

European Citizen Action Service

CONNECTING WITH CITIZENS

Does the EU have the will to tackle its information deficit?

ECAS

83 rue du Prince Royal
1050 Bruxelles Belgium
Tel : +32 2 548 04 90
Fax : +32 2 548 04 99
Email : info@ecas.org
Site Web : <http://www.ecas.org>

Author: Richard Upson
Responsible editor: Tony Venables

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SUMMARY

1 This report is a response to the Commission's White Paper on European Communication Policy which, taken with Plan D, tackles a long outstanding issue: how to involve citizens in the future of the EU.

2 Information is a key determinant of EU legitimacy as it has a major influence on the extent to which people participate through using their right to vote on EU matters. The report responds to the White Paper after analysing the role of information in the effective operation of democracy at EU level.

3 The report draws a distinction between factual information about the EU, which people need as a basic building block to enable their participation as voters; and *interpretive or political* information, usually disseminated by the media and originating from politicians, parties, interest groups and commentators, which encourages choices to be made. The report argues that the Commission has a unique responsibility for ensuring the widest possible dissemination of factual material about the EU

Under-Information

4 The fact that **people are not well-informed** about the EU is well documented.

- In the new member states taken as a whole, a Eurobarometer survey showed that at the time of the referenda (Autumn 2003) 60% of the population felt not very well or not at all informed about the enlargement process, while 56% said the same for their own country's accession process.
- In the pre-existing member states (EU15), on the eve of enlargement 69% of the population said they were not very well or not at all informed about enlargement.
- Eurobarometer also found that less than a third of people in the EU as a whole (EU25) knew in 2003 that the Convention on the Future of Europe was producing a draft Constitutional Treaty, and in 2004 - as preparations for national ratification were under way - that only a similarly low proportion could say they felt well or rather well informed about the draft Constitution.
- These proportions are very close to the proportion of people who say they feel informed about the EU. In Spring 2005 Eurobarometer asked "how much do you feel you know about the EU, its policies, its institutions?" with each respondent giving a self assessment on a scale of 1 (low) to 10 (high). The average was 4.4, with only 29% claiming to be at least fairly well informed (scale 6 to 10).

5 There is **a link between factual under-information about the EU and low rates of turnout for European Parliament elections**. In Spring 2004 Eurobarometer gave the following details:

Likelihood of people voting in EP elections	High level of knowledge	Average level of knowledge	Low level of knowledge
Average result (on scale 1 to 10)	8.38	7.35	5.69

6 The fifteen recent referenda (nine on EU accession, two on the adoption of the euro adoption, and four on the Constitutional Treaty) show that a similar relationship between feeling informed and turnout holds for most of them. Turnouts are higher where there are tangible choices before an electorate, and these choices are often related to information about the issues being available.

7 The analysis leads to the conclusion that a lack of factual information lies at the heart of the lukewarm nature of EU legitimacy.

- The prevailing factual under-information about the EU weakens the intention to vote in European Parliament elections.
- The catalyst which might convert intentions into acts - coverage in the media - is not sufficient. Media coverage of the European Parliament has been declining since the 1980's and has continued to do so in the present decade.

8 It is therefore no surprise to find that the turnout rate for elections to the European Parliament has fallen from 63.0% in 1979 to 45.7% in 2004.

9 Yet the paradox is that the under-information associated with lower turnout rates for the European Parliament does not reflect a fundamental lack of interest in EU politics. On the contrary, **a European identity is emerging and its fuller expression is frustrated by the lack of adequate factual information.**

10 This European identity – for which the term “civic identity” has been used – has been created through a drip feed of events over several decades: participation in the direct election of the European Parliament, media coverage of EU developments, national debates on EU issues, successive enlargements, and the experience not only of consuming more European products and services and having jobs dependent on the EU single market, but also of living, working, studying, and retiring to other EU countries. The expression of this European identity has contributed to the emergence of an EU polity in the sense that the political infrastructure at EU level is now beginning to become sensitive to the need to respond to views that citizens express through the ballot box about EU policies. Following the two “no” votes on the Constitutional Treaty in 2005, the most visible recent examples of this responsiveness are the amendments to the “Bolkestein” directive on the free movement of services, the announcement by the Commission of a Citizens’ Agenda on 10 May, and the European Council’s decision in June to open more of its meetings to the public.

11 Nonetheless, there is an unfortunate tendency among the institutions to doubt the existence of an EU polity, and to suggest that a “European Public Sphere” barely exists. This is too pessimistic as it does not reflect the many debates about the EU which are currently taking place and which, even if mainly national in focus, do overlap and influence each other.

Aim: Overcome the Information Gap

12 The Commission’s policy proposals are concerned to encourage greater efforts by the member states to enter into communication with their citizens about the EU, and the Commission’s report on Plan D (May 2006) shows that a degree of progress has been made. The proposals are also directed at showing that the Commission itself is listening and at trying to invent extra ways to promote citizen participation in the EU.

13 The Commission should, however, take more account of the fact that people are *already* participating in the EU through their votes (and thus seeking to pass political messages), particularly when they are stimulated by information about the EU. The referenda on the Constitutional Treaty are clear examples of this participation, however much they are also, necessarily, related to national circumstances.

14 The Commission is concentrating on what it calls the “communication gap”, over which it has very little direct influence given the large number of actors involved at all levels, while overlooking both the importance of under-information and the extent to which it can - and should - exercise a major influence in overcoming it.

15 **The provision of reliable factual information about the EU should be seen as a citizen’s right;** it should be met by placing the institutions under a binding obligation to deliver. They would deliver information to the public in ways to ensure that all sectors and groups in society are reached, which means using mainly TV and press as they are the two principal media through which people prefer to hear about the EU. This would call for the production of suitable factual material with a budget large enough to purchase media space to reach out to inform all EU citizens. This would require **a substantial increase in the current annual expenditure by the Commission on EU information and communication policy, which amounts to only 26 cents (just over a quarter of 1€) for each European.**

16 The EU should now respond more readily to the European identity that has already emerged. An important way in which it can do this is by accepting the need to deliver factual information to all citizens because of:

- the clearly expressed wish, repeatedly shown in Eurobarometer surveys, that people want to be better informed about the EU;
- the practical argument that a better informed public would participate more in the EU, especially in EP elections; and
- to provide a symbol of citizenship. The EU lacks many of the symbols that other polities have, such as a common language, artistic and cultural references, religion, sport, and education. These absences reinforce the need to inform people about EU matters as fully as possible.

A virtuous circle?

17 A “virtuous circle” can be envisaged: a more widespread awareness of the facts about current EU issues will stimulate a greater understanding of the range of actions which the EU can take. This will enable people to judge the positions which parties and interest groups take on particular issues. Political debate will be strengthened, and that will attract media coverage, which in turn will help the choices for EU policies to become clearer, thereby providing a stimulus to greater participation in EU.

18 If the factual material is not more actively disseminated, it will remain difficult for people to take a view about the advantages and disadvantages of what is being proposed, “Brussels” will continue to suffer from top-down remoteness, and the circle would remain relatively closed.

19 The absence of more factual information would also reduce the impact of the proposals in the White Paper for greater two-way communication and feedback, and also of other programmes aimed at generating decentralised, local, citizen-friendly projects as envisaged in programmes such as Culture 2000 and Europe for Citizens. It is therefore remarkable that **no increase in expenditure for EU information is being sought by the Commission in 2007** despite the key role of information in promoting EU legitimacy.

20 In sum, the White Paper concentrates too much on looking at what it calls the “communication gap” rather than the fundamental “information gap.” It is time that the Commission itself took a big step forward in ensuring that people are as fully informed as they wish to be about the EU: this should be the key objective of the Commission’s information and communication policy.

21 Seen from this perspective, the Commission's proposed Charter or Code of Conduct on Communication - aimed primarily at securing better partnership with member states - does not address the urgent need to overcome the information gap, quite apart from being unenforceable. **A better approach is to implement the citizen's right to be informed about the EU through a new Treaty article** (using the power available under Article 308), thereby *binding* the institutions to overcoming the information deficit.

22 At the same time the **Commission should take urgent steps to ensure that major campaigns to inform citizens about the EU are carried out in all member states with the aim of improving turnout at the next European Parliament elections in 2009.**

PART 1: THE COMMISSION'S WHITE PAPER

I The Commission's Proposals

1.1 The Commission's White Paper was issued on 1 February 2006, with a consultation period of six months; this was subsequently extended to the end of September. Thereafter the Commission plans to hold several «stakeholder» conferences after which it will come forward with a detailed implementation plan.

1.2 As far as the scope of the White Paper is concerned, the Commission argues that the context is one where “the ‘public sphere’ within which political life takes place in Europe is largely a national sphere”, where the media are largely national, people feel remote from EU decisions, and this is related to “the inadequate development of a ‘European public sphere’ where the European debate can unfold”. Because it is doubtful about the growth of a pan-European political culture (“it is still developing”), the White Paper concludes that public discussion about Europe is “first and foremost the responsibility of the public authorities of the Member States”.

1.3 The White Paper aims to establish EU communication as a “policy in its own right, at the service of the citizens”, reflecting a break with the past as it will be “a move away from one-way communication to reinforced dialogue”. The Commission groups its proposals under five headings.

- 1 Proposal for a Charter or Code : The Commission suggests that a European Charter or Code of Conduct on Communications could be devised as a means of securing commitment, on a voluntary basis, from European institutions, governments at all levels, and also NGOs. It would include the notion of people's access to information which the White Paper formulates as follows: “people from all walks of life should have the right to fair and full information about the EU, and be confident that the views and concerns they express are heard by the EU institutions”.
- 2 Empowerment : Proposals are made to enable citizens to be more receptive to messages about the EU. The measures put forward include civic education, improved access to new technologies, trans-national debates, greater transparency and better consultation on EU legislative proposals.
- 3 Media : The White Paper argues that «media coverage of European issues remains limited» and that “European citizens need access to a steady flow of common information if they are to see the European dimension of common issues”. The White Paper seeks innovative ways to work with national and local media, and proposes to develop and upgrade the Europe by Satellite service. The Commission's internal reforms (see 1.6) will also help to provide better material for the media.
- 4 Measuring Public Opinion : The White Paper proposes that an independent Observatory for Public Opinion would help the EU and Member States to pool resources so that in-depth analyses of trends in public opinion could be carried out. It notes that the Commission's Eurobarometer surveys and EU-financed research on social issues have played an important part in understanding European public opinion.
- 5 Partnership : The last section of the White Paper seeks a partnership with key actors at all levels – the European Parliament, the Council, governments, public bodies, political parties and civil society organisations - to cooperate to inform people about Europe, with cooperation including financial and operational matters.

1.4 At the conference to launch the White Paper the Commissioner, Mrs Wallström said: “People have a right to know what the European Union does and what it stands for and as citizens, they have a right to fully participate in the European project and in the decision-making process”. She emphasised that previous EU communication efforts had suffered from the lack of a common vision, and had been focussed too much “on a one-way supply of information, more centred on the institutions than on the needs or wishes of citizens”. She underlined that : “EU communication... is about enhancing our democracy. The White Paper... argues for a European debate in which citizens can participate, to unfold a working European public sphere”.

