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**THE EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT, THE NEW MEDIA AND THE DEMOCRATIC
DEFICIT**

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The Democratic Deficit

The processes of European integration have never been easy. The EEC and the EC have had their well documented "low periods", for example during the 1960s and the 1980s, during which the future direction of integration, if not the continuance of the process itself, were in doubt. (George, 1990). Given the scope of the undertaking such matters need cause no surprise. By the mid-1990s, however, the prospective stakes have been raised considerably as the Union faces monetary union under a European central bank, tries to establish a common foreign and defence policy at a time of fairly high chronic unemployment and the admission of economically weak Central European states. Additionally there are considerable tensions over immigration, trade problems with the USA, and the possibility of defecting member states. (Duignan and Gann, 1994). It is hardly surprising, in this context, that calls for a more transparent system of governance in the EU are mounting and that long standing assertions of a "democratic deficit" in the Union have acquired urgency and persuasiveness. (Lodge et al, 1989). At the centre of such concerns is, firstly, the momentum acquired by the European Commission and Court in face of member governments in the Council of Ministers and, secondly, the relative weakness of the elected European Parliament in relation both to Union institutions and member governments. (Corbett, Jacobs and Shackleton, 1995).

If calls for transparency and democratic accountability are to be responded to then the whole EU system will have to change in significant ways. Particularly this is the case on questions of the powers and public visibility of the Parliament. The Commission - Council relationship could be made more transparent, and Parliament could be given more powers over both, but such developments are unlikely to stop demands for accountability unless Parliament is seen to be a central part of the political directorate. Accountability, like justice, must be seen to

be done.

Parliament and the Problem of Communication

Communication research offers supportive evidence for the need for visibility and salience. The burden of such research is that information supply, not propaganda, is the key to public persuasion and with it the possibilities of public influence. There is evidence that Parliament is learning this lesson and is making itself "information friendly" to both member governments and their voters. The Parliament has come to see the "Information Revolution" as an ally in the struggle for visibility and influence within EU institutions, and between them and member governments and their national media.

Is Parliament correct to perceive that it needs the "new media" to overcome the effects of national media structures and the mindset which they are both products and perpetrators of? The general answer to that question is, of course, that EU institutions have been aware for a decade or more that they must do much more to inform voters if support for the processes of integration is to be increased. From its beginning those processes have been subject to the vagaries of national self interest and aggrandisement. Before he retired, former Commission President Jacques Delors acknowledged that not enough had been done to "sell" the EU to its peoples and that integration was at risk because of this failure.

President Delors was well aware that member governments, on occasion, used their influence with their national media to criticise the very policies they had voted for in the Council of Ministers. Even when governments did not orchestrate such coverage they frequently did not counter hostile propaganda vigorously or effectively. Because of such duplicity or ineffectiveness, leading EU officials see the battle to influence public opinion as crucial for the integration process, even the survival of the EU as the strains of widening its membership and extending integration are widely felt. (Andersen and Eliassen, 1993).

This paper focuses on what one MEP calls the "information war" and, in particular, on the efforts being made by Parliament to increase its salience and power. Nowhere is the communication problem more visible than in the UK which

for fifteen years has been the most resistant to integration processes. Its MEPs have every reason to know how significant the relationship between government and media in London has been, and still is. Some of those MEPs, interestingly, think the “democratic deficit” is being closed but the British electorate remains unaware of it. Certainly this is the view of most British Labour MEPs, nearly all of whom believe Parliament’s influence has much increased as a consequence of the Maastricht Treaty. To change these public misperceptions, members believe that a media led campaign of public education is needed and few believe that it not will face overt and covert discouragement from most national governments.

This paper looks first at the structured situation of British MEPs, secondly at their attitudes toward their own and the Parliament’s coverage in the UK and, finally, at the institutional efforts being made to increase media and popular information levels on EU institutions, and especially the Parliament.

