

ON MESSAGE

The internal communications challenges faced by governments – whether in Washington, DC, Brussels or London – are about as complex as it gets

BY MICHELE DAVIS IN WASHINGTON, DC
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By MICHELE DAVIS
— WASHINGTON, DC

It is like the beginning of a perfect day on *The West Wing*. The President gives a speech unveiling a new proposal to support clean energy and the government communications machine hums into action. The Secretary of Energy appears on television, echoing the message. The White House National Economic Adviser does a webchat. The press offices at the Office of Management and Budget field cost questions.

In the television show, a crisis would then loom in order to ratchet up the dramatic tension. In real life, such a coordinating effort is the routine hard slog of communications in the policy development process.

In my experience working at the White House, policy advisers typically bring together experts from relevant Cabinet agencies to examine and develop policy options for the President. Communications staff are part of that process, and they develop a unified plan as the policy moves toward finalization.

So a new proposal on clean energy tax credits might be announced by the White House, but very likely the Department of Energy, the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA), the Treasury, and others would be involved in the decision-making process throughout. They review White House fact sheets before they are released so that the agencies are ready to echo the message and answer questions. Once it is decided how the President will announce the policy initiative, communications staff in the White House work with agency colleagues to plug in the other voices of authority on each particular issue. They then coordinate the relevant Cabinet officials to create a calendar of speeches, interviews, site visits, op-ed pieces, blogs, and other events to produce a steady drumbeat on the highest priority issues.

Talking points

Washington is a town where being “on message” every day is a critical test for members of either political party. It sometimes feels as if “message discipline” is the highest goal in and of itself. But there is no internal website where everyone goes for their talking points. Instead, there is a coordinated daily planning effort to share the messages before announcements are made.

Most often, as a new policy initiative is being formulated at the White House, the Cabinet agencies with responsibility for the policy are at the table and the messages are jointly agreed. Top aides to policymakers and communicators across the government are kept up-to-date on the President’s decisions via daily and weekly meetings.

During the Bush Administration, the President’s senior staff met every day at 7:30am, followed by an 8:00am meeting of White House communications staff. These were to review the day’s agenda, deal with any surprises that required attention, and to look ahead. White House communications staff would then hold conference calls with Cabinet agencies to share information about news-making events. White House communications staff also

held weekly planning calls with the Cabinet agencies aimed at maintaining a calendar of events to ensure a continuous effort – speeches, interviews, Congressional testimony, and so on – to make the case for the President’s agenda.

Cabinet Secretaries, of course, have agendas of their own. These would be consistent with the President’s overall vision but below his level of approval. It would be analogous to a business unit rolling out a new product – part of the big plan but not requiring a CEO hands-on effort.

For significant Presidential announcements, communicators from across the government are invited to the White House for a briefing. Each year, before the President’s “State of the Union” address, we held briefings in the days leading up to the speech with staff from various branches of government. This included a meeting of all Chiefs of Staff and Public Affairs Directors, as well as meetings with outside allies to share important themes and the news from the address. After the speech was delivered, fact sheets and excerpts that could serve as “talking points” were sent out for those making television appearances, speeches, webchats, or similar outreach opportunities.

Also, to connect with staff on a more personal level, the President made a point of holding occasional “town hall” meetings, as well as dropping in unannounced on holiday parties to thank staff.

Best laid plans

In politics, the best laid plans get swept away by events, to paraphrase the old political adage. A legislative battle takes a sudden twist, a natural disaster causes a state of emergency, or a foreign policy event requires the President’s urgent attention. *Reactive* communication is a daily process too.

Reporters call government departments early every morning looking for reaction to whatever unexpected headline is leading the news agenda that day, or to developments from overseas. It is important to pre-empt off-the-cuff and off-message statements, so the White House media staff huddle very early in the morning – before the Press Secretary’s briefing – to identify the news that may need a coordinated response, to prepare talking points, and to get them out to the relevant Cabinet agencies.

When I worked in the White House from 2005-2006, I would meet with Press Secretary Tony Snow every morning at 6:30am to review what we needed to react to that morning. Cable news might be reporting a comment from the Iraqi government made earlier that day, or a national newspaper might have reported new information about North Korea’s nuclear intentions. We would meet with National Security Adviser Stephen Hadley to devise a comment, then reach out to the State and Defense Departments and other foreign policy agencies to make sure that everyone would be aligned by mid-morning.