1.5 The White Paper is in substance a consultative document rather than a set of well-defined proposals, and it has to be seen in the framework of the ongoing, post “no” vote, period of reflection during which the main emphasis has been laid on Plan D (see chapter 2), its follow-up (chapter 3) and the Council’s work (chapter 4). This wider framework is important as it heightens the importance of the White Paper to the effort to reinvigorate the EU democratic process. In effect, the decisions on the proposals in the White Paper will determine the content of this Commission’s information and communication strategy and its long term impact on democratic participation.

1.6 It is worth noting that, in advance of the White Paper, the Commission’s announced an internal Action Plan (July 2005) “to ensure more effective communication about Europe within the Commission by a modern and more professional approach across all departments.” It contains 50 detailed internal actions with completion dates ranging from the second half of 2005 to 2009, and is summarised at the Appendix.

European Parliament

1.7 While the Parliament has not yet given its opinion on the White Paper, its most recent view on EU information and communication strategy was contained in Resolution of 12 May 2005 following a report from the Committee on Culture and Education (the Herrero report). This was the first time that the Parliament had been asked for its views before the Commission finalised proposals in the field of information and communication.

1.8 The Resolution said that the aim of EU information and communication work should be “to keep the Union’s citizens continually and properly informed about the functioning of the Union’s institutions in order to develop their knowledge, concern and participation in the Union’s affairs...” Its many suggestions included the need for an annual debate in Parliament on the EU’s information and communication policy (which it first called for in 1993), and greater parliamentary involvement in the determination of the PRINCE* programme priorities. It also said that “the Union’s institutions have a duty to inform citizens clearly and objectively about the content of the Constitution and the meaning of the changes it introduces as compared to the current treaties.”

1.9 Some points in the explanatory statement to the resolution as proposed by the Culture Committee are worth noting. It recalled that “the level of public knowledge of basic EU matters is lamentable” and, without making a direct link, that turnout in EP elections had fallen to its lowest ever level. It argued for a change of approach: “it is not citizens who should go looking for information, but information which should go looking for citizens”.

*PRINCE – PROgramme for the INformation of the Citizens of Europe – is the vehicle for major information campaigns which in the past included Citizens First/Citoyens d’Europe in the 1990s and the campaign to help the introduction of the single currency in 2001.

PART 2: THE PERIOD OF REFLECTION

2 Plan D

2.1 The White Paper has to be seen in the context of the Commission's "Plan D for Democracy, Dialogue and Debate" which was published on 13 October 2005. Plan D is the Commission's contribution to the European Council's initial "period of reflection" announced in June 2005 following the rejection of the Constitutional Treaty in the French and Dutch referenda.

2.2 The intention was that this period should "be used for a broad and intensive debate on European policies" so that a vision of the future of Europe could be built on a clear view of citizens' needs and expectations. A year later the Council decided in June 2006 that the period of reflection should be extended: "the significant efforts to increase and expand the dialogue with Europe's citizens, including the Commission's Plan D initiative, should be continued." The Council also agreed on a two-track approach:

- to maximise the use of the existing treaties "to deliver the concrete results that citizens expect"; and
- after "extensive consultations" with Member States, the Presidency will report to the Council in the first half of 2007 so that decisions on the future of the Constitutional Treaty can be taken no later than the second half of 2008.

2.3 Plan D is intended to dovetail with the Commission's other proposals (ie the White Paper and the internal Action Plan). As the Plan D says :

"these initiatives set out a long term plan to reinvigorate European democracy and help the emergence of a European public sphere, where citizens are given the information and the tools to actively participate in the decision making process and gain ownership of the European project".

2.4 The problem identified by the Commission in Plan D, with reference to the results of Eurobarometer survey (EB63), is that there is "declining confidence in political systems", as shown not only by falling levels of public approval and trust in the EU but also by a similar decline at national level, with the risk that this poses to representative democracy. Nonetheless Eurobarometer finds that people would prefer the EU playing a greater role in the years ahead which suggests to the Commission that "this calls for the emergence of a Europe which listens more in order to meet its citizens' expectations". It concluded that the period of reflection should "stimulate a more accurate communication of the activities of the EU" : "ending the blame-game....is an important change that must take place".

2.5 Plan D proposes that the debate should not be limited: "there would be added value in listening to specific target groups that were not reached during the referenda campaigns like young people or minority groups". In effect "Plan D ... is a listening exercise so that the EU can act on the concerns expressed by its citizens. The objective of the Commission is to stimulate this debate and seek recognition for the added value that the EU can provide".

2.6 In terms of specific initiatives, Plan D is split into two parts :

(a) *assisting national debates*

Plan D offers the Commission's help in the organisation of national debates, in particular through cooperation with national parliaments. On content it suggests that three themes could be highlighted :

- Europe's economic and social development
- Feeling towards Europe and the Union's tasks
- Europe's borders and its role in the world.

Initial conclusions were presented to the June 2006 European Council (see chapter 3).

(b) initiatives at Community level

Plan D sets out 13 initiatives to stimulate a wider debate, to promote citizens' participation and to generate a real debate on European policies. Among the proposals are :

- stimulating debate by, for example, visits by Commissioners to member states, contacts with parliaments, greater use of the network of Europe Direct* local centres, establishment of "goodwill" ambassadors.
- promoting citizen's participation through more effective consultation procedures, support for multi-country citizens' projects and panels, more transparency including greater openness of Council meetings, support for projects to increase voter participation - using tools to generate a dialogue, such as Eurobarometer surveys, internet debates, focus groups.

3 Citizens' Agenda for Europe

3.1 As foreshadowed in Plan D, the Commission came forward in May 2006 with the lessons it had drawn so far from Plan D, from the national debates called for as part of the period of reflection, and from the special Eurobarometer survey (EB251). There were two documents :

- Communication on Plan D and the Period of Reflection, which provided the background for
- Communication to the June 2006 European Council entitled "A Citizens' Agenda".

3.2 The background document provides a synthesis of the national debates, lessons from Plan D, and details from the special Eurobarometer poll. In effect this document belatedly provides an up to date assessment of the views of the European public about the EU which was lacking in the White Paper. Among the points it makes are :

- most people are concerned about their future economic and social prospects, particularly the risk of unemployment. It says : "citizens tend to consider that the EU could use the European social model to help protect against negative side-effects from globalisation, but see few concrete actions taking place"; and
- while "opinion polls demonstrated a very weak knowledge and understanding of the functioning of the Union, its institutions and their role", it is acknowledged that demand does exist for such information.

3.3 The Commission finds that there is a gap between the action Europe takes and the public's perception of Europe's role : the Commission needs to regain the confidence of the public by delivering solutions to the issues raised by citizens.

3.4 The specific lessons drawn by the Commission are :

- there is wish for a debate on where Europe should act
- citizens have fairly low knowledge and interest in how the EU institutions operate, while they have high expectations of Europe and its added value
- the EU should not be seen as a threat to social models but more as a safety net in a globalised world
- the scope and pace of enlargement is being questioned.

* For more on Europe Direct, see 13.3

3.5 The Commission proposes 12 policy initiatives as a “citizen’s agenda”. They include :

- removing barriers to the single market alongside the development of an agenda for “universal access and solidarity”
- creating an entitlement card to enable every citizen to be aware of and enjoy full access to their rights
- making Europe a safer place to live by improving decision-making procedures
- clarify the value added of enlargement
- identifying ways to improve competitiveness, including access to markets, cutting burdens on business, and looking into Europe’s role in the world.

4 The Council's Report

4.1 The basis for the European Council’s discussion on the period of reflection (see 2.1), apart from Plan D and the follow-up described in chapter 3, and the Commission’s White Paper, was a report by the Presidency and Council Secretariat which summarised the results of member states’ information and communication activities during the reflection period.

4.2 This is the first time that such a detailed contribution to EU information policy from the Council has been available on the public record. The introduction to the report makes it clear that it is intended to contribute to the follow-up the White Paper: “the tendencies herein described could also form the basis for discussions concerning the communication strategy on Europe in general”.

4.3 In terms of analysis the report notes that most people prefer Europe to be communicated to them by TV and radio, particularly when the subjects affect people’s daily lives. Doubts were raised about the effectiveness of internet (“the mere accumulation of information is not sufficient”), together with high risks of duplication of effort between MS and the institutions. The aim of information policy is to «reach those individuals who do not seem to be keen on European issues, those who have no interest in such matters and those who have very specific interests». Abstract messages about Europe run the risk of being seen as demagoguery, while “information based on real facts seems to have a positive impact”.

4.4 In terms of attitudes it found that people “do not have any European agenda as such, but Europe constitutes for them an extension of the national agenda”. Because perceptions varied so widely between countries, “it would be illusory to conceive messages common to the EU as a whole.” Citizens’ expectations about the EU are similar to their national ones: “improving the quality of life, combating unemployment, increasing security and protecting the environment remain at the core of European citizens’ expectations.”

4.5 On citizen involvement, the report notes that, although they mistrust the way decisions are taken by EU institutions, a majority of citizens expressed a desire to be more closely involved in EU matters. Little is said about how this might be done, and doubts are expressed about the impact that the considerable efforts being made by public administrations will have in increasing citizens’ interest, although the greater involvement of civil society would help. While citizens themselves are best at exchanging ideas directly with other citizens, the report states that “giving citizens a voice could not, however, replace action by the political authorities, since the latter are responsible for conveying clear messages on European issues”.

4.6 The report is hesitant about the scope for synergy at national and EU level. While “almost” all countries cooperate with the institutions, they do so “with due regard for the principle of the voluntary participation of Member States”. Cooperation is subject to administrative complexity, lack of coordination and insufficient planning. It concludes “imaginative solutions are called for to overcome this situation”.

PART 3: THE INFORMATION DEFICIT AND ITS EFFECTS

This part of the report assesses the impact of under-information on voting turnout for European Parliament elections (chapters 5 and 6), and then considers the evidence from recent referenda on EU issues (chapters 7 and 8).

5 European Parliament Elections: Under-Information and Turnout

5.1 The author's first report for ECAS ("Information for the European Citizen", revised 2003), demonstrated that there was a direct link between the extent to which people feel informed about the EU and their likelihood to vote in European Parliament elections with particular reference to those held in 1999. The experience of the 2004 elections taken with more recent Eurobarometer findings serve to confirm the direct link between under-information and poor turnout.

5.2 In the European Parliament Elections held on 10-13 June 2004, there was a further decline in turnout to 45.7%. The voting rate in pre-existing member states dropped a little from 1999 (49.8% to 49.4%), while the contribution from the new member states (NMS) was no more than 26.9%. The chart at 5.14 shows the continuous fall in turnout from 1979.