British MEPs in the Parliament

In the British case 75% of British MEPs belong to the Labour Party and associate with the European Socialist Party. In fact Labour MEPs are the largest national contingent in that Party and this is symbolised in the very influential Group Leader, Pauline Green, MEP (London SW). British members are distinctive in the Parliament by being the only members not elected via a PR system and thus have single member constituencies capable of generating stress within party and group loyalties. British members, a strategic group from the most “Euro sceptic” member country, have a distinctive media concern. Whereas their fellow members, primarily, have to focus on their national media coverage and party standing, British MEPs have those plus the local constituency dimension to be concerned with. British MEPs know that they could lose their seats through the unpopularity of their party at either national or constituency level. Neither dimension can be ignored by them though each may complement the other. Like their US counterparts in Congress they are often pressured to put their constituency interest and political survival first.

British MEPs and Media Coverage

Members and their staffs are assiduous monitors of all newspapers circulating in their constituencies. 61% report seeing up to five local newspapers regularly - and scanning more at weekends. (1) While away the faxed clippings provided by their constituency staff are relied on to cover important local stories. For obvious reasons the level of monitoring of local radio and television coverage is lower, though nearly 60% of members claim that this is done "as far as possible." Local radio is seen by many MEPs as increasingly important - one claimed it is crucial to his electoral survival since he faces a hostile local press. (2)

At the national level members are less dependent on staff clippings since in both Brussels and Strasbourg all the newspapers they might want are available to them and the Socialist Party provides a clipping service for members. Parliament, itself, provides a weekly digest of European press coverage but this is highly selective and of only general use to any one member. 60% of members, anyway, claim to read some non-British newspapers and magazines. What is clear is that MEPs at constituency, national and European wide levels are assiduous consumers of press coverage and, where possible, try to monitor local radio and television coverage.(3)

Consuming coverage is one thing - finding it acceptable is quite another. 30% of these MEPs are unhappy with the volume of personal coverage they get at local level but more (53%) are unhappy with the coverage given to Parliament. (4) At the national level more than 50% are unhappy with their personal coverage and a resounding 93% are unhappy with that given to Parliament. Generally, most members subscribe to the view that, as one put it, EU news "is reported in a derogatory and dismissive way except in the Financial Times, Guardian and Independent. (5) One member complained that his local press gave little or no coverage beyond "my own press releases." Another member emphasised that, while few of his press releases were used, "the newspapers will take a column from me." Little wonder that members are grateful that local radio is under market pressure and "hungry for more local and European news where it had local reference."

Access for reporters, generally, is not seen by MEPs as a significant local problem - only 20% of members thought otherwise of the constituency level. At the national level, however, 40% of MEPs said reporters were not given enough access. (6) When asked whether reporters and newspapers are willing to use the access provided 24 said no for the constituency level but, nationally, 60% said no. (7)

Was Parliamentary news distorted by media? At the constituency level 16% see a lot of distortion but, at the national level, the figure is 80%. (8) Members claim to see more negative news presentation and a willingness to disregard and distort information of national importance in the national press. On the question of press concentration on certain individuals - usually code for leaders or maverick legislators - there are fewer than expected mentions. The responses suggest that members are not merely thinking of their own failure to make national news but of the broader Parliamentary picture. (9)

Members have clear views on why these distortions occur. At the constituency level there is perceived media hostility to EU policies and institutions (46% of mentions) with publisher or editor bias - based at times on similar attitudes - adding another 24% of mentions. At the level of British national media, hostility to EU matters increases to 54% of mentions with publisher/editor bias adding 20% of mentions. It seems clear that in a Eurosceptic country facing a globalisation of news coverage, a relatively powerless European Parliament is clearly not seen by local or national news editors as demanding front page status. (10)