While the content varied daily, the internal communication process was consistent and robust enough to manage multiple issues as they evolved throughout the day and to coordinate across government.

The media stage may not be as large, even for big companies, but the challenges – planning new rollouts or reacting to events, for example – are quite similar, with many brands to manage, many different audiences to reach, 

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and the job of having to tie it all together at the corporate level. At any moment, a crisis at a particular business unit can become a problem for corporate HQ, disrupting whatever had been planned as the communications priority. The key to managing the rapid flow of news is having the right processes embedded as habit across the company.

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BY DIRK DELMARTINO & NEIL MCMILLAN
— BRUSSELS

Most political observers have a sense that the workings of the European Union's institutions are of Byzantine complexity. Can the EU – rarely referred to by the three constituent parts: the European Commission, the Council, and the European Parliament – claim to have its internal and external communications under control?

The EU's very essence makes it complex: it is a consensus-driven body, the membership of which comprises 27 cultures, all with their own national interests. Power is spread across the civil service (Commission) and political (Council and Parliament) parts of the organization. This can make it difficult to say who it is in the bureaucracy that stakeholders should appeal to, or on whose behalf a single EU figure is speaking. Understanding its legislative process, meanwhile, can sometimes seem like trying to follow a series of interlinked rollercoasters.

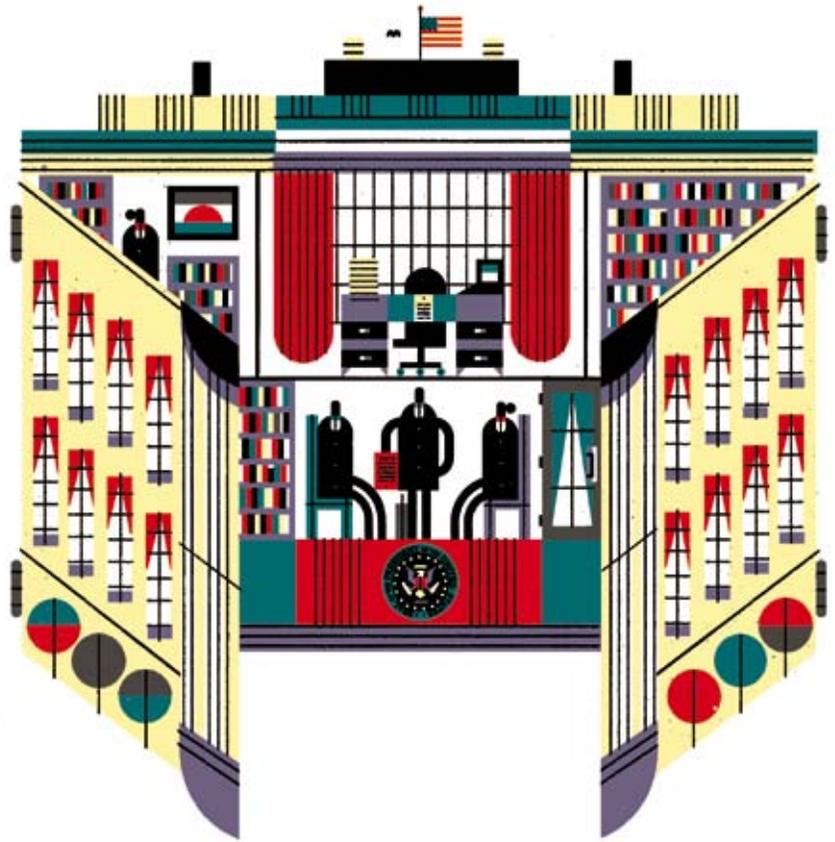
The way policy is formed reflects this complexity and the need to build consensus. Just within the Commission, various "directorates-general" of energy, transport and so on must put policy initiatives through a lengthy process of "inter-service" consultation before they are signed off by all 27 Commissioners. Those draft proposals are then negotiated and often significantly amended by the European Parliament and Council before becoming law.

