

Beal.  
Hed

## 8 The politics of the Commission as an information source

*Olivier Baisnée*

In order to study the political logics which govern the European Commission it is useful, for once, not to look within the institution itself but alongside or, to use the spatial metaphor of the press room, in front of it. Based upon a study of the EU press corps, this chapter deals with problems of crucial importance regarding legitimacy and the way the Commission deals with its own political ambiguity. If the European Commission is to be analysed as a political institution, it is beneficial to examine the way it communicates and attempts to gain both a visible and social existence.<sup>1</sup> While the themes of the democratic deficit and of the emergence of a European public sphere (for a critical approach, see Smith 1999) have become the topic of much scientific investigation, few studies have been dedicated to the Commission's communication practices (Consoli 1997; Meyer 1999), and this despite the fact that the ability of an institution to shape its legitimate social image is one of the key components of political power. In contrast, the attention paid to this question at the national level remind us to what extent this relationship with the media is an essential political issue for most governments (Davis 2000, 2002; Franklin 1999; Legavre 1993). From the point of view of a sociology of journalism which studies relationships between journalists and their sources, I attempt to analyse the communication strategies of an institution which has to deal with one of the biggest press corps in the world (800 correspondents). The priority for the Commission, as for any political institution, is to try to persuade the media to share its interpretation of the current affairs of the EU. In this respect, the sociology of journalism is divided between a structuralist approach and a more competitive/dynamic conception of the interactions between sources and journalists.

The first intellectual tradition (Hall *et al.* 1978; Gitlin 1980) has depicted journalists as broadly dominated by the will of their socially powerful sources. Because of their social authority, or due to their social proximity to journalists or media owners, these sources are seen as able to ensure the diffusion and the reproduction of the 'hegemonic' ideology. Interpretations of the (socially, economically or politically) powerful thus only allow contestation within limits they themselves have fixed.<sup>2</sup> Interpre-

tations deviating from their own would therefore be considered as oddities, deserving no attention or forced to respect the terms of debate imposed by the 'primary definers' whose initial framing of public issues cannot be challenged. From this hypothesis of the existence of 'primary definers', Hall *et al.* have stressed the dependence of journalists on the framing carried out by their official sources:

The important point about the structured relationship between the media and the primary institutional definers is that it permits the institutional definers to establish the initial definition or primary interpretation of the topic in question. This interpretation then 'commands the field' in all subsequent treatment and sets the terms of reference within which all further coverage or debate takes place. Arguments against a primary interpretation are forced to insert themselves into its definition of 'what is at issue' – they must begin from this framework of interpretation as their starting point. This initial interpretative framework ... is extremely difficult to alter fundamentally, once established ... the primary definitions sets the limit for all subsequent discussion by framing what the problem is ... Contributions which stray from this framework are exposed to the charge that they are 'not addressing the problem.'

(Hall *et al.* 1978)<sup>3</sup>

In this respect, a socially powerful institution is necessarily a dominant information source which is able to impose its own framing of events.

The idea of the ability of some sources to impose their interpretation of 'what is at stake' needs to be retained. However, other studies have tempered the conclusions of this structuralist intellectual tradition (Schlesinger 1992). For example, they have developed the idea that when the internal coherence of a source is undermined, their ability to impose a framing of the situation is challenged (Hallin 1989). Moreover, the competition that may take place between various official sources is also one of the factors needing to be taken into account because alternative definitions of public issues might be supported by institutions that are equally legitimate (Miller 1993). The main conclusion of these new theoretical approaches is therefore that it is quite impossible to decide a priori which institution will be able to impose its framing of the situation upon others. The relationship of an institution to journalists therefore has to be studied in a pragmatic and historical way. Indeed, the components which make up a 'good source' (Gans 1979) have to be analysed as well as the way this relationship has been historically constructed. Although the status of 'privileged source' is by no means flimsy, it can be lost or challenged under certain circumstances.

Historically speaking, and as far as EU news is concerned, the European Commission has long been the dominant source. Communicating in

136 *Olivier Baisnée*

an environment that is characterized by an enormous amount of information, the diversity of competing sources and the need for journalists to select from the information they are given, the Commission emerged as the institution best able to make its own interpretation of issues shared by journalists. With respect to the general theories mentioned above, this relative dominance of the Commission over the EU's information is more the consequence of a relationship that has been constructed with journalists than of its political or social power. Indeed, at least outside the context of 'Brussels', the Commission is not such a politically and socially powerful institution that it would automatically become the primary source of journalists. Indeed, in general terms, the Commission is characterized more by its weak political legitimacy and social 'invisibility'. As this chapter shows, the particular characteristics of the Commission's relationship to the press corps serve to explain why it has long been favoured by journalists.

This chapter also studies the relationship between journalists and their sources in a dynamic fashion. As the political crisis that led to the resignation of Jacques Santer's team was going on, the internal coherence of the institution disappeared and informers provided investigative journalists with information. In a situation where the usual relationship between the Commission and journalists was no longer valid, competition between EU sources became very tough and sources usually marginalized by journalists (such as the European Parliament) were re-evaluated. Indeed, the latter managed to have their analysis of 'what was at stake' shared by the media. Finally, the chapter looks at the changes that took place in the Commission's communication strategy when Romano Prodi's team came into office. The overall failure of this strategy not only reveals the logic of the relationship between the Commission and the EU press corps, but also the difficulties encountered by an institution which has to face a 'public' with very diverse needs.