(a) Link between knowledge of the EU and Intentions to Vote

5.3 One of the most stable relationships in successive EB surveys is the link between people's claimed knowledge of the EU and their intention to vote in European Parliament elections. For example, the following result was given in EB51 (Spring 1999) :

Intention to vote (%)	High level of knowledge	Average level of knowledge	Low level of knowledge
Yes	82	76	57
No	12	12	23
Don't know	6	11	19

Five years later EB61 (Spring 2004) gave a very similar result :

Likelihood of people voting (scale 1-10)	High level of knowledge	Average level of knowledge	Low level of knowledge
Average result	8.38	7.35	5.69

(b) Voting intentions

5.4 In the first report, use was made of the then longstanding practice of EB to ask people whether they intended to vote in the next European Parliament elections. In Spring 1999, 67% claimed they intended to vote; the actual turnout in June 1999 of 49.8% suggested that there was a latent interest in voting which needed to be converted into actuality.

5.5 Eurobarometer has changed its methodology so that responses are given on a scale of 1 (definitely would not vote) to 10 (definitely would vote), making a precise comparison with earlier results difficult. The results from the two methods can, however, be bridged by looking at all those who, under the new methodology, claimed they were likely to vote, ie all those who assessed their likelihood on the upper half of the scale (6 to 10). This shows that 64% were more likely to vote. Compared to the actual turnout in June 2004 of 49.4%, this confirms that there continues to be a gap between voting intentions and outcome. This represents a latent expression of involvement in the EU which should be converted into actual votes.

5.6 When the same procedure is applied to the new member states (NMS), the gap is even wider than among the EU15: 55% claimed they were likely to vote, yet the turnout was only 26.9%.

(c) Under information

5.7 The first report quoted extensive evidence from Eurobarometer in the period 1997 to 2002 to show that people were not well informed about the EU. More recent Eurobarometer findings show that the picture has not changed. For example, EB 63 (Spring 2005) asked “how much do you feel you know about the EU, its policies, its institutions?” with each respondent giving a self assessment on a scale of 1 (low) to 10 (high). The average was 4.4, with only 29% claiming to be at least fairly well informed (scale 6 to 10). These results were exactly the same as Autumn 2002 (EB58), although the latest data include the NMS.

5.8 The socio-demographic analysis of the responses demonstrate that those who finish education later feel better informed, as do men compared to women and, to a less marked degree, this is the case for those living in large towns compared to elsewhere. These differences are not new: they have been found by Eurobarometer for a very long time.

5.9 A complementary approach involves asking people whether they can correctly identify whether certain statements about the EU are true or false. The latest Eurobarometer effort, in Special EB251 (Spring 2006), put three statements to people :

- the EU currently consists of 15 member states
- the members of the European Parliament are directly elected by the citizens of the EU
- your country has a European Commissioner.

Only 22% were able to give three correct answers, thereby corroborating the result of the self-assessment question. Similar “knowledge” tests in earlier Eurobarometer surveys have produced broadly similar results.

(d) Awareness of the Parliament

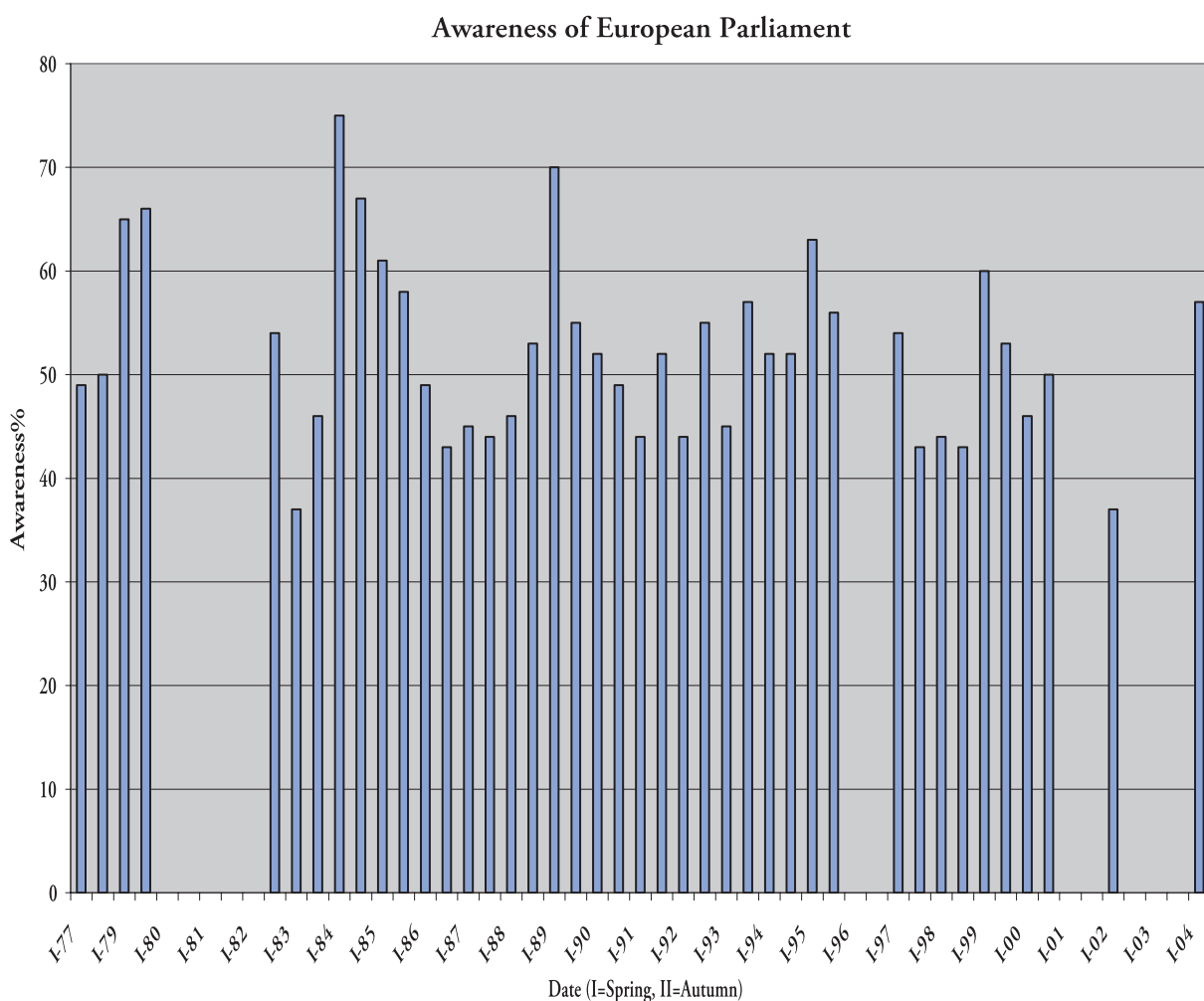
5.10 The first report suggested that high intentions to vote in European Parliament elections were not followed through because people lacked the necessary catalyst in the form of input from the media.

5.11 The evidence used to measure this was the extent to which the public had recently seen or heard anything about the European Parliament in the media (newspapers, radio, television), and it was a question

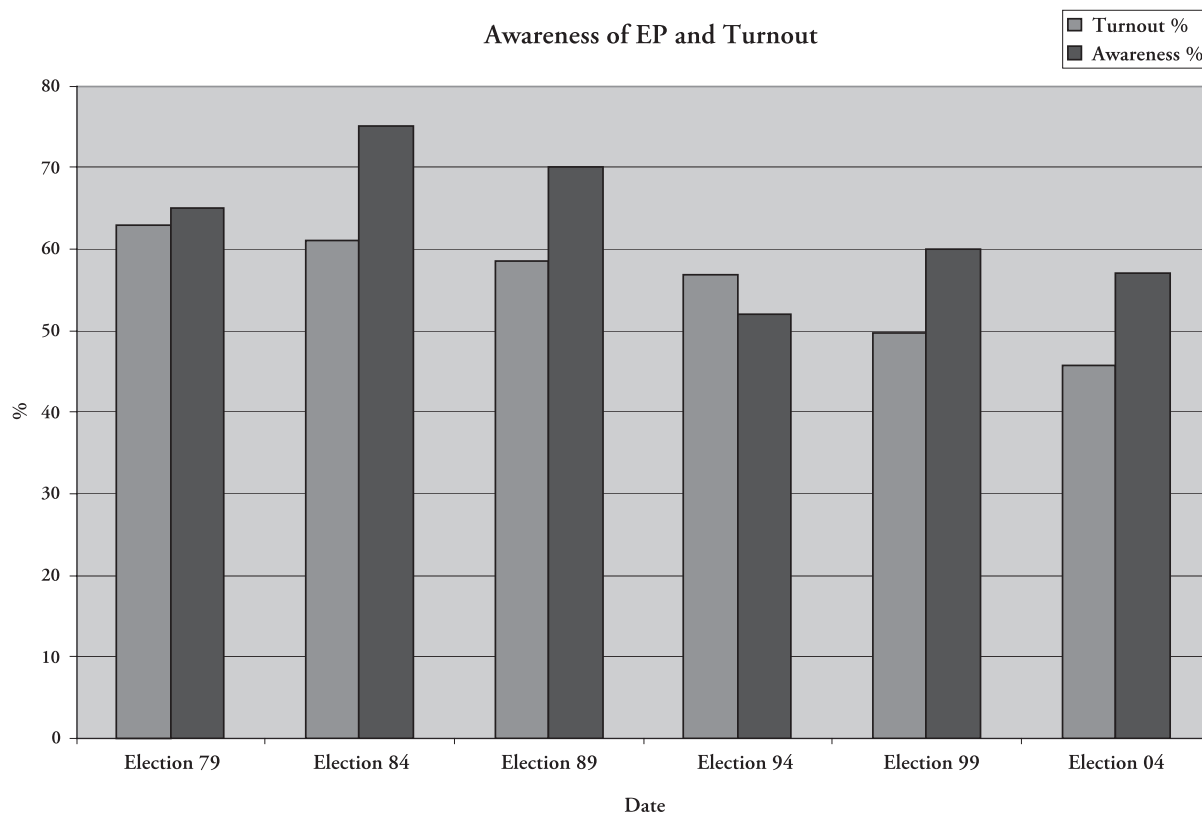
which had been asked in standard Eurobarometer surveys since 1977. The results for the period 1977 to 2002 showed that, while awareness levels of the Parliament tended to peak prior to elections, these “peaks” of awareness have been falling: there were awareness levels of the Parliament through the media of 65% to 75% between 1979 and 1989, followed by lower awareness levels (52% to 60%) between 1994 and 1999. This measure was last used in Spring 2002 (EB57), when it fell to its lowest level in 25 years (37%).

5.12 Since then, Eurobarometer methodology has changed so that the focus of the question was altered in 2003 to measure the awareness of the Parliament’s members through the various media (and through other forms of contact) by means of a multiple response question. A bridge across to the earlier measure can be constructed because the new question enables respondents to say that they had “not heard or seen anything about or had any contacts with a member of the European Parliament” since the last elections. In Spring 2004 (just before the elections), 38% of respondents had not been aware of MEPs, while 5% did not know whether they had been aware of MEPs or not. Thus a small majority, 57%, claimed they had been aware of MEPs in one way or another.

5.13 While the question is not framed in precisely comparable terms to the earlier one, the result gives good grounds for thinking that awareness of the Parliament in the media in the EU15 just before the 2004 elections was no higher than it had been just before the elections in 1999 (60% according to the earlier measure). The following chart gives the results for the period 1977 to 2004 (the gaps in data show that the question was not asked in the Eurobarometer surveys).



