

## **Consultation on EU Communication Policy**

*Response to the European Commission's White Paper on a European Communication Policy from FEIEA, the Federation of European Internal Editors Associations.*

### **1. FEIEA – Connecting Europe's communicators**

FEIEA represents corporate communicators across 11 affiliated national associations, which together comprise over 4,500 individual members. FEIEA is an independent organisation with a 50 year record of connecting communicators across Europe. FEIEA celebrates the cultural and linguistic diversity of its pan-European community, while serving as the expression of cross-border co-operation to improve the effectiveness and the standing of corporate communicators.

FEIEA aims to speak with a European voice on communication issues at a pan-European level in dealings with the European Union, business, economic, academic and social organisations, while remaining independent from all of these bodies. FEIEA provides an increasingly active network of professional support for business communicators. It aims to broaden members' knowledge of corporate communications matters in Europe. Above all, FEIEA serves its federated national member associations, providing them with a common European meeting point.

FEIEA welcomes this opportunity to respond to the proposals set out in the White Paper.

### **2. Overview**

We recognise that the EU has a problem in making its distinct voice heard. We believe that the EU is presently unable to speak with a single voice, lacks a common, unified identity and is heavily reliant on other agencies for exposure. We also observe, as the White Paper concludes, that news about the EU is very largely received through the distorting prisms of national politics and national media.

#### **2.1 Plan 'D'**

As a body of professional internal communicators we endorse your 'plan D for democracy, dialogue and debate'. It is a tenet of internal organisational communication practice that 'communication' is about fostering positive, productive relationships by building understanding and support through meaningful representation and active, sustained dialogue; it is not simply about the dissemination of information, important though that is in itself.

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We applaud your analysis that communication cannot be divorced from the subject matter. There must be an integrity about an organisation's conduct so that discourse and action are in close relationship to each other. The wider the gap between them, the less credible communications become.

## **2.2 Access**

Part of the solution to the EU's weakness in communication must lie in enabling the individual - just as much as representative bodies within civil society - to know how to access the EU, who to contact and how to enter into discussion and conduct dialogue on the widest range of topics within the EU's fields of competence and interest.

FEIEA believes that the EU should have a physical presence in all major cities - a focal point, a branded entity, a small piece of the EU in the heart of every major community. On one level, this could serve as a simple information bureau, a place to ask questions, be directed to further sources of information, a place to witness the business of the EU in progress. We would refer those within the European Commission tasked with developing viable solutions to the communication issue, to observe the British Broadcasting Corporation's model of public access. Beyond providing access to its programmes via TV and radio, in print and online, the BBC now offers physical access to inter-active visitor centres in its principal buildings in most UK cities, giving the public a more tangible, hands-on relationship with this renowned and publicly-funded institution.

## **2.3 Meet the EU**

FEIEA believes that the EU should provide opportunities for face-to-face discussion between EU representatives and citizens, enabling the public to 'meet the EU'. One solution would be to create engaging, inter-active public meetings linking citizens 'Eurovision' style in regional venues across the EU. These could be partially-invited audiences with an interest in the topic of discussion - education, transport, social services, environment, healthcare or other themes in which the EU has an interest in consulting its citizens. Another solution would be simpler variant of this idea, with a chain of two-centre public meetings, enabling EU citizens in one country to engage in discussion with EU representatives in their own locations as well as with citizens and representatives in one other EU location in a different country. Both of these solutions recognise that people's sense of belonging to the EU is not purely a function of their radial relationship with 'the centre' but also of the strength of their lateral relationships with their fellow-citizens in other EU communities.

Whatever precise formats are adopted, FEIEA is convinced that the EU needs to engage its citizens with public meetings. Get out and talk to people. Go out and touch their lives.

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The EU's communication stance should be to set out in everyday language the relevant aspects of its citizens' lives in which the EU plays a part. It should bring to their attention recent and current examples of the positive impact the EU has had within the given region - which buildings were built, which projects were funded, what public need has been alleviated, what private aspirations have been fulfilled –as a direct consequence of funding or some other intervention by the EU. This should be delivered in an appropriate tone, without over-promotion but patiently, consistently and at an effective volume (audible, amid the crowded airwaves of political and commercial messages competing for the public's attention - but not too clamorous).

## **2.4 Personality**

The EU is widely perceived as faceless and unengaging. While personality-driven communication can sometimes be effective in organisations led by charismatic individuals, the EU may struggle to identify a single leader with sufficient pan-European appeal to connect with all of the EU's citizens (and we say this with all due respect to the EU's present leaders). This facelessness is a fundamental weakness. FEIEA believes that failing to remedy it will undermine other elements of the communication strategy. We set out our idea to help address this issue under 3.3 below.