### **The characteristics of EU 'sources'**

EU sources are characterized by three trends: their abundance and diversity, competition for access to journalists they are involved with and the hierarchy of sources established by journalists.

#### *The diversity and amount of information*

'It's a house made of glass', explains a journalist while pointing out the Breydel building through his office window. When asked about his relationship to the Commission as a source he indeed underlines how easy, especially when compared to his previous foreign correspondent's job, it is to contact senior Commission civil servants and even commissioners. 'Transparency', the buzzword of the Commission's communication policy

*The Commission as an information source* 137

(Smith 2002), has accelerated the release of documents and increased the possibility for journalists to obtain explanations, answers, etc.

As we shall see, the amount of information it provides to journalists is one of the reasons for the Commission's domination as a source of information. Moreover, this is not merely the result of the commitment of just one institution since the profusion of sources is a characteristic of the EU. On a single subject, journalists can ask up to three institutional sources which have an interest in releasing information, thereby increasing the journalist's capacity to grasp the issues and problems at hand. Moreover, to these institutional sources one must add the thousands of lobbyists who inundate journalists' fax machines with their own news. The best example of this source diversity is the Council where competing governmental sources have equal value and legitimacy; a situation which simply does not exist at the national level. As these two British journalists explain, there is always a source keen to release the information they are looking for, either because they aren't involved in the controversy and have no reason to keep it secret (which is often the case for small countries), or because they are involved in a controversy and want to embarrass their 'opponents':

we complain and moan here, but actually, it's easier, and the sources of information are easier as well, probably because there are so many of them. So if I really want to find out what is happening, I can try here, but it probably won't come back to me, but then I can go to the UK representative, and the guy who covers chemicals there and say: 'well, what do you know about this?' He might not know anything, but he might, and then I'll go to France, I'll go to Germany ... in the UK you wouldn't have a clue. In the UK, you would have to go to the press office.

(British journalist, national daily newspaper)

In Britain, and a lot has been written about it, the government has ... tries to control the message a great deal. And it can do that if it's disciplined. Whereas here that isn't really possible because you have so many different other sources of information ... If, for example on beef ... If the British government says ... you can crosscheck what they are saying by talking to the French delegation, to the Commission, to the German delegation if they've gone to the meeting ... And that actually has a positive effect for a journalist on the way officials and press officers behave here ... They can put their spin or their perspective on events but fundamentally they've got to provide more information than they would provide in London and be ... make sure that it is factually accurate. It's more difficult to lie here as a press officer. It's a very difficult job to hold.

(British journalist, national daily newspaper)



138 *Olivier Baisnée*

This abundance of available sources on the same subject and the fact that they have various interests in releasing information, makes the journalist's job easier in the same way as it makes it more difficult for spokespersons. Besides this diversity, sources are also involved in a form of competition which increases the capacity of journalists to crosscheck their information.

*Competition between sources*

This competition between sources can even be observed physically every day. Spokespersons from the Permanent Representations attend the daily briefing of the Commission. Standing discreetly at the back of the press-room, their task begins when the briefing ends by meeting 'their' national journalists in the bar of the press centre and providing the official position of their government about what the Commission has just said.

On the other hand, as the following example illustrates, Commission spokespersons can also encroach upon the member state's territory (the building of the Council) in order to promote the stance of their own institution.

14th December 1999.

In the bar of the Council press centre: 16h10, during an interview with a British journalist the British spokesman arrived, the interview stopped. The spokesman of the British Permanent Representation gathers together the British journalists who immediately form a circle around him. He quotes from a small notebook (reading with accents) comments made by Ministers Glavany and Brown. Journalists ask him for details and to repeat some points. Journalists discuss the implications together. The spokesman of the Health and consumer protection commissioner then arrives: 'can I listen to you?'. The British spokesman then indicates that: 'I did not dwell on commissioner Byrne. I'm afraid I insisted on all the nasty things Mr Brown said about Mr Glavany'. Under pressure from a journalist, the Commission's spokesman gives an 'off, off, off the record' reaction, 'well, I'm listening to you'. Every journalist then gets closer. The Commission's spokesperson receives a phone call (everyone was waiting for the decision of the Commission meeting in Strasbourg about the '*avis raisonné*'). At the end of the call she tells a press agency journalist, 'I'm afraid you have to go'. The journalist asks 'is it five days?' When told 'yes', the journalist then runs to a phone. Indeed, the Commission had just decided to use a summary procedure which obliged France to answer for its decision not to lift a ban on British beef within five days.

*The Commission as an information source* 139

This French journalist also confirms that information released by the Commission is a means of verifying what a minister has said whereas in the same situation at the national level, he wouldn't have had a means of checking what a minister has told him. In short, the availability in a single place of various sources enables journalists to know when a politician is not telling the truth.

For example, ... Pierret (French Minister of Industry) ... It was about EDF, on the opening-up of the market. He said 'no, no, no I informed them, there was no problem'. We've been to others, I've been to commissioner De Palacio who told me 'Oh yes he has been given a shaking-up, etc.' so I wrote: 'It didn't go well'. Well, I found out too late to be able to say to Pierret 'wait a minute, the others say the contrary'. In France the contrary is true: political cant is everywhere. There must really be someone who wants to trip someone up to have an account of what goes on in the intimacy of the Council of Ministers or something like that. Here it's quite transparent.