5.14 The next chart brings together the voting turnout for the European Parliament since 1979 and people's awareness of the Parliament in the months immediately before each vote. The long term decline in both measures is immediately noticeable.



[\(e\) Conclusions](#)

5.15 Two conclusions can be drawn.

- One is that the prevailing factual under-information about the EU weakens the intention to vote in European Parliament elections (the intention to vote in national elections is higher, but not so much different to account for the wide difference in turnout between national and European elections).
- The other is that the catalyst which might convert intentions into acts - coverage in the media - is not sufficient. In fact the relationship between media coverage and turnout observed during the 1980s and 1990s - that as one declines, so the other follows - has continued into the first decade of the 21st century.

6 Is Lack of Information the Main Problem?

6.1 Despite the persuasive evidence that under-information has a major impact on the poor turnout rates in European Parliament elections, other factors come into play. In addition doubts have been raised about the importance of lack of information itself.

Sidelineing of Parliament

6.2 The Constitutional Treaty which emerged from the Inter Governmental Conference was adopted by the European Council just after the Parliamentary elections. While there is no way of assessing the extent to which this contributed to a belief that a vote would have little consequence, there was a message to potential voters that despite the accretion of power by the Parliament in recent years the Constitutional Treaty was not a matter on which the Council was expecting any expression of pan-European identity.

Lack of Trust

6.3 The reasons for abstaining are manifold, often involving personal, family, health and work. The most frequently reason cited by Eurobarometer in respect of the 2004 elections (EB162) was “lack of trust, dissatisfaction with politics generally” (22% across the EU, 19% in the pre-existing countries - EU15, and 34% in the new member states - NMS). Obviously, the result for NMS is of great concern, especially as the other two factors which scored highly among them were “not interested in politics as such” – 21% and “vote has no consequence, does not change anything” – 14%.

6.4 While the lack of trust factor appears to have increased among the EU15 since 1999 (when it was chosen by 11%), the change of methodology by Eurobarometer introduces a difficulty. In the 1999 question on reasons for abstention respondents were allowed to choose two factors from a long list, while in 2004 five factors could be chosen several of which concerned aspects of trust. Since this made it easier to include “lack of trust” as a factor, it suggests that one should be circumspect about what appears to be higher levels of lack of trust.

6.5 Indeed, according to another measure, the “trust” factor changed little between the 1999 and 2004 elections. Asked whether they trusted the Parliament, those tending not to trust it amounted to 29% in Spring 2004 (EB61), which was much the same as five years earlier before the 1999 elections – 28% (EB51).

6.6 It seems that not too much weight should be attached to the “lack of trust” as an explanatory factor. This is not to deny that there has been some degree of erosion of trust in the EU recently, but it has occurred since the elections in 2004. Using the same indicator – trust in the European Parliament – those tending not to trust fell to 26% in Autumn 2004, thereafter rising to 35% by Autumn 2005 (EB64), the highest yet recorded. In contrast, those holding a negative image of the EU accounted for only 20% in Autumn 2005, although the proportion has risen a little in recent years.

The information issue

6.7 EB162 (the post European Parliament elections survey in 2004) also found, that “although a potential voter has sufficient information, that does not mean that he/she will necessarily go to the polls”. The finding is surprising given the wealth of material in successive EBs about the effect of under-information as noted in chapter 5.

6.8 The argument in EB162 is that while most voters had the necessary information, “reticence with regard to politics can be so great that the level of information is not a sufficient criterion to prompt voters to the polls”. This reflects the findings about the general factors behind abstention noted in 6.3.

6.9 There are several difficulties with this line of argument.

(a) The EB162 question asked was in the form of a statement on which respondents were required to agree or not, as follows :

«You had all the necessary information to choose for whom you were going to vote in the recent European elections»	EU25	Voted EP 2004	Did not vote EP 2004
Agree (%)	59	72	47
Do not agree (%)	39	27	50

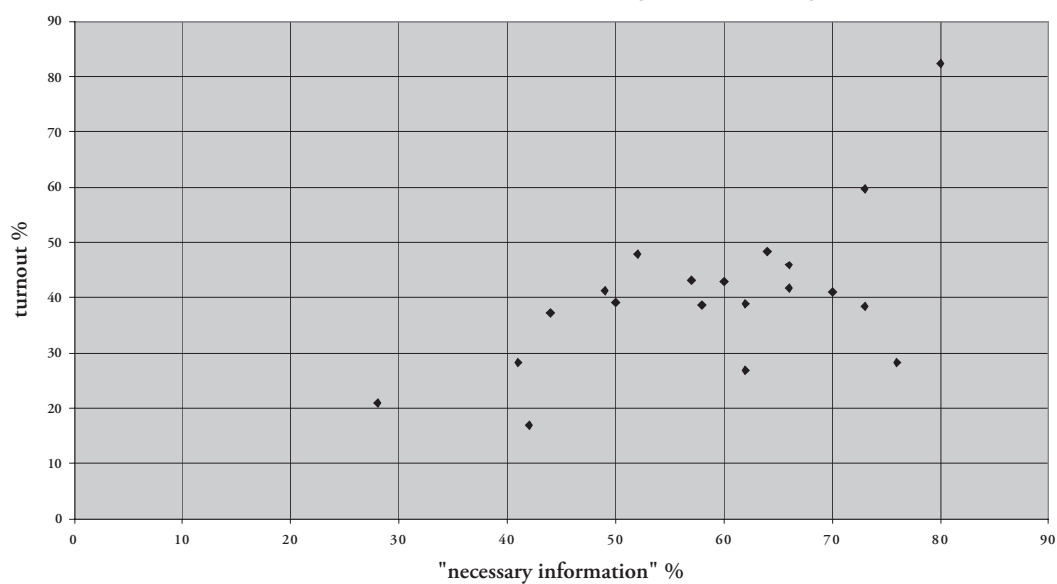
The wording of the statement on necessary information is crucial : had it been formulated as a question of the type “did you have all the necessary information...?” a different answer may have emerged. As it stands the statement appears to be a leading question to which people will be likely to assent as it appears to represent what the average voter should say. It is also possible that respondents may have taken the question literally in the sense that they could see the lists and names of candidates and knew how to cast their vote.

(b) EB162 says that the ranking of the percentages of those who agreed to the statement on a country by country basis “corresponds fairly closely to the rates of participation in each of the member states”. This is a contestable inference: as the table (next page) shows, there is a wide variability between “had all the necessary information” and turnout. Indeed, if the countries where is some more or less compulsory voting are excluded (Belgium, Luxembourg, Italy, Greece, Cyprus), the variability is even more striking as shown in the chart (after the table). These doubts suggest that the concept of “necessary information” may be flawed.

TABLE: Turnout and Information - see 6.9(ii)

Country	Had necessary information	Turnout EP 2004
EU25	59	45.7
EU15	62	49.4
NMS	42	26.9
Malta	80	82.4
Luxembourg	79	90.8
Slovenia	76	28.3
Ireland	73	59.7
Hungary	73	38.5
Italy	71	73.1
Finland	70	41.1
Belgium	69	90.8
Spain	66	45.9
Austria	66	41.8
Lithuania	64	48.4
UK	62	38.9
Cyprus	62	71.2
Estonia	62	26.8
Germany	60	43
Greece	59	62.8
Portugal	58	38.7
France	57	43.1
Denmark	52	47.9
Netherlands	50	39.1
Latvia	49	41.3
Sweden	44	37.2
Slovakia	42	17
Czech Republic	41	28.3
Poland	28	20.9

"necessary information" and turnout excluding compulsory voting countries



(c) The idea that people have turned away from politics to the extent that they cease to vote is reflected in the Eurobarometer finding noted above (6.3). It is however clear that, however widespread the discontent with politics may currently be, people place a great deal of importance on voting in elections. In Special EB251 (Spring 2006) respondents were asked “Which two of the following do you think are the best ways of ensuring one’s voice is heard by decision-makers?” Nine options were offered as follows:

Option	%
Voting in elections	56
Signing a petition	15
Joining a political party	13
Joining a demonstration	10
Joining a trade union	9
Being a member of a consumer association	9
Going on strike	8
Being a member or supporter of an NGO	7
Participate in debates using the internet	7

This finding should put some brake on the view, also found in Plan D, that people are drifting away from representative democracy. An interesting expression of this view is to be found in the report on the state of democracy in the UK (“Power”, 2006) notes that “the problem of disengagement from formal democracy is not unique to Britain. Nearly all of the established democracies are suffering similar problems” and, inter alia, cites the analysis in the Council of Europe’s green paper on “The Future of Democracy in Europe”. It is not the intention of this report to criticise the impressive research and well-argued remedies of these papers; rather, the point being made is that the evidence of a long term trend in voter turnout is not at all clear cut. For example, it appears from inspection of the data available at www.electionresources.org/westerneurope.html that, at least for the EU15, there has been, on average, very little decline in the turnout for national elections over the past 20 years.

6.10 Apart from these doubts, there is a more general concern about the Eurobarometer findings on information in relation to abstention in the 2004 elections. The question put to respondents is too narrow because it does not distinguish between types of information :

- it is clear that people are poorly informed factually about the EU, and that this limits people’s ability to participate in European Parliament elections;
- the turnout data, including those on referenda set out below, show that the more that choices (in terms of issues and personalities) are made clear to people the more likely they are to cast their vote.

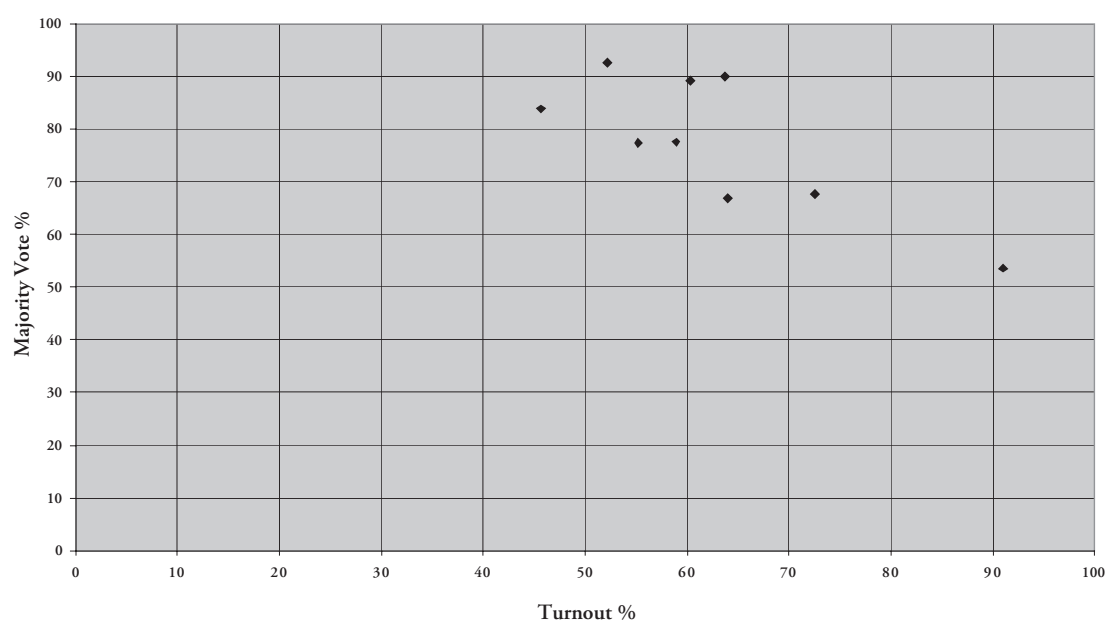
6.11 These considerations suggest that the EB162 has not shown that people had sufficient information for the European Parliament elections of 2004, nor that lack of trust is a more important factor in explaining abstentions. While this report does not claim that under-information is the only factor behind low turnout in European Parliament elections, it does argue that it has an importance which is underestimated by Eurobarometer. This underestimation may have unduly influenced the White Paper – see the Commissioner’s remarks about the unfortunate emphasis on “one-way” information in the past (1.4).

