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Bled Manifesto on a European  
Communication Policy  
of the Commission of the  
European Communities

## **Europe as a Communication Challenge**

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## **Bled Meetings**

The primary mission of the international symposia that have been organized over the past 13 years is to provide a venue for public relations scholars and practitioners from around the world to exchange ideas and perspectives about public relations in all its forms such as corporate communication, governmental communication, public affairs, reputation management, issues and crisis management, etc. Building from this history, BledCom seeks to help establish a state-of-the-art body of knowledge of the field with each annual symposium attempting to widen the horizons of the field by attracting current perspectives and research on public relations and related disciplines as well. Toward this end, every BledCom symposium seeks to offer a venue for scholars and practitioners to share their conceptual perspectives, empirical findings (adopting all methodologies), or case studies related to the field, and discuss trends, developments and specific topics. As an international symposium, BledCom welcomes participation of scholars and practitioners from every region of the world, so that we can help improve the public relations and theory-building to cope with a world that is globalizing rapidly.

## **BledCom 2006**

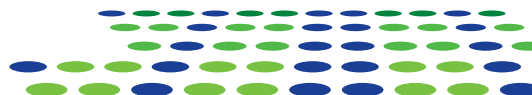
The 2006 BledCom symposium addresses issues of diversity, social cohesion and social integration in modern societies, and the potential contribution of public relations and social communication. This year's symposium focuses particularly on the current situation in Europe, against such developments as the non-ratification of the EU constitutional

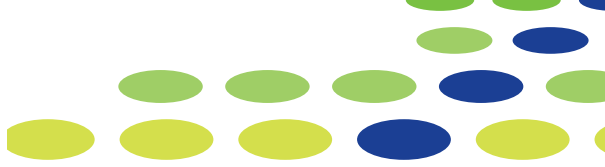
treaty and the subsequent difficulties created for the "European project." Complexity and flux are intensified in the modern world. Basic assumption and premises formerly guaranteeing society's institutions rationality and legitimacy have lost their force. These have to be generated anew through discussion, which is where we believe public relations has such an important role to play. Earlier BledCom meetings have dealt with questions of trust, which emerges from dialogue. Now, we hope to broaden the discussion of public relations' role to examine its broader social contribution. Europe today is a diverse society in nations, languages, societal and cultural practices. The question of what it means to be European, for organizations and for individuals, has become even more complex and fluid.

## **Europe and the Democratic Deficit**

The recent rejections of the Treaty Establishing a Constitution for Europe are but the latest symptom of a failure to tackle a fundamental challenge, widely referred to as its 'democratic deficit', inherent in the emergence of the European Union. It has become clear that the 'permissive consensus' among European citizens has not endured the fact that integration which has long been top-down and elite-driven- intergovernmentalist decision-making in the tradition of classical bargaining diplomacy is no longer sustainable or compatible with the nature of the European policy.

While the modern nation-state has served as the cradle for civic solidarity and identity, our conceptions of which have formed the basis of





our democratic convictions, the organizational structure of the European Union has generated novel challenges to traditional notions of democracy and legitimacy. This requires scholars of international relations to question their paradigms and everyone to restate the normative principles on which the newly emerging modes of governance ought to be grounded. The sequence of Treaties establishing a Union has attempted to overcome some of the obstacles obstructing greater political and social integration (for example through introducing the concept of European citizenship in the 1992 Maastricht Treaty). Documents such as the Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union further indicate the acknowledgement that Europe's ambitious pace of integration requires certain basic tenets of legitimacy. One of the greatest challenges, however, to the future of the European project remains the political apathy and lack of political awareness of its citizens (cf. Julia Hoffmann, BledCom, 2006).

### **Europe as a Communication Problem**


Europe is in trouble and it is tempting to blame this upon inadequate information and communication. This common and popular approach is attractive because it points to a well-defined and concrete cause and offers a variety of strategic solutions. Such solutions - although in some measure undoubtedly useful - may gloss over the real roots of the European crisis. As the would-be European Constitution proposes: the European project is guided by neo-liberal economic politics that divides European citizens into winners and losers. The

intriguing question is whether this basic political choice can bring about a community to which all Europeans belong. Europe is primarily a problem of political morality and the challenge is to see whether and which communicative practices can contribute to a sustainable solution (cf. Cees Hamelink, BledCom, 2006).

### **The European Communication Challenge and The White Paper**

As society's complexity increases, coordination of society puts new pressures on the communicative processes. In Europe, conventional law is increasingly supplemented by legitimising processes. They regulate individuals' as well as organizations' way of reflecting their own and their reciprocal role and responsibility in society (known e.g. as governance structures and corporate social responsibility). These processes require increasing communicative competencies at all levels of society, and potentially contain extensive social flexibility, complexity and dynamics. However, they also pose inherent threats. They increase the perception of contingency, uncertainty, and risk, and continuously alert public attention. A hyper-irritated and over-stimulated state of communicative processes may lead to a society where fear and distrust prevails (towards new knowledge, towards other cultures), and where professional response grows into exaggerated or distorted reflexes - as for instance spin doctoring, rhetorical reflexes to frequent media crises or panic-stricken response to a populist public opinion. Also, the European diversity in public culture, socio-economic structures, and political traditions presents different





constraints and potentials. Consequently, these societal and social developments pose substantial challenges to European communication research and practice (cf. Susanne Holmström, BledCom 2005).