(French journalist, national economic daily)

*Journalists' hierarchy of sources*

Dealing with such an abundance of information and informers, journalists have to be selective in handling their sources. While for most European citizens the EU institutional system remains rather indistinct, journalists have to favour some sources over others, both for practical reasons but also because they are able to evaluate the respective political weight of each one. As the following example shows, sources not considered basic or interesting tend to be ignored by journalists.

On the 10 November 1999, quite unusually, numerous journalists gathered in the pressroom of the Paul-Henri Spaak building of the European Parliament (EP). To understand this unusual crowd, one has to take into account the importance of what was happening in the EP on this particular day. A French commissioner, Michel Barnier, and the president of the Commission, Romano Prodi, had come to explain to MEPs what the Commission's propositions were regarding the Helsinki intergovernmental conference. This was a big issue since it concerned the way the EU will adapt its functioning to the enlargement process. During the first few minutes of the meeting, only around 20 journalists came into the vast pressroom of the EP to watch the debates broadcast on a giant screen. However, as soon as the commissioner and his president (whose presence was not foreseen) were announced, the

room suddenly filled up and MEPs' assistants were pushed out to free up space for journalists ('we have to do some cleaning' said one of the Parliament's civil servants). Representatives from the prestigious titles of national presses then settled down to listen to the Commission's propositions about a crucial issue.

As the (short) press conference ended the president of the parliamentary commission for institutional matters, Mr Napolitano, began his speech only to endure a mass exodus from the pressroom. Indeed, most journalists who came for the Commissioner's press conference left the room just as the Italian MEP was about to speak. This attitude is very revealing of the weak interest amongst journalists for the EP's position even when major issues are at stake. It provoked a humorous reaction from Mr Napolitano who seems to have understood that the institution he belongs to does not arouse much enthusiasm among EU correspondents. Speaking in French, he greeted 'all the heroes that have decided to stay'.

One can see from this episode the hierarchy that exists in journalists' minds between the Commission and the Parliament. While the former is attentively listened to and even provokes an unusual crowd in the Parliament's building, journalists appear uninterested in the thoughts of MEP's about issues involving the enlargement process. In the cosy atmosphere of 'the European quarter' of Brussels, institutions struggle for the attention of journalists. Often obliged to cover the whole of EU current affairs (and sometimes those of NATO and Belgium), journalists have been obliged to prioritize and therefore to favour certain sources above others.

Along with the observation of journalistic practices and analysis of their output undertaken as part of my research, this example illustrates quite clearly that the Commission is the dominant source for EU correspondents. Through a historically constructed preferential relationship with accredited journalists, the Commission has not only managed to receive considerable coverage, but also to influence interpretations of EU current affairs.

### **Becoming the dominant source**

Given the intense competition between information sources that takes place in the European quarter, the ability of the Commission to shape both the agenda and the interpretation of events of EU correspondents has to be explained. As we shall see, its ability to produce abundant and technically detailed information on a daily basis, as well as the dominant way correspondents cover the news of the EU, are the principal foundations of this decisive 'power to frame'.

*The Commission as an information source* 141*The midday briefing as an institution: producing an information routine*

While the social image of journalism depicts media professionals digging for information, most news actually arrives in newspapers through highly routine channels. This is why Léon Sigal (1973) used the metaphor of the pipeline in order to underline the role of sources in the news production process:

like a pipeline carrying water from a reservoir to a city, it has some effect on what arrives at the end of the line. Not all droplets that enter the pipeline end up in the same destination; some are routed elsewhere, others evaporate en route. Yet the effects of the pipeline are minor compared to the source of the water – the reservoir. Similarly, newsmen, by adhering to routine channels of newsgathering, leave much of the task of selection of news to their sources.

(Sigal 1973: 130)

Moreover, as most news comes from institutional and habitual sources, this enables journalists to have equal access from which no one benefits above others:

Uncertainty loves company: the similarity of their stories provides some reassurance that newsmen understand what is going on in their world. For men who do not and cannot know what the 'real' news is, the routines of newsgathering produce 'certified news' – information that seems valid insofar as it is common knowledge among newsmen and their sources.

(Sigal: 1973: 130)

By providing journalists with a daily encounter, the Commission has been able to 'feed' correspondents with 'official' news through a routine channel. The main interaction between journalists and the Commission takes place every midday, during the '*rendez-vous de midi*'. Every day, at a few minutes before midday, between 200 and 300 journalists flock to the European Commission's presidency building. Most of them arrive at the Breydel on foot from nearby offices. However, the formal press conference takes place only after the correspondents have finished queuing to get their documents. Then they enter the pressroom: a semicircle with barely 200 places. Indeed, these are cramped conditions in which to accommodate a press corps that has grown continuously since the early days of the European Community. The most striking point about this briefing is that sometimes a third of the press corp spend an hour of each day (a scarce resource) in the Breydel. During the hour-long conference, the official line of the Commission is made public. Spokespersons for the various commissioners come into the pressroom to make announcements of decisions already taken or to be taken, to expose the Commission's

142 *Olivier Baisnée*

positions about events or processes that are taking place and to answer journalists' questions. During the whole interaction, spokespersons are also available for journalists in order to answer more precise questions 'bilaterally'. Indeed, particularly when the midday briefing attracted less journalists, it was a valuable occasion to obtain 'off the record' comments from the Commission.