7 Under-Information and Recent Referenda - Enlargement

7.1 Nine of the then ten candidate countries held referenda to on decide on their accession to the EU. They were held in 2003, with the results showing that the higher the turnout, the closer the result.

Country	Turnout %	Majority Vote % (all yes)
Malta	91	53.6
Latvia	72.5	67.7
Estonia	64	66.9
Lithuania	63.7	90
Slovenia	60.3	89.2
Poland	58.9	77.5
Czech Republic	55.2	77.3
Slovakia	52.2	92.5
Hungary	45.6	83.8

Accession Referenda 2003: Turnout and Majority Vote



7.2 The referenda in Denmark and Sweden on the adoption of the euro also fit this pattern of high turnout with a close result.

	Date	Turnout %	Majority %	
Denmark	28.09.00	85	53.1	no
Sweden	14.09.03	81.2	56.2	no

7.3 It appears that this association is related to the extent to which people perceived that a real choice was being made. Where the result is in little doubt, or where those who are unenthusiastic but not motivated to say “no”, the turnout is lower.

7.4 In the NMS taken as a whole, EB CC 2003.2 shows that at the time of the referenda (Autumn 2003) 60% of the population felt not very well or not at all informed about the enlargement process, while 56% said the same for their own country's accession process. Nonetheless, at that time, a majority of people in the ten countries (52%) considered their country's future membership of the EU a good thing. This implies that most people accepted that it was worth joining the EU and, even though they were poorly informed about it, they were prepared to vote. In these cases, there appears to have been a sufficient minimum of information to persuade people of the political importance of membership even if they were aware, in a detailed sense, of being ill-informed. It is also the case that the proposition put forward in the enlargement referenda was straightforward compared to the issues raised by the referenda on the Constitutional Treaty.

7.5 In the pre-existing member states (EU15), on the eve of enlargement 69% of the population said they were not very well or not all informed about enlargement. This feeling of under-information went along with many concerns about enlargement. In EB61 (Spring 2004), 72% feared the transfer of jobs, while 64% worried about their country paying more to the EU, and 64% also about increased drug trafficking and crime.

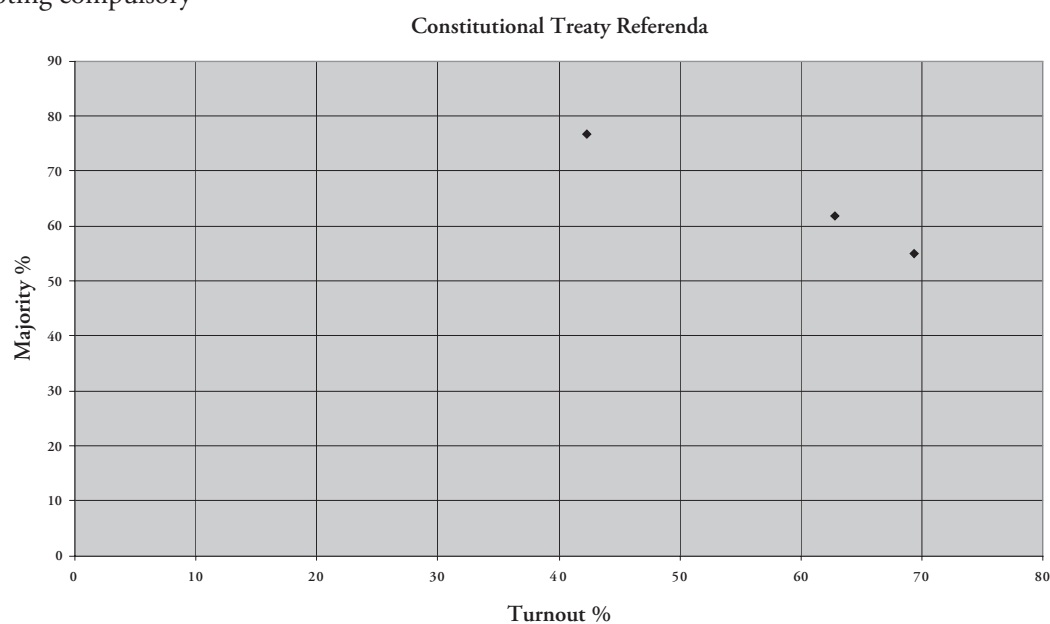
7.6 The failure to respond to this under information, and the worries related to it, had an impact on the referenda on the Constitutional Treaty. These concerns might have been reduced had they been directly addressed by relevant information. Moreover these concerns are clearly still very evident as the latest Eurobarometer findings (EB255 on attitudes to enlargement, Spring 2006) show. It finds that "68% of the EU population do not feel they are well informed about enlargement issues".

8 Under-Information and Recent Referenda - The Constitutional Treaty

8.1 Against the background of under-information, the ratification of the Constitutional Treaty began in November 2004 and has so far included four referenda. Three of them show a similar relationship between turnout and majority as that seen above (7.1 and 7.2).

Country	Date	Turnout %	Majority %	Yes/No
Spain	20.02.05	42.3	76.7	y
France	29.05.05	69.3	55	n
Netherlands	01.06.05	62.8	61.8	n
Luxembourg	10.07.05	*	56.5	y

*Voting compulsory



8.2 At about the time the Convention concluded its work, Eurobarometer found that 45% of people in the future EU25 had heard of it. But less than a third then knew that it was producing a draft Constitutional Treaty and, later on, in the run-up to the ratification process only a similarly low proportion could say they felt well or rather well informed about the draft Constitution. The table shows this clearly.

<u>Question</u>					<u>Date</u>	<u>%</u>
(a) <u>What kind of text? Is it a draft Constitutional Treaty?</u>					Jun-03	32
					Oct-03	29
(b) <u>Do you consider yourself well/rather well informed on questions relating to the draft of the future European Constitution?</u>					Jan-04	25
					Jun-04	30

This result is very close to the proportion of people who say they are at least fairly well informed about the EU (29% - see 5.7).

8.3 In its post-referenda surveys (EB168, 171, 172, 173), Eurobarometer asked whether people had the necessary information in order to take a decision, and the results are as follows. Respondents whether they agreed with the statement : “before voting in the referendum, you had all the necessary information in order to take a decision”.

Country	<u>Voted</u>		<u>Did not vote</u>		
	Agree %	Disagree%	Agree%	Disagree%	
Spain	59	39	32	61	
France	70	29	46	52	
Netherlands	47	52	32	62	
Luxembourg	62	37	54	46	
	<u>Yes vote</u>		<u>No vote</u>		Turnout %
	Agree%	Disagree%	Agree%	Disagree%	
Spain	65	32	34	64	42.3
France	70	29	71	28	69.3
Netherlands	51	48	44	54	62.8
Luxembourg	70	29	53	47	*
*compulsory voting					

8.4 Two points stand out clearly:

- those who did not vote felt less well informed than those who did cast their vote;
- those who voted “no” also felt that lack more than those who voted “yes”, with the exception of France.

In addition, with the exception of Luxembourg (compulsory voting), abstention was particularly marked among the young.

8.5 A link between feeling informed and level of turnout can be sketched in. In France and Luxembourg, both with high turnout, the sense of feeling informed among voters was high; while in Spain, with lower turnout, there was a greater sense of not feeling informed. This pattern of feeling informed/higher turnout does not fit the Netherlands where although there was a good turnout most people, including most of those who participated, did not feel they had enough information.

8.6 It goes without saying that any analysis must take account of country specific factors as, for example, in Spain where the opposition party did not go out of its way to help its opponent who had called the referendum. The ensuing absence of strong debate appears to have led to a perceived information deficit and, unsurprisingly, to a relatively low turnout.

8.7 In the other three countries, there was a pattern (with national variations) whereby a consensus on the part of the political establishment was increasingly questioned – earliest in France - with concerns being raised about the direction in which the Constitutional Treaty was likely to take the EU and their country. France provided a good example of a choice being debated at great length; the Netherlands show the problem which emerges when a campaign is started too late and the lack of information itself becomes a source of protest.

8.8 The overall but necessarily tentative conclusion is that the four referenda provide further evidence that when people feel better informed they are more likely to vote. But given the widespread under-information prior to the referenda campaigns (8.2), it is not surprising that many people abstained or voted “no”. The comment in the Flash EB report on Spain is very relevant :

“Information is, according to the data, a key element in mobilising voters, and in this case it has not been communicated in a valid or efficient manner by the parties or official institutions...

The lesson that can be learnt for other similar referenda is that even if the mass media seem to be the most effective channel of communication, the content of this information should first come from the political parties and national and European institutions, thereby ensuring that citizens can handle all the necessary information prior to a vote of such crucial importance.”

Conclusion to Part 3

8.9 The analysis suggests that the European information deficit has three elements :

- there is a low level of knowledge about the EU. The provision of factual background material to overcome this is primarily a matter for the EU and national authorities. This makes it difficult for politicians to present their policies and choices to voters when they cannot rely on an understanding of what the EU does and is capable of doing;
- there are often weak political messages, or campaigns that start too late (as the Eurobarometer surveys found for the Spanish, Dutch and Luxembourg referenda on the Constitutional Treaty), which is a matter for political parties and interest groups. This compounds the first factor; and
- in the absence of campaigning, the media finds it difficult to present material which helps people to decide to vote and choose.

As is pointed out below, the Commission has an important role to play in overcoming the first of these elements.

PART 4: THE EXPRESSION OF EUROPEAN IDENTITY

9 Is there a European Identity?

9.1 The report now looks at the nature of European identity, and at the signs that its expression is beginning to form part of the European polity, and then argues that its fuller expression is frustrated by the lack of adequate factual information.

Doubts

9.2 There is a body of opinion which considers that political legitimacy at EU level will always be weak because there is no European demos which in turn reflects the absence of a specifically European identity associated with a European public space in which political debate flourishes. From here it is a short step to assert that, without pan-European political parties, European Parliament elections are no more than a secondary set of national elections to a body whose authority is necessarily weak and which, despite its recent growth in powers, is essentially subservient to the Council of Ministers which itself contains the true political representatives of the 25 constituent democracies of the Union.