The failure of MEPs to figure prominently in national news may well be accounted for by a variety of explanations. For the moment it may be worth looking at two widespread explanations common to legislators and their staffs. Are Brussels based British reporters contributors to this situation? The answers are interesting and, superficially at least, contradictory. Most members find such reporters mostly informed on Parliament (58% of mentions) but too focused on the Commission (55%); there is a wide gap between "qualities" and tabloids in their grasp of European issues and reporters seem unable to present Parliamentary

news in an attractive form (16%). But which of these characteristics determine the news choices of British reporters and editors - the Commission focus or the nature of Parliamentary news? Can it be that their knowledge of Parliament makes them reluctant to give its stories prominence? The other possibility cited is partisanship among reporters - 85% of mentions. British and other journalists, as seen by MEPs, have decided that Parliament is not a potent institution and, by covering it in these terms, help keep it so. Is there, MEPs ask, tacit collusion between national governments and the Commission to keep reporters believing that Parliament is not, and will not become, powerful? Such factors are in play and complex in their effects as seen by MEPs.(11)

What do MEPs make of the London based reporters and editors who do not work within an EU focused news arena? Scottish MEPs, of course, deny that the London based press is a national press for them. Most MEPs, however, agree with a senior Labour MEP who asserted "the problem is London, not Brussels." Nearly 60% of the MEPs questioned have made no effort to cultivate London based journalists. Among the few who have, and report good results (38) the possession of a specialisation in a policy field is the preferred explanation for their ability to get coverage.(12)

So far as the broadcast media are concerned some MEPs clearly see differences between some of the outlets. Some members single out BBC television and radio news as Europhile while others identify ITN news as Europhobe in tenor. Most members have some technical criticisms of broadcast news - allegations of "soundbite news" are frequent while a minority criticise London based news organisations for being willing to rely on Westminster Members as sources on Europe. In contrast most members feel that regional television and radio, to say nothing of the regional press, gives more and better coverage.(13)

It seems clear that there is uncertainty among members about what Parliament can expect from British media and what Parliament can do to help itself. British MEPs think that other member states still have more of a pro-EU party press and an EU-friendly public broadcast system.(14) They are aware that in many countries

Parliament is characterised as a "grave train" for members and one barely able to call the Commission to account. But they would insist that "infotainment" values have spread more widely in the UK than elsewhere and this is reflected in their feeling that EU news is of better quality outside the UK. (15) When asked what Parliament can do the answers cover every aspect of Parliament's work. The institution needs more staff, more user-friendly documentation, party leaderships need to give more background briefings, and MEPs should be able to have more training in media use. Additionally, members feel, there should be greater coordination of news release between EU institutions and field offices in member states. Above all there should be more proactivity in news-making by Parliament. (16) Television coverage is seen as the key to greater popular engagement. If it could be acquired, said one MEP, "there would be a ratcheting upwards of national and regional coverage of Parliament without which it cannot become the influential legislature it aspires to be." British Labour MEPs, it seems, are quite clear that the "democratic deficit" will be closed when Parliament not only acquires more power, but when it is in the televised possession and visible exercise of those powers.

Parliament and the New Media

During the 1990s Parliament published an ever increasing amount of information on its activities. DG IV now has responsibility for DBA EPISTEL which carries press releases, committee debates and agendas, Parliament debates, Who's Who and schedules of activity. Additionally there is DBA EPOQUE which primarily is aimed at MEPs, Groups and staff providing data for their work. This consists of legislative procedures, session documents, Parliamentary questions (written and oral), debates, petitions, studies and the Library catalogue. Since November 1996 EUROPARL is both on the internal Parliamentary network and on the Internet. The aim is "to bring together all the information published by the European Parliament in the 11 languages of the European Union for the use of its members." Additionally the aim is to make available such information to members of national, regional and local assemblies, the press, representatives of socio-political groups, students and researchers. MEPs are already creating Web sites

for themselves, a fact of considerable potential significance for them, if not for Parliament.