This '*rendez-vous de midi*' remains the symbol of the control of the Commission over EU news. Whether they criticize its repetitive nature or recognize its usefulness, correspondents put up with the fact that this is the moment which organizes their whole working day. As such it acts as a kind of guide, enabling them to frame EU current affairs. By organizing the only daily encounter, the Commission is able to put its spin on EU news. The Commission defines the agenda and guides and influences further interpretations. Through background documents (speeches, data, etc.) and the words of its spokespersons, it channels the EU's informational flood.

*Transparency: cluttering up timetables and offices*

By filling up both the timetables and the very offices of journalists, the Commission's policy of 'transparency' constitutes another practice which tends to limit their ability to set agendas which differ from that of the primary source.

Apart from the ritual '*rendez-vous de midi*', the Commission multiplies interactions where journalists are invited: technical briefings,<sup>4</sup> commissioner press conferences, receptions with foreign heads of state, etc. Obligated to cover these current affairs mostly on their own, journalists are literally inundated with possible encounters and information. Moreover, the huge press documentation released is, in itself, a problem journalists have to deal with. Piles of paper in offices are stored for further reading or storage; the various press releases, speeches, files, data, etc., all reducing the time available for studying subjects 'in depth'. As journalists indicate, this amount of information prevents them from having their own work schedule. They have to 'go with the flow' as one of them put it, pointing to piles of papers around her office:

You just have to look. And everyday you have that amount of documents [she points] and these are technical documents, you have to get into it. Our job, sometimes I liken it to the kind of analytical dissection I would have done at university . . . And that's very difficult.

Qu: 'You were talking of the amount of press releases, and how you manage it?'

It's horrible, it's horrible (laughs) It's awful, I sit on it. I try to do some filing. You must not be scrupulous or conscientious, anyway you

*The Commission as an information source* 143

can't do it so you have to ... it's empirical. Some people may have secretaries but most of the time it's like that [she points at her Italian colleague's office] It's not me, it's my Italian colleague, it defies description. I think he will never use it.

(French journalist, local daily newspaper)

On its own, the amount of available information is not sufficient to explain why the Commission can be regarded as the dominant source of EU news. First of all, journalistic interest for this information has to be explained. The crowd in the pressroom and the attention paid to documents (the queue to get press releases is a testimony of this phenomenon) cannot be explained mechanically from the fact that these papers are available. It is the historically constructed relationship between this institution and this group of journalists which better explains this interest.

*A press corps which has supported the EU political project*

Indeed, if journalists have an objective interest in a regular source which offers a landmark in the flow of information, its status of privileged source has to be explained. These two elements (dominant and privileged source) are linked to the kind of journalist the pressroom has long accommodated. Because of their biography and background, Brussels' correspondents have seen themselves as experts for many years, and just as often as advocates for the EU. Indeed, until the 1990s, the Brussels press corps was dominated by journalists with a particular profile.

For a time, accredited journalists were very few and far between. Well known by their peers, they were even more respected by European civil servants. Their longevity in Brussels is quite remarkable since some of them have been EU correspondents for more than 30 years. Year after year, they have come to know young civil servants intimately, some of whom have in time become Director Generals or even commissioners.

While this social proximity with senior civil servants has consequences on their daily work (it becomes rather difficult to criticize someone who addresses you by your first name), the reasons they decided to come to Brussels in the first place were twofold: to be close to Commission employees and others with a similar intellectual interest. Covering the EU in the 1960s or 1970s was indeed a sort of vocation. These young people, for whom it was often their first post as a correspondent, came to Brussels as true believers in the European project rather than as journalists. Indeed, before their arrival in the Belgian capital, some of them had belonged to learned societies or associations supporting the European ideal.

The other side of this 'institutional journalism' is its preference for an expert-linked definition of their job, one that is close to that of 'specialist journalism'. 'Quite assimilated to the institution' (Haegel 1992), these journalists come to look and act like civil servants. They are above all



144 *Olivier Baisnée*

experts of European matters, 'fascinated by their subjects' and cover the way the institutions work in a very technical way. In particular, such journalists produce coverage more concerned with 'policies' than 'politics' and, consequently are not very keen to dig up scandals and exclusives. The social and intellectual properties of these journalists have strengthened the domination of the Commission over EU current affairs. Seen as the only real European institution and the place where the European ideal is best represented, the Commission has therefore been given privileged treatment by these journalists. In comparison, the Council and the Parliament were considered to be institutions where struggles between national interests took place and tarnished the European ideal. For 30 years, the European Commission could expect to deal with a press corps which shared its preoccupations and, broadly speaking, supported the political project for which it was the symbol. By helping newcomers to the press corps and giving them precious advice, the first EU journalists were not only the 'grand elders' of the press corps, they also represented a professional model to be followed. As will be discussed below, growth in the number of the press corps and the arrival of journalists from more 'eurosceptic' countries, has changed the 'cosy club' atmosphere of the press room. It is now a place where numerous journalists have various interests and desires and not the place for 'pleasant chattering' that it used to be.

### **A crisis situation and the loss of internal cohesion**

From an analytical point of view, the 1998–1999 political crisis that ended with the Santer Commission's resignation provides a privileged moment from which to study trends and phenomena which, except in exceptional circumstances such as these, tend to happen more silently. While it does not represent a definitive turning point in the life of either the press corps or the Commission, these events reveal tensions both within the professional group and the institution.