9.3 It is interesting to note that the Commission lends credence to this view. In the Governance White Paper of 2001 it said that the focus of people's allegiance is exclusively national and regional. Indeed one of the governance working groups found that "there is little European consciousness" and "there is an absence of European political culture". This line of thinking persists in the White Paper on Communication where, as noted at 1.2, the Commission states "the 'public sphere' within which political life takes place in Europe is largely a national sphere. To the extent that European issues appear on the agenda at all, they are seen by most citizens from a national perspective."

"European opinion"

9.4 Nonetheless, at least at the level of opinion surveys, the existence of a European public opinion is not in doubt. For example, a Louis Harris poll for the TV channel Arte (April 2006), reported results for five countries (Germany, France, UK, Italy and Spain) as follows: "At the beginning of 2006 Europe appears as a political area made up of a European opinion despite the divisions which exist between the views of different countries". It went on: "The [survey] reveals the clear existence of European priorities, moderated by important national divisions". The main aspects identified were: firstly, a wish for a more social side to EU policies and, secondly, more effort to deal with unemployment and terrorism".

9.5 The LH/Arte survey claims that these preferences flow from an attachment to Europe, with 56% of those surveyed having a positive image of Europe. This attachment is based primarily on three "fundamental values: culture, the euro, and peace". On the main factor, "culture", the survey finds that while only 8% of respondents think that "true European culture exists", 90% consider that "Europe is composed of a diversity of cultures".

Communication and identity

9.6 A good deal of work has been carried out to see whether the concept of "culture" can be pinned down to something operational, focussing on the extent to which a European identity exists. Research suggests that the top down, uni-directional push of information about the EU associated with the earlier development of the EU had an impact in stimulating a sense of European identity. In her article ("Political

Communication in Switzerland and the EU”, 2002), Regula Stämpfli argues that political identity can be created without a common public space. Both the Swiss and the EU systems benefit from “a basic trust and a basic feeling that democracy is working” despite being associated with negative views on concrete issues. Her “findings suggest that European identity is a product of many factors but one of them is certainly political communication”.

European identity as “civic” identity

9.7 In his book (“Citizens of Europe? The Emergence of a Mass European Identity”) Michael Bruter goes further and suggests that European identity has emerged mainly as a result of political communication flowing from the creation of the EU and the institutional reforms and changes which have taken place over the past half century.

9.8 He examines the issue at two levels. Firstly, at the individual level, he uses a sample survey of citizens of the UK, France and the Netherlands to obtain some self-perception measures of citizens’ European identity so as understand better what people mean when they discuss feeling European. At the aggregate level, he analyses the results of the responses to certain Eurobarometer questions over the period 1970 – 2000.

9.9 His survey contained detailed questions designed to reveal overall European identity and to see whether its civic and cultural components could be separated. The results showed that feeling European has more to do with “civic” rather than “cultural” identity (his terminology), where the distinction is made between a cultural perspective where people feel closer to those within a group with social similarities and a certain shared heritage, and a civic perspective where they identify with a specific political structure characterised by common institutions, rules and rights. This relatively greater identification with civic aspects may, he suggests, arise because of “the relative abstraction...of a common European heritage, as opposed to the obvious influence of European integration in citizens’ everyday lives”. It would appear, not unsurprisingly, that a significant part of “civic” identity is related to the understanding that people have of the sheer economic impact of the EU.

9.10 This suggests the LH/Arte finding reported above is relatively superficial in that it concerns the ability to talk in general, undefined terms about “culture”, making it difficult to interpret (meanings might range from a general sense of attachment, to ways of doing things, ethnicity, empathy with literary and artistic works, religious traditions, and so on). On the other hand, by asking people to distinguish the relationship they feel between the civic and cultural components of identity Bruter has succeeded in separating them; he points to the importance of current economic and political experience in shaping a primarily civic European identity (without excluding a partial overlap with more general cultural attachments).

9.11 Secondly, he calculates an index of European identity from two Eurobarometer questions which measures the extent to which “citizens demand European integration when they do not believe that it is actually directly beneficial to them personally, or to their country”. One question looks at how favourable respondents feel towards EU integration, the other look at respondents’ assessment of the benefits of this process. In effect the index is a measure of the altruistic desire for ‘more Europe’ and is expressed on a scale of 0 (no desire) to 1 (high desire). The result, covering all countries for the period 1970 to 2000 is 0.62, ie “a very clear sign of the evolution of European identity across countries and time”.

9.12 As is to be expected this evolution varies across countries, the most noticeable results being the four countries which are below the EU average of 0.62. Just below the average are Austria (0.56) and Sweden (0.55), followed by the UK (0.35) and Denmark (0.19).

9.13 Bruter suggests that the level of European identity thus revealed is closely related to three factors :

(a) the introduction of a “rather comprehensive set of official symbols of Europe”, in particular the direct election of the European Parliament, the introduction of the euro, the common passport, as well as the flag, the anthem and Europe Day, and more recently by the adoption of the term “Union”, the Charter of Fundamental Rights, and the effort to adopt a Constitution;

(b) the impact of news about the EU about which people feel positive, which has the cumulative effect of confirming that there is a dynamic to the EU which people can identify with. It is also the case that exposure to news about which people feel negative will tend reduce the extent to which people feel part of Europe. He concludes that “news on Europe is closely related to the level of European identity of citizens and its short term changes in each member state”;

(c) a degree of “inertia” in the sense that “the longer citizens are used to being part of the EU, the more European they are likely to feel”. In other words, the longer an institutionalised political community survives, the more likely it is that a related political identity will emerge

9.14 Point (b) should not be underestimated. It appears that a continuing stimulus to European awareness is provided by the extensive coverage in the media of many EU countries of several recent pan-European issues, such as :

- the decision to go ahead with membership negotiations with Turkey (Oct 05);
- the eventual agreement by Council of the 2007-13 Budget (Dec 05) after the well publicised failure in June 05.
- the concern over gas supplies (Jan 06)
- the efforts to combat bird flu (05/06)
- the results of the carbon emissions/trading scheme (Spring 06)
- the anniversary of the “no” votes (June 06)
- the role of the EU in helping resolve the Lebanon crisis (Aug 06).

Some of these will have been seen positively, others negatively.

9.15 Bruter’s conclusions imply that, despite the official doubts expressed about there being a European public opinion (see 1.2), one should see some evidence of it. In fact the emergent nature of an EU polity is shown by the political reaction to some of the messages contained in the results of the referenda on the Constitutional Treaty.

(a) The revised proposal for the services directive (“Bolkestein”) adopted by the Parliament in February 2006 represents a move to meet the criticism that the proposal would weaken the social welfare systems in certain wealthier member states by permitting the relatively uncontrolled use of non-contributing workers from poorer (and new) member states. It appears to be an example of direct account being taken of voters’ views and, as such, a demonstration that a message was passed from a popular consultation (whose echoes went well beyond national boundaries) and that it was heard. The Council has endorsed the response of the Parliament.

(b) The Parliament and Council have both shown some degree of sensitivity to widespread concerns about enlargement and immigration. The June European Council spoke in terms of needing to discuss “the Union’s capacity to absorb new members.”

(c) The Council’s extension of its transparency policy, making more meetings open to the public, is also a reaction to criticisms of lack of accountability.

(d) The Commission’s announcement in May of a “Citizen’s Agenda” (chapter 3) also reflects a wish to be seen to be listening to European opinion.

10 Responding to European Identity

10.1 No doubt there are limits as how far the political expression of European identity can be advanced, given the present institutional balance of forces, in the sense that certain parts of European opinion are not being reflected very well in the current political process at European level. Two examples can be cited: the balance of opinion against the Iraq war, and the desire for a more social Europe. The result of the Parliamentary elections in 2004 was finely balanced, while the Commission nominated later that year has a more right of centre disposition characterised by measures designed to promote a more liberal economy. Irrespective of the strengths and weaknesses of this as a policy approach, the point is that a considerable part of the population does not feel it is fully represented or being heard (and the Commission suggests it has some awareness of this – see 1.4, 2.3, 2.4, and 3.4). There may be a link here to the greater lack of trust in the EU institutions in recent years, as found in recent Eurobarometer surveys.

10.2 The underlying point, however, is that the EU should respond more clearly to the mass European identity that has already emerged, which is primarily civic in nature. One way in which this response can be made is through meeting the widespread demand for more factual information about the EU.

10.3 The analysis of mass European identity shows that the case for a clear EU policy to deliver factual information can be derived from the practical argument that a better informed public would participate more in the EU, and also from the clearly expressed wish, repeatedly shown in Eurobarometer, that people want to be better informed about the EU. For example, in its survey on “Getting Information on Europe” (EBSpecial56.3, 2002), it was found that there many topics on which people would like more information. At that time the five top areas were :

- 63% on the rights of EU citizens
- 60% on the EU and the fight against crime
- 59% on the EU and fighting unemployment
- 58% on food safety, and
- 57% on the consequences of introducing the euro.

10.4 The case for providing more factual information can also be made on the basis that the EU lacks many of the symbols that other polities have, such as a common language, artistic and cultural definers, religion, sport, and education. Coupled with the EU’s identity being primarily civic in nature, these absences reinforce the need to inform people about EU matters as fully as possible.

10.5 This means accepting that reliable factual information about the EU should be seen as a symbol of citizenship. It should therefore be seen as a “public good”, ie in the sense that it benefits society only if it distributed to everyone; it is not a consumer good whose distribution is related to the ability to buy. It would be provided as a duty by public authorities without charge, and would be offered to the public in ways to ensure that all sectors and groups in society are reached (in particular through public sector messages in the media).

10.6 This pro-active dissemination means using TV, press and radio which, as Eurobarometer has repeatedly found, are people’s preferred media for receiving information about the EU. For example in the Autumn of 2005 (EB63), 70% of respondents said they used television when looking for information about the EU, its policies and its institutions, 43% used daily newspapers and 32% used radio. The internet was used by 22%. In other words people generally expect information about the EU to be brought to them, not that they should have to go and search for it (as underlined in the European Parliament report of 2005, see 1.9). This means, however, that the financial resources have to be found – and voted – to provide the means to obtain access to the media space necessary to communicate with the very large public who wish to hear and see more about the EU.

10.7 A “virtuous circle” can be envisaged: a much wider distribution of factual material will help clarify the basis on which choices at EU level are being made, and will enable people to judge the positions which parties and interest groups take about particular issues. Political debate will be strengthened, and that will attract media coverage, which in turn will help the choices for EU policies to become clearer, thereby providing a stimulus to greater participation in EU. (This may in turn possibly lead to a demand for better means of political accountability than exists at present, for example through popular involvement in the election of the Commission President.) If the factual material is not actively disseminated, it will be more difficult for people to take a view about the fairness of what is being proposed (eg discussions over services directive, enlargement, CAP reform, etc), and the circle would remain relatively closed.

