it does. This is not being elitist, it's a fact of life which polls about the EU Constitutional Treaty demonstrate: More than 90 per cent of Europeans know little about and haven't read it. But we can attract the attention of those many millions of well-intentioned, interested citizens who can are often decision-makers, in a large or small way, whether in the boardroom of a high-tech market innovator, or a social worker in a deprived community. The Lisbon Strategy affects them all, growth and jobs and social stability is at the heart of their wellbeing and their prosperity.

The challenge is to refine our goal into clear, manageable, intelligible and rather brief information, which is targeted at various communities, whether of the think-tank variety or a busy worker, men and women, and to seek systematically and relentlessly to get the information into the media which must also be targeted.

And we may need to think about new language. Much of the standard language in which even the new version of Lisbon is written is unintelligible to even normal, practised readers. Words such as cohesion, coherence, solidarity, the social partners, are probably much more tuned to the ear educated in French, in which these terms were probably first introduced to European documents. The whole process began in French: The Union is now more or less managed in English, but the terminology remains, and in English it emerges as translations of the French which are a sort of code, even to journalists, in that they have to be explained, who have to retranslate them for their newspapers or microphones. No wonder some of our public has become allergic to *eurospeak*.

Our message also needs sometimes to be reinforced with sharp edges, criticism, analysis, warnings, so as to create an easily recognisable introductory paragraph for the reporter's article or broadcast. One of the reporter's traditional pleas down the ages is: "What does this mean?"

Let me give you an example: The Lisbon Civic Forum, had it been established then, could have launched a well-justified attack on the British Chancellor of the Exchequer, Gordon Brown, a supposedly pro-European who

has signed up to the Lisbon Strategy, who made a very exciting, triumphal, business-oriented speech to an audience labelled Advancing Enterprise 2005 on February 4, two days after President Barroso re-launched the streamlined Lisbon Strategy, without once mentioning it. He did not mention anything about it; his speech was entirely British-oriented, populist in terms of competition with the United States, China and India, as if the EU did not exist. Not only is this a besetting habit of Gordon Brown's apart from his frequent finger-wagging lectures to the *eurozone* ministers which have now become a joke, but he sometimes announces a new British initiative which has actually been a decision of the Council of Ministers in Brussels. He recently made a speech urging economic reform on the EU, which in some ways plagiarised the Lisbon Strategy again without allowing the term to pass his lips; the next day the FT published a leader scoffing at his speech in terms clearly aimed at making him a laughing stock. The FT editorial was the talk of the town.

The biggest problem with the Lisbon Strategy up to now has been that most, if not all national governments, which have the responsibility to put its objectives in place, have failed to do so. Indeed its objectives are at the heart of a divide, with France conspicuously leading one side. Brown and any other EU ministers or governments who fail so conspicuously to take the new streamlined version into account can be legitimate targets for a Lisbon-based think tank, taking recalcitrant leaders to task for failing to live up to self-proclaimed obligations. This is certainly one way of catching media attention, in order to convey a more substantive, positive message.

The fact is that most people, from Presidents and Prime Ministers downwards to the man or woman on the metro, get their initial, and often most of their general information from the media. This was very clear to me when I was working in two enlargement countries, Turkey and Hungary, and I like to think that my very close attention to media relations was reason that polls showed Hungarians, during their accession process, to be “quite well informed.”

The targets listed by Professor Horst Hanusch in his paper (see this website) mention this, among other ideas which, in my view, are good and workable. Our statement of purpose is clear and workable. We need to make it recognisable, a benchmark against which governments, companies and entrepreneurs make their strategic plans.

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