#### *Changes within the press corp*

If someone ever wanted proof of the Commission's belief in the loyalty of 'its' journalists, an internal memo written by Edith Cresson's spokesman which accidentally ended up in a journalist's hands would be a very crude example. As one of the solutions presented as a means of countering the 'attacks against the European idea and institutions', this memo explained:

It is not true to say that all journalists have deeply changed. There is admittedly a 'takeover' of the press room by investigative journalists. But it is false to say that we don't have friends anymore. On the con-

*The Commission as an information source* 145

trary: many journalists admit their confusion over what is going on; many disapprove – sometimes openly – of the excesses of their colleagues. I've seen journalists shouting openly at one of their colleagues. Instead of developing a general distrust of the press, this is why we must use our potential allies to restore a balance between background and investigative journalists.

(my translation)

This opposition between 'background' and 'investigative' journalists is very revealing of the confusion of a spokesman's service which now has to face a new 'breed' of journalism, to quote the term used in an International Press Association (professional association of EU correspondents) newsletter:

Until the early nineties investigative journalism was an unknown species in Brussels. Most of the press corps, myself included, saw ourselves as fighting on the same side as the Commission to build up our common Europe ... Only a couple of years ago some journalists, given time and money by their editors, started to dig deeper and to look behind the daily press conferences, declarations and so-called 'background' briefings. Far away from mainstream reporting another truth saw the light of day.

(Nathe 1998)

As the Maastricht Treaty was adopted and the EU's scope of activities enlarged, new correspondents arrived in Brussels to cover its current affairs that now appeared increasingly important to the politics of the member states. Unlike their elders, these journalists did not come to Brussels because of their own European activism or personal interest but to pursue a journalistic career they had begun in their own country. These journalists are younger than the institutional journalists but are in fact 'older' in terms of their journalistic career. They thus arrived with very different expectations. While 'institutional' journalists valued the local symbolic rewards within the Brussels microcosm (within which they are prominent personalities), these newcomers defended the 'professional values' that prevail in national journalistic fields. Put another way, these journalists have imported into the EU level the legitimacy principles of the national journalistic field, especially those of investigative journalism. This personal taste for in-depth reporting made them pay attention to things their elders ignored as part of an implicit refusal to undermine institutions and instead favour a journalistic style based on expertise and technical knowledge. When the internal crisis began to spread within the Commission, investigative journalists began to gain unprecedented access to informers within this administration, access which in turn provided major assistance for the production of their respective articles.

146 *Olivier Baisnée*

*Leaks: the loss of cohesion within the college*

Between August 1998 and the 16 March 1999, the Commission experienced the biggest political crisis of its history; a crisis which ended with the college's resignation. Meanwhile, many leaks undermined the communication of the institution and its apparent unity. Indeed, the very few investigative journalists who systematically pursued this story were only able to do so because of the informers who provided them with information.

As Didier Georgakakis (Chapter 7 in this volume and 2000) has shown, the administrative reforms and the 'managerial watershed' imposed upon European civil servants moved many of them to dissociate themselves from the college of commissioners. In this way the symbolic frontier between what can be said and what cannot was removed. A member of a commissioner's entourage related the following scene to me, a scene which is highly revealing of the incriminatory atmosphere that had come to exist within the institution:

He recounts a meeting between a member of Cresson's entourage and four French journalists. The senior civil servant asks one of them what he is going to write about Cresson over the following days. The journalist answers that he's fed up with this story and will publish an article the next day and then give up. The civil servant replies 'well, what luck, you give up searching because Berthelot's son has a contract with the DG12, etc ...' One of the journalists then leaves the room slamming the door. The storyteller then catches her up in the hall, she seems rather irritated and tells him 'this guy wants to knock Cresson down'. Effectively the day after, the journalist the civil servant was talking to published a new article about all the subjects he was told about, thus reigniting the controversy.

Journalists themselves are quite open about how such information was released:

There were civil servants who were talking that's clear ... so yes, leaks come from Director Generals and then officials within the Commission itself and within the spokesman service, there were ... spokesmen or some of their assistants who had loose tongues. And so that's it ... there were settlements of scores also. You have to know for example that Cresson was poorly thought of by her colleagues and ... actually nobody thought well of her ... enmities creating enmities well there has been a settling of scores and the time bomb could not be stopped

*The Commission as an information source* 147

in time and that's it. At some time they wanted to stop it and try to offer an image of unanimity, of '*un pour tous, tous pour un*'. But it was just a front. The rot had already set in, the fruit was rotten and that's it. It was over.

(French journalist, national radio)

In the atmosphere of internal crisis, spokesmen in charge of ensuring the cohesion of the official line began to spread rumours and thereby keep investigations alive. As this young journalist explains, it was both because they wanted to protect 'their' commissioner (or put another in an awkward position) and because the warmth of the relationship between spokespersons and journalists is favourable to confidences.

Well, at some point we forgot ... we forgot the boundary between the institution and the journalist ... At some point the Commission and its spokesmen lost control, forgot that they were talking to journalists and when ... When everything is all right, there's no problem at all. When everything is all right they say 'it's off', it's off. But when things are going badly, when there are revelations, the boundaries ... if such boundaries are abolished then ...