PART 5: RESPONSE TO THE WHITE PAPER

11 “A Policy in its Own Right”

11.1 Academic research confirms that the Commission had changed its information policy before the arrival of the Barroso Commission. In his assessment (“How the EU constructs the public sphere”, 2005), Michael Bruggemann argues that the pressure to overcome the weakness of the European public sphere has induced the Commission to attempt to move away from a more secretive and declaratory approach to information towards greater dialogue and transparency. He suggests that this attempt “hints at a change of paradigm in the way the EU treats information”.

11.2 It is crucial to recognise that the rejection of the Constitutional Treaty by two member states has provided the stimulus to the Commission to broaden the context of EU information and communication policy. It now accepts what has been evident to many observers for some time that information policy is “a policy in its own right” with a direct bearing on the long term mission of the EU and the involvement of people in it. In effect, this seems to promise a good deal more than the “hints at a change” identified by Bruggemann; the recognition by the Commission that the democratic legitimacy of the EU is related to the ability of the institutions to communicate is greatly to be welcomed.

12 Act now to overcome the Information Gap

12.1 The detailed comments are based on the main finding in the analytical parts of the report, namely that a lack of factual information among EU citizens still lies at the heart of the lukewarm nature of EU legitimacy. The experience of recent European Parliament elections and referenda is that more people will vote when faced with concrete alternatives (or choices) and/or with the possibility that their vote will «count». To the extent that governments and/or national parties have not clearly explained their European Parliament manifestoes, or try to play down EU issues, or resort to blaming Brussels, the electorate will be less inclined to vote; similarly, if the media do not provide enough coverage of the event, there is less of a catalyst to convert voting intentions into action.

12.2 The White Paper under-estimates the importance of ensuring that as many people as possible – especially the large numbers included in the groups which have long been under-informed (see 5.8) – are informed about EU facts and policies so as to help them make up their minds about the choices facing the EU. A distinction is made between factual information about the EU, which people need as a basic building block to enable their participation as voters, the provision of which is a proper function of the institutions, particularly the Commission; and interpretive or political information, usually disseminated by the media, which encourages choices to be made.

12.3 While the Commission is right to advocate “a stronger recognition of the European dimension in national political exchange”, the analysis in this report on the relationship between European information and identity suggests that the Commission has not fully recognised the nature of European political activity and the existing involvement of people in the EU and how it can be encouraged by ensuring that people are better informed about the EU. As a result, the White Paper underplays the extent to which the Commission – as a key player – should respond itself to inform people about the EU.

12.4 It is unfortunate that the White Paper acquiesces in the primacy of the member states in this area (see 1.2). It appears to have stuck too closely to the narrow role prescribed for it by the European Council in June 2005 (to “develop a broad framework for action and coordinate the activities undertaken by all the partners”).

13 Three Omissions

The White Paper contains very little or no examination of three crucial matters.

13.1 *Value for money* There is no appraisal of the value for money of the expenditure incurred during the period 2000-2004, apart from the enigmatic statement in the internal Action Plan (see 1.6) that “the strategies adopted in the past by the Commission were too focused on financing campaigns rather than on dialogue and proactive communication”. Although the Commissioner expanded a little on this in her remarks at the Launch Conference on 1 February (see 1.4), there is no way of knowing what the Commission thinks in detail about the value and impact of the various “PRINCE” campaigns (see footnote to page 9) which have been carried out since 1996.

13.2 In effect, no evaluations are available to support the Commission’s position, nor have any research/background papers been published separately (for example on europa, as is often the case for other policy areas). Apart from a footnote in the White Paper there is no reference to any consultation or other public input which was sought in preparing it.

13.3 One of the clear successes of the PRINCE programme is “Europe Direct”, which provides a call centre and website to enable people to ask any question about the EU: about 100,000 enquiries were received in 2005. The extensive network of local information outlets (about 400 across the EU) has recently been incorporated under the Europe Direct banner. As the expenditure analysis in chapter 14 shows, Europe Direct has been somewhat expanded recently. Nonetheless, it remains a “cinderella” operation which is given little publicity. If the Commission accepted the need put forward in this report for the provision of much more factual information, Europe Direct would form the basis for pro-active campaigning.

13.4 *Legal Basis* Nothing is said about the legal basis for the Commission’s own information activity. On the one hand, there is the opinion of the Commission’s Legal Service, as recorded in the last policy statement by the Prodi Commission on information and communication policy of April 2004: “information and communication measures are covered by the Commission’s institutional prerogatives, which can be carried out without a legal basis under Article 49(2) of the Financial Regulations.” This justification regularly appears for each of the Commission’s budget lines for information activity. Nonetheless, as reported in the author’s first report for ECAS, the Commission’s detractors argue that as there is no single point of reference in the Treaty for information work, objections to proposed expenditure can be mounted by the Council unless the Parliament overrides them.

13.5 *Financial Resources* While the White Paper wants to get the Member States to do more, it is disingenuous to propose a charter which seeks to involve them while also papering over what appears to be a major uncertainty in the Commission’s powers. This hole at the heart of the White Paper may account for its near absence of discussion of financial resources, as well as its failure to envisage large scale – and necessarily costly – information programmes designed to make a serious impact on the “lamentable” ignorance of the EU (the term used by the European Parliament – see 1.9).

13.6 The only limited reference to finance in the White Paper appears under the heading of “partnership”: comment on this is at 17.5.

14 Filling in one of the Omissions : Information and Communication Expenditure and Plans 2004 - 2007

14.1 Neither Plan D nor the White Paper on Communication contains details of recent and planned expenditure by the Commission on information and communication activity. This omission makes it difficult to assess the options on which the Commission is consulting.

14.2 In order to fill this gap, the analysis contained in the table* on the next page covers the Commission's expenditure outturn in 2004, commitments for 2005 and 2006, and proposals for 2007 (in the preliminary draft budget). It concentrates on those budget lines which are related to activities designed to reach the citizen. They are :

- PRINCE (five lines; for background see footnote to page 9)
- specific information activity within DG Communication - seven lines
- infrastructures maintained by DG Communication – three lines.

The cost of staff and headquarters overhead costs have been excluded.

14.3 As the table shows, there was a one-off increase in expenditure in 2005 and there has been a modest change of emphasis towards more local action and online activity.

14.4 A detailed examination shows that there was a welcome boost to expenditure in 2005, mainly to reinforce the information outlets (now part of Europe Direct, see 13.3) and the Representative Offices across the expanded EU. Other increases included local actions and online tools, the PRINCE line concerning the debate on the future of Europe, and public opinion analysis. The main change in 2006 was the increase in multimedia actions (production of material through the media), and a decrease in the amounts allocated for public opinion analysis and information outlets.

14.5 The most surprising result is that the Commission is actually proposing a reduction in its expenditure on information and communication in 2007 compared to 2006 (120.84m€ against 123.04m€). This amounts to about 0.26€ per head (26 cents). The only line to see any significant increase is “online tools” which is forecast to rise to 10.08m€ in 2007 (8.4%). PRINCE is where one would expect to see an increase if there were to be a major effort by the Commission to reach out to people, but the total is almost unchanged at 26.39m€ (about 0.11€ per head, ie 11 cents), including that part which concerns the debate about the future of the EU for which DG Communication is directly responsible (7.87m€).

*Final adoption of the general budget of the EU for Financial Year 2006, OJ L Vol49, 13.05.06
Preliminary Draft Budget 2007 adopted by the Commission, 03.05.06

TABLE EXPENDITURE ON INFORMATION AND COMMUNICATION 2004 - 2007

budget line	outturn	expenditure	expenditure	proposed
		commitments	commitments	commitments
source	(budget 2006)	(budget 2006)	(PDB 2007)	(PDB 2007)
year	<u>2004</u>	<u>2005</u>	<u>2006</u>	<u>2007</u>
PRINCE				
Economic and Monetary Union, incl Euro	2.28	4	5	7
Freedom, Justice and Security	2.99	5	3.2	4.4
EU in the world	3.86	2.8	4	2.62
Enlargement	15.5	5.6	7	4.5
Future of Europe	4.33	9	7.3	7.87
			res 1.07	
<u>total PRINCE</u>	<u>28.96</u>	<u>26.4</u>	<u>26.5</u>	<u>26.39</u>
			res 1.07	
DG COMM Action Lines				
Multimedia actions	8.26	9	15.25	13.75
			res 1	
Information for the media	1.78	2.6	3.25	3.37
Local actions	5.71	8.65	8.25	8.39
			res 0.4	
Online I&C tools	6.25	9.65	8.8	10.08
Targeted written publications	2.67	5.75	6.05	5.09
Written publications of general use	2.4	2.42	2.42	2.42
Public opinion analysis	6.69	8	5.07	5.6
			res 0.53	
<u>total Action Lines</u>	<u>34.76</u>	<u>45.07</u>	<u>49.09</u>	<u>48.8</u>
			res 1.93	
DG COMM Infrastructure				
Buildings - Representations	21.04	24.6	25.1	25.5
Operation of studios and AV	6.4	5.6	5.6	5.6
Information Outlets	9.03	19.6	16.75	14.55
			res 1	
<u>total Infrastructure Lines</u>	<u>36.47</u>	<u>49.8</u>	<u>48.45</u>	<u>45.65</u>
			res 1	
<u>Overall Total</u>	<u>100.09</u>	<u>121.27</u>	<u>123.04</u>	<u>120.84</u>
			res 4	
Note: «res» is an extra amount held in reserve				

15 Access to information

15.1 Although the White Paper talks about the right to information, it does so by reference to Article 11 of the Charter of Fundamental Rights which is not in fact concerned with information designed to raise awareness of the EU (it concerns the individual right to freedom of expression and the freedom and pluralism of the media). The White Paper does not in fact talk in terms of giving people the right to be informed. On the contrary, the notion of “access to information” (which is entirely separate from the issue of access to internal documents) means that the institutions have complete discretion about the provision of information to citizens. Worryingly, the White Paper says that people “should be helped to develop skills to access and use that information” as if there is no obligation on the institutions to make it available in the way that best suits people.

15.2 This emphasis on the need for people to become more media literate is unfortunate : the White Paper should rather say that the European institutions have a duty to inform the citizen, in whatever way is necessary to reach them all so that people can fully participate in the democratic mechanisms available (whether that is at European, national, regional or local level). It is surely for people themselves to decide what level of “media literacy” they wish to achieve.

16 Charter, Code or Legislation?

16.1 Despite the legal basis which has long provided the justification for the Commission’s information and communication activity (see 13.4), the Commissioner explained at the White Paper Launch Conference on 1 February that the proposal for a charter on common communication principles and standards would help create a basis for the communication activities of the EU, which the Treaty of Rome lacked. Thus, if all EU institutions signed up, citizens would know what to expect and accusations of making propaganda would be more difficult to sustain.

16.2 The argument of propaganda is likely to be made by governments who object to the right of the institutions, particularly the Commission, to communicate directly with “their” citizens, or by political parties (at all level) who dispute the facts and object to specific policies (an obvious contender are certain eurosceptics). The argument that a charter would provide a defence against charges of propaganda is not convincing because the real defence is not to retreat in the face of criticism but to show that the information being provided is factual and impartial, and not designed to promote a party political interest.