There are people in Brussels whose main job is to organize inter-institutional dialogue. For example, each Commissioner's cabinet has a member charged with ensuring the Commissioner is in touch with members of the European Parliament (MEPs). Communication across the institutions is necessary if the messages to stakeholders are not to become confused. This is not always easy: each member state, each political party in the European Parliament, might have fundamentally different views on issues. But the EU generally aims to present a coherent view on key issues. One of the most obvious areas for this is foreign policy, though this has had a mixed record.

Spokesperson's role

The 27 Commissioners come to their jobs from a variety of backgrounds and political philosophies, making the task of coordinating external views rather more complex than at national government level.

Playing a central role in coordinating the Commission's internal communications and presenting a unified message to stakeholders – including member governments, business



groups and citizens – is the Commission's Spokesperson's Service. This comprises a close-knit network of people drawn from the cabinets of each of the 27 Commissioners. Their communications efforts are centered on a daily, midday press briefing at which the day's key events and announcements are put to the Brussels-based press corps, sometimes with specialist briefings by policy experts arranged alongside it. This hour-long meeting – which is streamed live in video and audio online – aims to deliver externally a coherent distillation of the Commission's policy plans and reactions to current events.

A meeting of spokespersons each morning plays a central role in establishing a shared understanding of the respective tasks and mutual communications objectives of the Commission, and it creates a coherent message to deliver to the outside world. The role of a spokesperson is pivotal in coordinating the internal messages and forming them into a clear external one. This was the case during the introduction of the euro in 1999, which needed a major external communications effort and an equally large internal one.

Machine politics

The political EU institutions face somewhat different internal communications challenges. The Council of Ministers, comprising the 27 members states of the EU and headed by President Herman Van Rompuy, often faces situations where it must reconcile very different views on policy from each member state.

More complicated still is the European Parliament, with 736 MEPs who have many overlapping and conflicting constituencies – including their voters, national parties, and European political groups.

The Parliament works primarily through committees and policy is arrived at through the usual political haggling. But MEPs are under a constant bombardment of information and arguments from the Commission, member states,

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non-governmental organizations (NGOs), party colleagues in their home countries, and interest groups in Brussels or elsewhere. The influence of political blocs is extremely important, such as the European People's Party (EPP), which includes Union pour un Mouvement Populaire (UMP) in France, and Germany's center-right parties (Christlich-Demokratische Union, CDU, and Christlich-Soziale Union, CSU), plus similar parties from the Benelux countries, Italy, Poland, and a number of other member states. The current presidents of the three main EU institutions – Commission, Council, and Parliament – have all come from the EPP bloc.

Crisis management

No matter how well organized the internal communications, a crisis can test the steeliest of dispositions. And the EU has never faced a crisis as dire as the current one, which combines a series of perilous sovereign debt situations with a banking crunch. At the same time, internal disagreements among the different members of the Eurozone about how best to deal with the crisis have exacerbated the situation. European leaders have been subjected to close scrutiny while they negotiate the complex details. The inevitable disagreements have been aired in public and the crisis has tested to the full Brussels' ability to present a unified and coherent message.

Council President Herman Van Rompuy's office has at times taken control of coordinating internal communications and orchestrating the external message, while Commission President José Manuel Barroso's message of resolute

determination to deal with the crisis in a "State of the Union" speech was widely reported across Europe. However, crises like the present one require speedy action which Brussels institutions sometimes struggle to achieve, with member states still clearly holding considerable power and not always agreeing.

The Matrix is everywhere

The EU has a unique communication challenge in that it must manage the internal communication of an enormously complex organization both vertically and horizontally – within and between departments – and from its technocratic to its political branches. These in turn are subject to the ebb and flow of political alliances in Brussels and the machinations of political parties in the national capitals. At the same time, quite legitimately, these players need to be responsive to the concerns and reactions of a wide group of stakeholders.

No wonder the EU has to work hard to control this information spaghetti junction. Inevitably, there will always be competing views within such a large and diverse organization. Yet there remains a strong argument for developing further the EU's ability to coordinate its internal communication effort and the way it is presented publicly. This is important in avoiding confusion when facing either an external political crisis or market nervousness, as in the present difficult economic situation.