Parliament thus makes easily available the documentation of its public debates and decisions, both past and present, plus studies, press releases and details of past and prospective Parliamentary activities - all to Members, staff, journalists and the public. What, of course, Parliament cannot do is to make available what is neither published nor meant for publication. Examples would be private Group, Party, and Committee debates and decisions, including formal and informal sub-Group meetings and individual deliberations. Minutes of meetings can be published but, as ever, they can be misleading.

Neither DG IV nor the Information Directorate are in a position to dictate simpler Parliamentary procedures, speedier timetables nor relevant agendas. The latter is particularly important because, as seen by many MEPs, the Parliament spends too much time on distant and symbolic matters and not enough on issues directly relevant to ordinary voters - unemployment, health and consumer goods' quality being examples. The result is that the work which Parliament does do and can influence tends to be lost in matters which many European voters would regard as marginal at best and irrelevant at worst. Some of this is due, of course, to the limited nature of Parliament's powers and to the necessary all-Union level which its debates must address. The structured position of Parliament remains, seemingly, outside the main circuit of power which consists of national governments feeding into the Commission/Council and thence back to national governments.

MEPs are mostly aware of the above limitations and welcome the steps toward greater transparency of decision and its public communication. Asked whether Parliament should take more steps "to publicise its achievements" nearly 90% of MEPs agree. (17) When asked whether current efforts to publicise themselves were unsatisfactory the same figure was returned. (18) When, finally, they were asked whether all EU institutions but "especially Parliament" should become "more user-friendly" a similar number assented. (19) Members seemed clear on the steps needed to improve the visibility and salience of Parliament. The institution needs

more radio and television coverage (60%) and the way to secure both lies in Parliament taking command of its own information needs. It should have its own news agency and guaranteed satellite access. Parliament should put out its own information and advertisements and, generally, conduct its own public relations. It cannot and should not depend on normal news channels, which MEPs feel, are too heavily commercialised or partisan or influenced by national governments.

Parliament, for many MEPs, has a major communication problem. It has the usual problems of a deliberative assembly - delegation, complex procedures, slowness of decision making etc. which can make it at best barely newsworthy. But Parliament has to contend with eleven official languages and being upstaged by the Commission and national governments - usually subtly but sometimes openly. Thus even when the institution has acquired new and real power in the co-decision and conciliation procedures and is active in budgetary matters - national electors are barely aware of this. The "Information Revolution" has to mean a lot more than the passive provision of all kinds of information. It must mean, for many MEPs, proactivity in communication which aims to engage voters on matters which they see as directly relevant to their lives. For these MEPs the democratic deficit is already much more apparent than real - the problems are to mobilise electors to support Parliament's efforts to use its current powers and influence to the full.

The new President of the Parliament, Jose Maria Gil-Robles, addressed this and other issues in a wide ranging recent interview. A beneficiary of party horse-trading himself, he is suitably sceptical that his office will be filled by any other method in the near future. He is also cautious on the vexed questions of correcting the abuse visible in expense claims by MEPs, equal pay for MEPs and a uniform electoral system for their election. His main concerns are clearly two-fold - firstly the influence and power of Parliament and, secondly, the content and style of the work facing MEPs.

On the question of power and influence he is clear that Parliament will gain more of both only "if the Union as a whole agrees to increase the use of majority voting, involving Parliament in decision making through the co-decision formula.

Not surprisingly he supports the Commission's proposals for "flexibility" so that groups of countries can make agreements between themselves, on areas other than the single market or competition law, and not be subject "to the veto of one."

His second major concern is to bring MEPs and citizens closer together. "The real link between Parliament and the people is the MEPs themselves and I intend to give them more time to spend in their constituencies and more means of getting and disseminating information. My target is a computer for every member."

Gil-Robles is not naive on the possibilities of more direct democracy. He notes that the political will of the member states may have a larger role to play than people's support or indifference. "We must," he said, "be realistic and work within our constraints." The subtext of the whole interview is the need to persuade member governments to give up their veto power. This would allow the Parliament and the Commission much greater jointly exercised power and influence while giving larger groups of member countries the right to advance integration in a wide variety of policy areas. Parliament, for its President, will gain more power only if all EU institutions are allowed to do so. Meanwhile "Parliament must prove that it can exert the power it has already and do so properly." This is a challenge and potentially an epitaph.