## **3. Consultation questions**

Our response to your specific topics for consultation are:

### **3.1 Defining common principles: which way forward?**

We support your proposal to create a communication Charter and to engage citizens and other civil society organisations in its creation both in public and electronically.

However, we believe that this should be accompanied by a clearly articulated commitment to move as swiftly as reasonably possible from policy to implementation, in other words, to begin to put the Charter into practice as soon as it is agreed. Otherwise there is a risk of creating a perception that communication will remain on the level of policy and principle – the format but not the content of communication.

### **3.2 How to reach out to the citizen?**

FEIEA supports all proposals under this heading. The present public media space is crowded. The EU needs to create a new physical space in all regional cities to act as a focal point for the EU, its work, the contribution it makes to the locality and to individuals, and its institutions.

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### **3.3 How to involve the media more effectively in communicating on Europe?**

FEIEA supports these proposals and positively endorses the idea of providing communication skills training to EU officials. However, while all of the proposed solutions will deliver some incremental benefits, in FEIEA's view, they will not deliver a step-change improvement in media reporting on Europe. FEIEA has two specific proposals. Both are tactical but both should capture public attention.

The first is that the EU should recruit charismatic TV and radio-friendly spokespeople who provide 'good TV' and 'good radio' in each EU country. We think back to the time of President Gorbachov and how the public image of the then Soviet Union was softened partly as a response to the President's very personable and good-humoured spokesperson Gennadi Gerasimov, who spoke perfect English (with an authentic American accent). The lesson in the context of this consultation is that Gerasimov brought a fresh and engaging quality to the identity of the Gorbachov administration and to an extent, also to the then Soviet Union. For native English speakers, Gerasimov 'spoke our language' in every sense. His appearance on TV screens was something fresh and appealing, causing viewers to question their own preconceptions and more readily accept the idea that the Soviet Union was changing. Here, communication and subject matter were in correlation and Gerasimov's appearances became a credible token of the real change taking place. The parallel cannot be drawn too heavily but using strong, engaging, recognisable and native-speaking personalities to present the EU's story could help to connect the EU more powerfully with its citizens in each of the member states.

The second recognises that the commercial and political agendas of media owners are a factor in the editorial stance taken by many established media outlets. The effect of this may often be to weaken or distort the EU's message on any given topic. FEIEA offers no opinion on this except to say that, given this potential barrier to connecting with its citizens via national media, the EU should consider creating its own universally available and highly accessible free news channels – electronic and print, available in local languages throughout the EU, with appealing content that draws people to them.

### **3.4 What more can be done to gauge European public opinion?**

FEIEA supports these proposals. Accurate, actionable data is a pre-requisite for effective communication. However, the ultimate value of measurement lies in its application – measuring for a purpose. As with employer-organisations and their internal audiences, so with the EU and its citizens. In order to see the value of participating in surveys, the target audience needs to understand what action has been taken and what benefits it has gained as a consequence of previous public opinion research, in order to recognise the value of future polls.

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### **3.5 How will the partnership work?**

With regard to this section, FEIEA urges the EU to devote more thought to the concerns of the individual. FEIEA accepts that "Communicating about the role of the EU in the world..." may be "... an effective way to engage Europe's own citizens.." However, the extensive experience of FEIEA's members in working with their own publics would indicate that true engagement is best achieved by first capturing the attention and interest of a target group at the point of their own preoccupations. The question 'How does it affect me?' will always have to be addressed first.

In order therefore to be able to configure the EU's 'story' in such a way that its audience will be receptive to it, some of the resources devoted to opinion research would be well directed to determining the priorities of EU citizens in each member state. This would provide the EU with a basis on which to develop citizen-centred communications. Of course, the EU will wish - and will be expected - to report against its own PRINCE priorities. However, some of these will not necessarily chime automatically - and certainly not exclusively - with the preoccupations of citizens *where they are*. We are all EU citizens but we live in Birmingham and Berlin, Bregenz and Braganza, Ljubljana and Bratislava. If the EU is sincere in its desire to 'localise', it must frame its discourse in terms and on themes that reflect - or at least acknowledge - our inherently local perspectives. That is arguably the single most powerful and impactful change that the EU could make in its approach to communication.

We trust that the points raised in FEIEA's response will be considered along with those of other contributors to this very worthwhile consultation. We trust that the resulting communication strategy will be all the stronger for it.

*Federation of European Internal Editors Associations, September 2006*

## **4. Contacts:**

For more information about FEIEA, please visit [www.feiea.com](http://www.feiea.com)

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*End of response submission*