

What should communicators (not) do to improve the reputation of the EU?

Speaking points for Antonia Mochan (@euonymblog) at Workshop E3 of EuroPCom2013
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Let me start by pointing out the slightly obvious fact, that I have spent the last 5 years communicating about the EU in the UK. There are special elements to that situation, and I have a quite enjoyable presentation on those that I have given across the UK. But I think it is wrong to see the UK as a fly in the ointment. To use another animal metaphor, it is more of a canary in a coalmine - an early warning of how things can develop - and so important lessons can be learnt there.

There are two main elements to the topic today. Firstly, what can be done to improve the reputation of the EU and secondly what is the role of communicators in that.

To take the first, there has been considerable academic work done on this and we would do well to examine it. We have Simona here today, who is an acknowledged authority. I also was very struck by a lecture I went to by Sara Hoboldt of the LSE, who talked about responsibility without accountability within the EU institutions. If voters don't like their national government, they can elect another one the next time. If they don't like what the EU is doing, they don't feel that they have that direct link. Therefore when they don't like what is going on, the only option they feel they have is to turn away from the whole thing.

Add to this some polling that the Representation did in 2011. 82% of respondents said that they knew little or nothing about the EU. 60% overall were either quite uninterested or not interested at all in receiving more information. So, without wishing to sound like Donald Rumsfeldt, basically in the UK people don't know about the EU, they know they don't know and they don't want to know. And most importantly for what we are talking about today, when asked who should inform them about EU policies, the top answer, by a considerable margin, was the national government, at 48%. EU information centres got 11% and the institutions 6%. Six percent.

Another point that came out was that when you talk about specifics - arrest warrants, bathing water, pet passports - people support them, and would miss them if they were gone.

OK, this is one poll, but it has some interesting observations for us as institutions and more particularly communicators. I've picked out four.

Firstly, you can't talk to people that don't want to listen to you. At an institutional level, we need to be much more at ease with working with intermediaries. Yes we will lose some control over the exact content of the message, but we will gain that back many times over in credibility with our audience.

Secondly, telling people they are wrong is not a great way to communicate. There's the story of the Irishman when stopped by a tourist and asked directions to Dublin says, I wouldn't start from here. Maybe we wouldn't start from a place where people have lots of

misconceptions about what the EU is, what it does and how it works, but that's where we are and we have to build that into our route.

Thirdly, we have to differentiate. This isn't the same as changing our story, it's just about telling it in different ways to different audiences, in order to move forward. When I was a little girl, I had a children's Bible, with lots of pictures and the stories told in easier language. They were the same stories though, and I recognised them as I got older and heard them in the original biblical language. So too must we talk the language of our audience. The story about the economic changes at European level will necessarily be different for countries that are inside and outside the Euro. And that's a story that you can't even start telling to people who don't know the difference between the Commission, the Parliament and don't understand that there is a strong role for their national governments.

Fourthly, we have to be more comfortable with what we are. I would imagine many of you have seen [the video doing the rounds](#) that says the European parliament won't fix the big issues like war, dictatorship, sexism, racism, but it will do important but non-sexy things for you. I often say we're like plumbing - no-one gets excited about getting a new sewer pipe fitted, but they notice pretty quickly when it goes wrong. And also like plumbing, people don't want to know the details of how it works and why it does what it does, they just want it to work.

People just want the EU to work. That's what we need to communicate about.