Notes

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Questionnaire for MEPs 1996*

() = n
 Figures = %

1. How many newspapers covering part of your constituency do you read:

(a) Regularly - which?
 (b) Sometimes - which?

(a) n = 33	(b) n = 33
up to 5	up to 5
5+	5+
(20) 60.6	(17) 51.5
(14) 46.7	(3) 9.0

2. Do your constituency staff, or party workers, clip national newspaper items of interest to you on a regular basis?

Do they monitor local radio or television for you?

Newspapers		TV/Radio	
Yes	No	Yes	No
86.7	(26)	(4)	13.3
		(10)	58.8
		(7)	41.2

* These data derive from a questionnaire administered in interviews to 33 Labour Party MEPs during 1995 and 1996. No offers of interviews were made by any other British MEPs.

3.

A. What national UK newspapers or magazines do you see:
 (a) Regularly - which?

up to 5 5+

(28) 84.8 (6) 18.1

(b) Sometimes - which?

B. Do you read any non-British newspapers or magazines:
 (a) Regularly - which?

up to 5 5+ none

(19) 61.3 (1) 3.2 (11) 35.5

b) Sometimes - which?

C. Does Parliament provide members with a clipping service covering:

(a) their national press or
 (b) tapes of radio/television, if requested?

(a)

(b)

Yes

No

Yes

No

DK

(10)

45.4

(12)

54.5

(9)

35.0

(9)

36.0

(7)

28.0

4. Generally speaking, are you satisfied with the volume of local media coverage of:
(a) your activities?

	Yes	No
(12)	36.4 (10)	30.3

(b) news of Parliament in the local media in your constituency?

Very satisfied;	(1)	3.0
Satisfied;	(13)	39.4
Dissatisfied;	(10)	40.0
Very dissatisfied	(6)	18.0

5. Generally speaking, are you satisfied with the volume of national media coverage of:

(a) your activities?

	Yes	No	Mixed
(6)	42.8 (7)	50.0 (1)	7.0

(b) news of Parliament in the national media?

Very satisfied;	(2)	6.6
Satisfied;	(22)	73.3
Dissatisfied;	(6)	20.0
Very dissatisfied		

6. Generally speaking do you think reporters are given enough access to information (news)
- (a) in your constituency?
- (b) nationally?

	(a)		(b)		
	Yes	No	Yes	No	Mostly DK
(20)	(6)	(4)	(14)	(13)	(3)
66.7	20.0	13.3	43.7	40.6	9.4
					(2)
					6.2

7. Generally speaking do you think reporters and newspapers are willing to make use of the news facilities open to them?

	<u>Constituency</u>		<u>Nationally</u>		
	Yes	No	Yes	No	Mostly Sometimes DK
(12)	(7)	(11)	(3)	(18)	(1)
40.0	23.3	36.7	9.4	60.0	3.3
					(2)
					6.7

8. Editorialising apart, do you see any distortions in the presentation of Parliamentary news?

	<u>Constituency</u>			<u>Nationally</u>		
	A little	A lot	No	A little	A lot	No Sometimes
(18)	(5)	(9)	(4)	(24)	(1)	(1)
56.2	15.6	28.1	13.3	80.0	3.3	3.3

9. If you do see distortions what forms do they take?

<u>Mentions</u>	Constituency	National
Over concentration on same individuals	(6) 23.0	(10) 15.6
Disregard of news/information	(11) 42.3	(16) 25.0
Distortion of news provided	(4) 15.4	(22) 34.4
Only negative news provision	(5) 19.2	16 25.0
Other		
	n = 26	n = 64