(French journalist, national radio)

Moreover, the fragmented nature of the Commission played an important role. Its boundaries are very loose since it hires a lot of contract workers and often works with and through private companies. This fragmentation – while being one of the core problems evoked during the crisis – is also the decisive factor for the early leaks. Indeed, the first elements revealed by Jean Nicolas (a journalist from Luxembourg who did not belong to the EU press corps) were given to him by an entrepreneur who failed to obtain a contract with Mrs Cresson's services. When she refused to employ this company (Perry-Lux), Claude Perry then gave Jean Nicolas (with whom he also had a commercial relationship) information about Jean Berthelot, a friend of Edith Cresson, whom he in fact paid wages to as a means of obtaining contracts with Mrs Cresson's services (Nicolas 1999).

In short, the weak homogeneity of the Commission is not conducive to controlling information. As soon as a conflict appears between the Commission and one of the actors it hires, the latter may decide to release information. Yet, as we have seen, it is the arrival in Brussels of journalists with new profiles (compared to those of their elders) that enables informers to find journalists who will listen to them attentively. The loss of internal cohesion coincided with a change in the sociology of EU journalists which, together, resulted in the political crisis that ended with the resignation. Not surprisingly, Prodi's new team subsequently tried to define both a new communication strategy and a new relationship with the changing press corps.

148 *Olivier Baisnée***Changes in communication strategies**

As 'press campaigns' have been blamed (rightly or wrongly) for the resignation of the Santer Commission, the stability and ritual-like nature of the Commission's communication have been undermined. Belief in the power of press and the conviction that it provoked the departure of his predecessor, encouraged Romano Prodi to change the relationship between journalists and the institution he runs. In the name of the rather vague but politically significant notion of 'transparency', the new President set up a reform of the communication strategy of his institution. Thus, in a speech to the European Parliament on 14 September 1999, Romano Prodi explained:

The Commission intends to become much more open. It is time for some glasnost here! I want to bring Europe out from behind closed doors and into the light of public scrutiny. I want people to be able to look over my shoulder and check that the Commission is dealing with the issues that most concern them ... And the new Commission will be putting much more efforts into communicating properly with the citizens of Europe, giving them open access to information.

This general announcement about a revised communication strategies entered the press room through diverse changes: the overall organization of the 'midday briefing' and the basis of this interaction were revised. By changing what was said and how it was said, the new team in charge of the media provoked the anger of part of the press corps who considered these changes were undermining their ability to do their job properly.

***'An event a day': reforming the midday briefing***

More attention will be paid to the way the 'midday briefing' has been transformed than to the overhaul of the spokesman service (now called the 'press and communication service'). This reform has been the subject of a major controversy between the new service and some journalists which is revealing of journalists' expectations and of their relationship with the institution. French journalists have been the most vociferous opponents, while their British counterparts, more used to the lobby system (Jones 1995; Tunstall 1970; Esser *et al.* 2000; Kavanagh 2000), have largely remained silent.

First, the 'stage' in the pressroom was significantly modified. Instead of the usual table where the spokespersons sat, lecterns were installed: one for the spokesman for Mr. Prodi, the other for spokespersons who are asked to answer precise questions or to communicate on a particular point. This modification of the set-up might seem anecdotal but it was interpreted by journalists as the sign of the 'Anglo-Saxon turn' of the

*The Commission as an information source* 149

1 service. As one journalist puts it 'they think they're in Washington'. More-  
2 over, as the Commission asked Alastair Campbell (Tony Blair's then spin-  
3 doctor) and the local BBC journalists for advice, the reform has been  
4 interpreted as Anglophile. When reforming its communication strategy,  
5 the new spokesperson service also tried to 'rationalize' and 'professional-  
6 ize' its relationship with journalists. Based on mutual trust and social and  
7 intellectual proximity with journalists, previous practice was seen as obso-  
8 lete by Ricardo Levi (head of the press and communication service). The  
9 new communication team decided instead to try to control and contain  
10 the communication of the European Commission. This reform concerned  
11 particularly the 'midday briefing' whose content and status have been  
12 revised.

13  
14 Clinton invented that during his 1992 campaign. In order to avoid  
15 having to answer questions coming from anywhere, about anything,  
16 you have to feed the journalists. You have to give them a big story  
17 each day to avoid them thinking of something else. That's the theory.  
18 And that's a bit like what the new Commission tried to do here. So,  
19 broadly speaking, Levi who is the chief spokesmen was arriving saying  
20 'well, President Prodi wrote today to Clinton to tell him that there's a  
21 problem with the WTO'. That kind of stuff... What the new group of  
22 communicators did not understand when it imposed this policy of 'an  
23 event a day' is that it does not work. There isn't a single event that  
24 interests 15 nationalities on the same day. There are things going on  
25 and what they select as the event of the day is not often what interests  
26 most people.

(French journalist, press agency)

27  
28  
29 As this policy was directed to a pressroom made up of media coming from  
30 15 member states, but also of journalists from all over the world, it soon  
31 came to be seen as a failure. Given the various interests and expectations  
32 involved, it did indeed turn out to be impossible to put forward a subject  
33 that would be relevant for the whole pressroom, a situation which is very  
34 different from the national one. Because of the relative homogeneity of the  
35 hierarchy of information, when addressing a national press it is possible to  
36 select a particular event. While it is possible to predict the wishes of a  
37 national press it becomes much harder when there are 15 national presses  
38 with as many specific priorities and agendas. For example, whilst the EU is  
39 one the main political issues in Great Britain (Wilkes and Wring 1998;  
40 Morgan 1995; Anderson and Weymouth 1999) it is not any longer in  
41 France. This leads to distinct ways of covering the same institutions because  
42 expectations from national desks differ. While most of EU current affairs  
43 are translated in terms of British internal political debate (with a particular  
44 focus on themes that can be explained in terms of 'victory' or 'defeat' for  
45 the national government), the French press never covers EU matters in its



150 *Olivier Baisnée*

national pages. In the same way, countries where agriculture is only a marginal economic sector do not have the same expectations as those where this profession has greater political significance.