16.3 The White Paper argues that communication is a shared responsibility, spread between the institutions, particularly with the Council and its constituent Member States. The difficulty with this position is that the responsibility becomes everyone’s and no-one’s, with the risk of there being a lowest common denominator of what should be done, ie very little; the absence of “European” solutions in the Council’s report (see chapter 19) reinforces this concern. The real need is for there to be a driving force to ensure that everyone has factual material at their disposal (not just, as the White Paper says, equal access to information). In principle this responsibility lies with the Commission, because of its role as guardian of the Treaty.

16.4 Such a charter seems unlikely to serve much purpose as the principles would not require the signatories to pro-actively reach out to citizens. Moreover, the White Paper makes it quite clear that it would be voluntary and thus unenforceable: eg how would citizens – the nominated beneficiaries - assess whether the “common principles and norms” have been respected? And which body would attempt to seek remedies on their behalf?

16.5 Codes of Conduct are well known in the consumer field, for example in areas such as banking, insurance, and air passenger rights, where it is difficult for the legislator to provide a sufficiently flexible response to changing commercial circumstances. It may also be the case that there is a political preference for sectoral self-regulation rather than legislation. In the field of information rights, however, with their direct link to the exercise of democratic participation, the informality of a code or charter is not appropriate. If citizens have a right to know about the activities of the EU, the institutions have a corresponding obligation, not a discretionary duty.

16.6 These objections could be overcome by legislation in the form of a provision under Article 308 of the Treaty which would :

- state the objective of EU information policy in terms of people's "right to be informed about the EU" (rather than just "access to information" - see 15.1 - or a passive "right to information" - see 1.3 and 1.4);
- place a binding obligation on the institutions to deliver it, meaning that there would be properly prepared factual information programmes;
- require the institutions to cooperate, meaning that the programmes would be financed to use the mass media to reach the target populations (as explained at 10.6); and
- enable a legal challenge in the event of a failure to discharge the duty to inform people.

A draft Treaty article is attached at the Annex.

16.7 The Commission would be responsible for :

- producing factual, reliable material about all EU policies, issues and individual rights, building on what is available through Europe Direct;
- communicating the expanded Europe Direct material through the media, and buying media space in order to reach out to all citizens;
- the europa site, and improving its user friendliness to the citizen;
- handling enquiries, managing Europe Direct and euro-info centres; and
- carrying out public opinion survey which would help orient the information campaigns towards the least well informed parts of the population.

16.8 The Commission would report to the Parliament and Council each year and operate under a pluri-annual budget and programme voted by the Parliament.

16.9 Although the Article 308 procedure excludes Parliament as co-legislator, involving it only in a consultative role, a procedure could be found whereby the Parliament could be fully involved in defining and framing the legislation. Article 308 requires unanimity in the Council which, while enabling any Member State which was less than enthusiastic about encouraging greater EU activity in the information field to block and delay the legislation, would have the advantage of exposing any member states who wished to keep their citizens in the dark. In an information age, they could expect to run into serious criticism.

16.10 The need for this legislation is all the more urgent if the present under-funding of EU information activity persists :

- the Council has rarely been enthusiastic about providing extra budgetary resources for information activity;
- the Parliament, although often the indispensable source of institutional pressure for more information activity by the Commission, has in recent years held significant sums in reserve in such a way as to frustrate the effective operation of EU information programmes; and
- worse still, given all the evidence for under-information and its effects, the Commission itself is reducing its expenditure plans in 2007 (see 14.5).

The legislation proposed would require the Parliament and the Council to accept the need for the effective funding of EU information activity, the programmes for which would be proposed by the Commission in discharge of its duty to comply with people's right to be informed.

17 Other Comments

The following comments refer back to the headings used to summarise the White Paper in paragraph 1.3.

Empowerment

17.1 While there is merit in much of what is proposed, for example the projects sought through the Citizens for Europe programme, the White Paper fails to address the point that the EU has little competence in the education field and contents itself with suggestions for networking European teachers and libraries. A more direct approach would be to make suggestions direct to the member states such as the need for the EU to be a compulsory subject in schools.

Media

17.2 In the light of the evidence that a European identity has emerged partly because existing media coverage already provides some degree of political communication, it seems that the Commission is over concerned by the often critical tone of its treatment by the media. It recommends little change: the aim is to establish mechanisms so that there should be a better relationship between the media and public bodies (particularly the EU institutions) so that the latter can provide the media with material which is relevant for them. The discussion of the information haves and have nots unfortunately implies that a good part of the EU information deficit would be overcome if everyone were equally competent to use the internet. Even the Council's paper expresses doubts over the effectiveness of the internet (4.3).

Measuring Public Opinion

17.3 The White Paper goes too far when it says that "the importance of these tools [to measure public opinion] has increased in parallel with the tendency for citizens to withdraw from traditional politics (joining political parties, voting in election, etc)." Not only is the evidence for this withdrawal weak (as discussed in this report), but too much is made of the implied democratic role of public opinion analyses (ie by substitution). The proposed Observatory for European Public Opinion, in which the institutions and member states would pool resources, seems to be a recipe for the dilution of Eurobarometer :

The important thing is that surveys like Eurobarometer are carried out to the highest independent standards with a high degree of continuity and without being subject to political interference. Otherwise the results are worse than useless. Their value lies in scrupulous adherence to verifiable methodology and the publication of all findings (irrespective of nature of the results and whether or not politicians pay attention to them).

Partnership

17.4 While there are some useful suggestions (including acceptance of the Parliament's proposal – see 1.7 - that an annual parliamentary debate should be held on communication initiatives), the prevailing sense is that cooperation is a good in itself, and little is said about what political parties and other groups could do in practice: there is no analysis of their activity, and what can be learnt from it. There is, unexpectedly, no reference to the importance of single issue interest/pressure groups apart from a generalised glance in the direction of civil society organisations.

17.5 The partnership heading provides the only reference in the White Paper to finance, where it is couched in terms of the possibility of cooperation with member states on the basis of “management partnerships”. They appear to be agreements with national authorities on the EU information and communication activities to be carried out in each member state. As there is no description or analysis of these agreements in the White Paper, it is to be hoped that they do not give too much initiative – in terms of the type of information and messages, as well as in terms of finance - to the member states, with too little control by the Commission. The reference in the White Paper to the lead role of the member states by the Commission (see 1.2) gives grounds for concern.

18 The White Paper and the “Citizen's Agenda”

18.1 None of the items contained in “a citizen's agenda” published by the Commission on 10 May 2006 (see chapter 3) have actually been submitted to citizens as such, and - with the exception of the entitlement card (since rejected by the Council) - they appear to be part of the Commission's existing policy agenda. Much is made in the document of the political consensus reached at the special European Council in October 2005 (Hampton Court). In other words there is not much recognition that “listening” may also involve changing policies.

18.2 This suggests that there is a risk that Plan D may hinder the implementation of the White Paper. The danger is that Plan D will impose the need to deliver quick results to make it appear that the Commission is actually “listening” to citizens, rather than enable the development of an effective long term information and communication policy.

19 The White Paper and the Council's Report

19.1 The Council's report (see chapter 4) illustrates the uncertainties which can arise when too much initiative is left to the Member States to solve information and communication issues which are often EU-wide in scope.

19.2 Much of the analysis in the Council's report about methods of communication and targets has common ground with this report, in particular its recognition of the positive impact of information based on real facts, and its finding that most people want to be more involved in EU affairs. The drawback of the document is that it contains no sense that there is a wider European feeling about issues being more capable of being solved through the EU rather than at national level, and there is no awareness of the sort of European identity discussed in chapter 9.

19.3 The tone of the Council's report is not very enthusiastic about citizen involvement, perhaps because of the mistaken view that people's agenda for Europe is much the same as that for the national one. While the role of national politicians is safeguarded, nothing is said about the need for a wider European voice to which citizens can relate, and the absence of practical ideas about encouraging citizens to participate in EU debates, discussions, projects, etc is quite remarkable. It demonstrates the need for clear proposals by the Commission to take the EU forward in this area

19.4 This absence of "European" solutions is striking, and it underscores the need for the Commission to initiate its own programme to avoid the situation whereby European information policy is left to drift at the will of each Member State.

20 Conclusion

20.1 The White Paper marks a big step forward in making EU information and communication policy a policy in its own right, and in recognising its link to the EU democratic process.

20.2 It does not, however, take into account the nature of European identity, or the way in which the European polity is already operating. In particular it does not recognise the importance of overcoming the deep-seated information gap so as to help more people express their European identity.

20.3 The Commission should accept that people have a right to be informed about the EU and come forward with a proposal for a new Treaty article, using the power available under Article 308. At the same time it should take active steps to ensure that major information campaigns are carried out in all member states with the aim of improving the turnout at the European Parliament elections in 2009: they are less than three years away!

ANNEX : The Right to be Informed

See 16.6

Article to be added to Part II of the Treaty (Citizenship of the Union)

1. All citizens of the Union, and all natural persons residing in a Member State, shall have a right to be informed of the activities of the EU institutions and of their rights and obligations under the Treaty.

Union policy on informing citizens shall therefore contribute to the advancement of citizens' practical understanding and participation in the Union and its institutions.

2. Action by the Institutions should complement efforts by the Member States and regional authorities to inform citizens about the Union.

3. The Council, acting in accordance with the procedure set out in Article 251 of the Treaty [co-decision], shall adopt information programmes aimed at :

(a) establishing the general strategy of the Institutions and how they should co-operate with the Member State, taking into account available data on the information needs of citizens;

(b) informing citizens

- of their individual and collective rights, and in particular the Charter of Fundamental Rights;
- of changes to the Treaty, and of legislation and policies being prepared and adopted;
- about the major challenges facing the Union.

Information shall be clear, factual and impartial and made available to all citizens.

4. The European Parliament, the Council and the Commission shall elaborate in their respective rules of procedure specific provisions regarding the citizen's right to be informed.

APPENDIX

Summary of the Commission's Action Plan (July 2005)

See 1.6

1 It contains a brief assessment of the previous Commission's activity, pointing to the improved partnership with the Parliament, Council and member states. But "follow-up and implementation had several weaknesses :

- continuous fragmentation of communication activities...
- messages reflecting political priorities but not necessarily linked to citizens interest, needs and preoccupations...
- inadequate implementation..."

2 The Action Plan has three strategic principles :

- listening : the EU should not only inform citizens, but they should also be able to express their opinions «so that the Commission can understand their perceptions and concerns»;
- communicating : EU policies and activities should be explained in a way that people can understand and relate to; and
- connecting with citizens by 'going local' : the Commission should address people's concerns and inform them through the channels they prefer.

3 The Plan contains 50 detailed internal actions with completion dates ranging from the second half of 2005 to 2009. The priorities are :

- establishing communication priorities, including the provision of core messages. This involves the creation of a top level communication agenda supported by a planning and coordination function;
- coordinating activities across the Commission, involving a revitalised 'external communication network' across Commission departments;
- reinforcing the Representations, including priority for Commissioners' visits;
- better use of communication tools, including the reshaping of the europa website;
- describing the tangible benefits of all major new initiatives, together with the provision of a communication plan;
- better training of staff and better recruitment

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