The European Commission is aware of these threats and proposes to debate Europe, by involving its citizens in order to close the gap between the European Union and its citizens. The Commission last year set out an Action Plan with a list of specific measures it will take to improve the way it communicates with its citizens (SEC, 20 July, 2005), Plan D for democracy, dialogue and debate (COM, 13 October, 2005), and the so-called White Paper On a European Communication Policy (COM, 1 February, 2006). In this White Paper all players are invited to contribute their ideas on how best one can work together to close the gap. The result will be a forward-looking agenda for better communication to enhance the public debate in Europe. This Bled Manifesto is meant as a contribution to this debate.

### **Issues for Structural Analysis**


The WP addresses very relevant and timely issues and provides important guidance for future European communication policy-making. However, there is (worldwide) already an impressive volume of laudable recommendations and provisions for the communicative practices of governmental and non-governmental parties. The urgent matter to address in this manifesto is why these practices so often fail to meet basic normative standards of information provision and public dialogue in democratic and open societies, and what we can do to overcome these failures. As researchers we feel the

need to analyse the structural/factual context within which new communicative practices are expected to emerge.

### **During the Special Day on Communicating Europe, the participants have discussed the following public communication problems:**

- the structure of ownership of traditional and new information/communication institutions
- the control (both public and private) over public communication processes
- societal developments towards economic globalisation, market-driven consumerism, competitiveness, privatisation, polarisation, and 'neue Unübersichtlichkeit' (Habermas)
- European Broadcasting versus Television and Newer Media Nationalism
- Communication and Democracy in the context of weak democratic institutions and inegalitarian social structures
- communication rights and the lack of political will to implement these entitlements
- and the discussion has led to the following recommendations.

### **Recommendations (to be decided on during the plenary discussion)**

1. The participants applaud the development of common principles and norms that should guide information and communication activities on European issues in a European Charter or Code of Conduct on Communication. A successful implementation can only be possible if the Charter will contain the following elements:
    - that communication is based on a reflective sensitivity to Europeans in order to avoid
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EU communication as blind, enclosed auto-communication

- full understanding that democracy presupposes communication with and not to people
- that people communicate among themselves about their lives
- that Europe should be a social and political environment and not a project
- individuals, countries, nations, states and regions constitute the EU and not the other way around
- communication are processes and activities that can be improved and therefore knowledge and professionalism in its conduct are of utmost importance

2. The participants see empowering citizens as the only possible way to develop a EU communication policy. In order to give as many people as possible access to information and the opportunity to make their voices heard, it is not only important that civic education is improved, that citizens connect with each other, and that citizens and public institutions connect. Europe is to be seen as a moral issue to persist, not a technical problem to be solved: it is essentially about a way of life.

All this will only improve when all EU institutes communicate in a responsive, open and accessible way. In order to improve this, the following are seen as key elements:

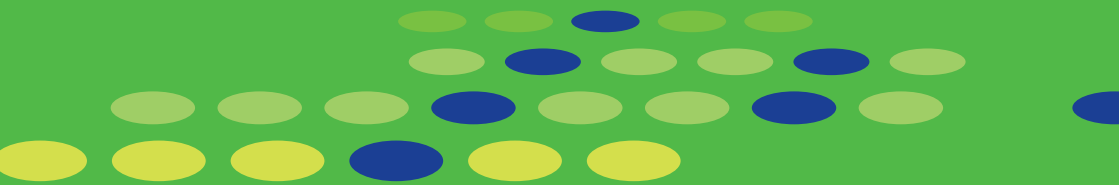
- that the most crucial EU communication is the conduct of all EU institutions
- the EU and its institutions should be systematically de-arcanised and subjected to the highest standards of openness, transparency and accountability in level to a constitutive country with the highest standards

- communication (including media) markets should be opened and trans-national communicative activities should be encouraged
- the endeavours to establish institutions which facilitate a European public sphere should be reinforced into a public sphere which acknowledges the dynamics of conflict and diversity
- the EU area should be self-understood as subjected to definitions of a general public, special publics, publicity and public sphere
- legitimacy should gain an equal weight to expediency and efficiency
- strategic communication is a professional activity

3. The international community of Public Relations researchers would like to contribute to the European Communication Challenge and is able to provide its expertise in the following ways:

- systematic, comparative and trans-national research of European public communication and public communicative challenges
- systematic education on all levels on European communication institutions and processes
- systematic publication of empirical research, theoretical works and case studies on European communication institutions and processes

*The participants of the Special Day on Communicating Europe, July 8, 2006, gathered at the 13th BledCom International Public Relations Research Symposium: Diversity, social cohesion and social integration in Europe and elsewhere: the contribution of public relations and social communication, 7 - 9 July 2006, Lake Bled, Slovenia*



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