10. If you do see distortions how to you account for it?

<u>Mentions</u>	Constituency	National
Party politics?		
Hostility to EU institutions?	(10) 27.0	(20) 25.0
Hostility to EU policies?	(7) 18.9	(19) 28.8
Publisher/Editor bias?	(9) 24.3	(16) 20.0
Nature of media business	(5) 13.5	(17) 21.2
Parliament not "user friendly"	(6) 16.2	(8) 10.0
Other		
	n = 37	n = 80

11. How would you characterise your relations with Brussels based British reporters? Have you found them

<u>Mentions</u>	Yes	No	Mostly	Sometimes
Adequately informed on Parliament?	(14) 60.9	(1) 4.3	(5) 21.7	(3) 13.0
Willing to attend party/group briefings?	(5) 25.0	(6) 30.0	(7) 35.0	(2) 10.0
Able to present Parliament news in attractive form?	(3) 15.9	(6) 31.6	(8) 42.1	(2) 10.5
Exhibit a wide tabloid v quality gap in grasp of issues?	(10) 55.5	(5) 27.8	(5) 5.5	(2) 11.1
Far too focused on the Commission?	(11) 57.8	(5) 26.3	(1) 5.2	(2) 10.5
Partisan in their news coverage?	(3) 23.1	(2) 15.4	(8) 61.5	2 15.4
Other?				
Non existent				
London veto				

12. Do you seek to cultivate London based reporters and editors? If so, why? with what results?

(a)		(b) Results		
Yes	No	V Good	Good	Poor
13	18			V Poor
41.9	58.1	(5) 38.1	(7) 53.8	

13. Would you say that there are discernible differences in the ways EU news is presented on:

BBC TV -	Europhile	(6)	40.0
BBC Radio -	Europhile	(6)	40.0
ITN -	Europhone	(3)	20.0

n = 15

Local radio

Local television

Are there any differences in the treatment of news of Parliament?

Yes	No
(6) 40.0	(9) 60.0

Mentions

Sound bites only	(4)	10.8
Europhile	(6)	16.2
Europhobe	(9)	24.3
Use MPs not MEP's on EU	(6)	16.2
Regional Press	(12)	32.4

n = 37

14. Is it your impression that EU news is better reported in other member states? If so, could you give examples?

- of countries?

All	(8)	27.5
Germany	(5)	17.2
France	(6)	20.0
Spain	(1)	3.4
Ireland	(2)	6.9
Italy	(2)	6.9
Belgium	(3)	10.3

n = 27

15. Any comment on Parliament and the mass media would be welcome.

Parliament = "Gravy train"	(3)	18.7
UK values	(11)	68.7
EU fails to explain self	(2)	12.5
		n = 20

16. What improvements, if any, would like to see in the ways that Parliament and its members conduct their media relations.

- More staff?	10	(8.8)
- More training for MEP's?	11	(9.6)
- More provision of "user friendly" documentation?	21	(18.4)
- Regular background briefings by party or party leaderships?	15	(13.1)
- Greater effort at securing television coverage?	19	(16.7)
- Greater effort to coordinate news release with Commission and Council of Ministers?	13	(11.4)
- Expansion of London office activities to pull in national media coverage?	14	(12.3)
- Other Honest with voters	2	(1.7)

n = 114

17. Do you think that Parliament should seek to use mass media more to publicise its achievements?

Yes	(21)	87.5
No	(3)	12.5

18. In this respect are current party or group efforts to publicise their activities and agendas satisfactory?

	Yes	No	DK
	(2) 6.4	(28) 93.5	(1) 3.2

19. Do you think major EU institutions should become more media conscious and "user friendly" - and perhaps especially Parliament?

	Yes	No
	(27) 93.1	(2) 6.9

If so, in what ways?

		Mentions
More Radio/TV	(12)	60.0
Own news agency	(3)	14.3
Parliamentary Adverts/PR	(3)	14.3
Satellite	(2)	10.0

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