*Undermining the 'off the record' basis for information exchange*

However, another change has more definitively damaged the relationship between the pressroom and the spokesperson's service. Under the banner of "transparency", the new Commission decided to broadcast the midday briefing both on *Europe by Satellite* (a TV channel that disseminates 'institutional' pictures of the EU) and on the Internet. By doing so, the new spokesperson service deeply changed the nature of the daily encounter. While it used to be 'friendly', 'informal' and based on the 'off the record' principle (which enables journalists, without quoting precisely any source, to go beyond the official line), it became a meeting point where only 'official' information was available 'on the record' (Legavre 1992). Indeed, because the midday briefing was broadcast through a media (Internet) available to anybody (even if the audience might not be strong) it became impossible to release 'off the record', background information.

This decision quickly became a major issue. The International Press Association (API), which represents a third of the press corps, soon reacted and set up a meeting with members of the spokesperson's service on 22 October 1999. This meeting was a failure since the head spokesman refused to change his decision. In its internal letter (La lettre de l'API, no. 6) the API underlines the fact that:

The opinion of the majority [of the delegation] is that the current attitude of the Commission is likely to increase tensions with the Brussels press corps. It has been explained to Mr Levi that, unlike what he thinks, the upholding of the current line in the way the midday briefing is presented will be considered as a way to limit, rather than improve, the information flow. This is because the briefing can only be a useful information tool if, at any time, the use of 'off' information is possible. The fact that, as far as possible, information might be 'on' can't change anything on this point.

As negotiations reached deadlock, the IPA then convened the first extraordinary general meeting of its history in order to obtain a mandate from its members to reopen discussions with the spokesman.

The first extraordinary meeting of the IPA (25 November 1999).

In the International Press Centre, pressroom number 1.  
50 seats. About 60 journalists were present.

During the debate, two issues were raised: the first one concerns the broadcasting of the briefing on EbS and Internet (which turns the briefing into an 'official' meeting where all sayings will be 'on the record') and a more general one that concerns the failure of the new press relations' strategy introduced by the new team headed by Ricardo Levi. In fact, these two phenomena were closely linked, as the officializing of the '*rendez-vous de midi*' is an indication of the way the Commission considers the press corps as a public.

Jean Burner (president of the IPA and head of the AFP office in Brussels) speaks first: he points out the fact that EbS is only the visible part of the problem, 'the press office tries, in every which way, to give us ready-made information ... the 'on the record' cannot be used as such'. He suggests that 30 minutes of the briefing should be reserved for official announcements. A journalist then says that 'that's too long, they have nothing to say'.

Jean Burner then carries on, giving examples of every dysfunction. A list, which he admitted, wasn't closed: 'the discontent has to do with all the mistakes within this press and communication service'. According to a British journalist since the arrival of EbS 'the outcome of the briefing has been reduced in the same proportion to which it has been made more public'.

A journalist from a German broadcasting service then indicates that he doesn't attend all briefings and instead uses the Internet broadcasting. He proposes to use the same system as with the German government where questions are divided into three categories: free information, restricted information and 'off' that can't be used. It is a technical regulation since the head of the press conference can switch the sound off when necessary. He points out that it has been working for ten years and that, concerning the Internet, a confidential code may be used. 'For those who can't attend the press conference, the Internet is wonderful'.

A French journalist underlined the difference with the German situation where journalists invite politicians to talk. 'If you invite people you can switch off ... Here we go to their place'. An American journalist later points out that in the White House there is a double briefing system: one is 'on the record', the other is 'off'. Two French journalists insist that the API's delegation refuse 'reverse angle shots' where journalists appear on television, they also want an 'on air' light to be installed.

A German journalist evokes the more general issue of a service that mistakes communication (which does not interest journalists) with a press relations department's role: 'we must demand a press relations office which knows how journalists work'. As a French journalist sums it up 'they behave as a communication service and not as a press relations one'.

The abilities of the members of the new service are then challenged: 'the problem is in their mind ... they learned three weeks ago what 'off' means'. An Irish correspondent follows up, 'they do not understand how journalists work'. He recalls a briefing where 'there was absolutely nothing' and added that the problem was that 'they don't yet know how far they can go'.

Indeed, on 17 November 1999, Ricardo Levi spoke for an hour (after he indicated that what he would say would be 'unofficial, without EbS') to explain that on the beef issue, Commissioners took a collegial decision! After this dull exposé, two journalists joked, 'it's rubbish, one hour of waffle to tell us the Commission took a collegial decision' and his colleague then followed up mocking Levi for saying '... that the Commission is formed of 20 commissioners'.

An American journalist said 'they tackle their job as civil servants do' and gives the example of a spokesman who 'still thinks he works as a EU negotiator'. He then wonders whether they should 'sit down with them and explain how the media work'. A German journalist then proposes an argument 'we will still get our information, we'll get it from the lowest secretary, but we will get it'.

Indeed, the main problem is the informational benefit that the attendance of the briefing represents. One of them says that within the present pressroom: 'I only get confirmed what I already know' and a Swiss journalist adds 'they think we're stupid, they think we don't know'.

Burner retains the proposition inspired by Germany saying, 'otherwise we go on strike'. He also summarized the major points of the talk: amateurishness, incompetence and finally, less information. In short, he sums up the conclusions of the meeting as 'a rejection of the method and of the content'.

Since this crisis, and after a short break, the briefing's broadcast resumed but now the sound transmission can be switched off when 'off the record' statements are made. Moreover, within the pressroom an 'on air' light has been installed for journalists to know in which kind of interaction they are being placed at any one time.

From an analytical point of view, the commitment of Prodi's spokes-

person's team to broadcast the midday briefing represents a kind of official recognition that the pressroom plays the role of the European public. Turning what used to be a 'pleasant chat' into a much more official meeting is significant of its importance for the new President of the Commission. Furthermore, while commissioners almost never have any occasion to make speeches in front of a genuinely European audience, this pressroom and its inhabitants can ask questions relevant to their national situation in front of journalists from other member states, thus inciting them to take into account other national points of view.<sup>5</sup> In this sense, the pressroom can be described as the first and perhaps the only public for the European Union: a public socialized into the functioning of this political system, that knows its actors, that has direct contact with them and that, at least compared to the average European citizen, is well informed about it.

To journalists, however, the commitment to turn the daily briefing into a much more official meeting is seen as a significant mistake. As one journalist told an official after a very disappointing press conference: 'when you want to organize electoral meetings you should do it elsewhere'. The introduction of broadcasting, lecterns and the 'on the record' basis clearly show that Prodi's team wanted to use the briefing as an occasion to deliver political messages. This attitude is very revealing since it shows that they were convinced that the pressroom was made up of a public and not of a community of journalists present in order to obtain information. The reaction of the journalists, who do not consider themselves as members of the public but as professional reporters in need of information, highlights the ambiguous nature of this group. Because they are socialized into the EU political system and possess the analytical framework necessary to understand and analyse politics in Brussels, they function as a public. However, as long as they are journalists they consider that it is not their job to listen to political speeches which do not provide them with information.

### Conclusion

This chapter has attempted to provide an account of the way the European Commission deals with journalists. Because it has dealt with a specific point of view, the picture presented is incomplete. To understand the production of EU news as a whole, one also needs to take into account the other main source for EU correspondents (the Council of Ministers), but also how editors in national capitals deal (in highly different manners) with the articles their correspondents send them from Brussels. Nevertheless, while incomplete, the present analysis provides some explanations of how, in a highly competitive environment, the Commission has become the main source for EU correspondents. This ability to shape news concerning the EU is a major political tool for the Commission. Yet, given its

very weak political legitimacy this power is shown to be highly fragile whenever a crisis arises. In 1998–1999, the Commission's news routine that had essentially provided correspondents with technical information no longer fitted with their needs. In addition, the habitual discourse on 'collegial' decision-making was seen as anachronistic in the face of the intense conflicts raging within the very institution itself.

Moreover, the problems encountered during the 1998–1999 political crisis and when the communication strategy of the Commission was revised have called into question, at least temporarily, the Commission's status as a dominant source of EU information. As the Commission was undermined by its internal crisis, the European Parliament suddenly became one of the journalists' privileged sources. Both echoing and amplifying information coming from the Commission, the EP's press service began to provide investigative journalists with 'scoops'. As some journalists admit, this crisis led them to re-evaluate the parliamentary source.

More generally, the arrival of journalists with new practices who stand more aloof from the Commission has probably contributed to 'making a whole generation take compulsory retirement' as one journalist jokingly put it. While it has been undermined, the Commission has not lost its ascendancy over EU news. Journalists continue to be interested in the 'midday briefing' for practical reasons, especially those who are bewildered newcomers in need of a 'lifeline'. Yet, the Commission is no longer regarded as a 'natural' and neutral source. In short, the Commission has become a source like any other; one that cannot dominate EU news as it used to do.

## Notes

1 This chapter presents some of the initial results of a PhD research on the logics of information production in Brussels. It is based on 63 interviews with correspondents and spokesmen and observations carried out during several stays in Brussels. (See also Baisnée 2000, 2002)

2 For Todd Gitlin (1980: 258) it is through socialization that ideological domination is organized:

By socialization, by the bonds of experience and relationships – in other words, by direct corporate and class interest – the owners and managers of the major media are committed to the maintenance of the going system in its main outlines.

3 A similar hypothesis was also developed by Todd Gitlin (1980: 257) who explains:

the economic system routinely generates, encourages, and tolerates ideologies which challenge and alter its own rationale. But contradictions of this sort operate within a hegemonic framework which bounds and narrows the range of actual and potential contending world views. Hegemony is an

*The Commission as an information source* 155

historical process in which one picture of the world is systematically preferred over other.

- 4 Directorate Generals or senior civil servants then provide journalists with 'off the record' information. These briefing are highly specialized and enable journalists to develop an in-depth knowledge of subjects.
- 5 For example when a German journalist asked one day if the Commission might suppress regional funding to some Länder which don't respect an environmental directive, French journalists, who were not aware of this problem, immediately reacted by asking whether some French regions might encounter the same problem.