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BY STUART HUDSON — LONDON

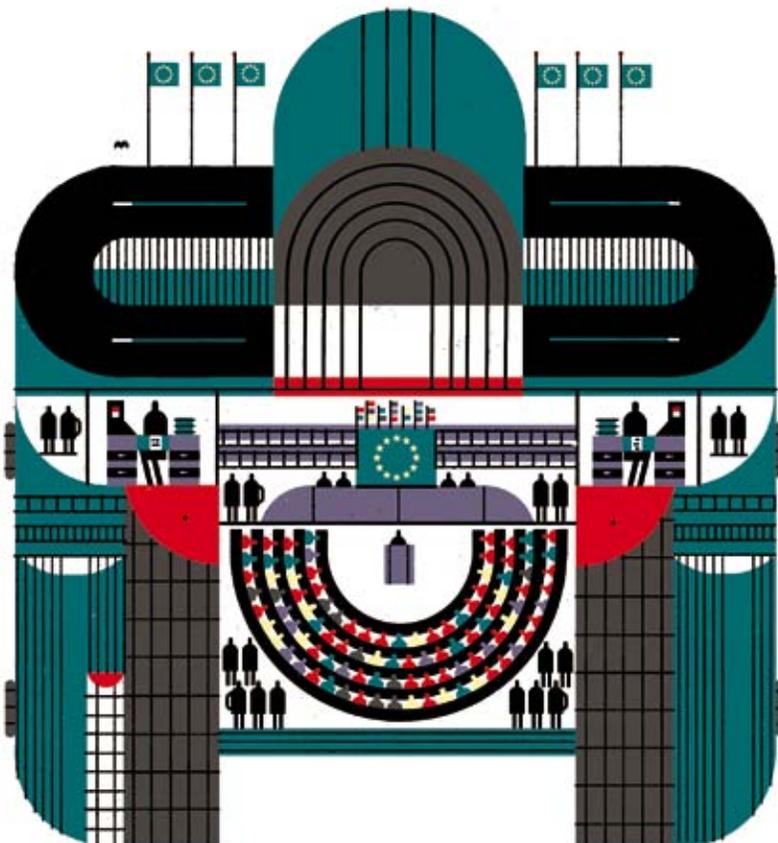
David Cameron has spoken of the "enemies of enterprise," while Tony Blair complained of the "scars on my back," both referring to the often fraught relationship between Prime Ministers and an entrenched and powerful civil service. It will resonate with many organizational leaders.

The BBC's much-loved 1980s television series *Yes Minister*, written by Jonathan Lynn and former public relations man Antony Jay, expertly satirized the cynical view that the citizenry (and many politicians) often have of civil servants, as captured in an exchange between the wily Sir Humphrey Appleby and his neophyte underling Bernard Woolley:

Bernard: "But surely the citizens of a democracy have the right to know." Sir Humphrey: "They have a right to be ignorant. Knowledge only means complicity in guilt; ignorance has a certain dignity."

In the real world, the relationship between politicians, the civil service, and their other advisers is complex.

In recent times, this may have been best illuminated by the controversy surrounding the intelligence reports on 



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Iraq's weapons of mass destruction, compiled by Downing Street in coordination with various branches of government and the security services ahead of the 2003 invasion of Iraq. Subsequent public inquiries have given unprecedented insight into the way government and the civil service work on such issues. Specifically, an Information Commissioner's tribunal looking into a request under the Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) for access to an early version of advice examined a key issue for government internal communications: whether releasing such information, "would ... inhibit the free and frank provision of advice and the free and frank exchange of views for the purposes of deliberation."

The tribunal ruled in 2008 in favor of releasing the information to the journalist who requested it, but the case underlines a key question facing ministers and their officials: how frank can they be if the content of their communications might make it into the public domain?

Prime Minister Blair, in his political memoir, reflected on the impact the FOIA had on his government. "Freedom of Information. Three harmless words. I look at those words as I write them, and feel like shaking my head 'til it drops off my shoulders. You idiot. You naïve, foolish, irresponsible nincompoop. There is really no description of stupidity, no matter how vivid, that is adequate. I quake at the imbecility of it ... Where was Sir Humphrey when I needed him?"

Arise, Sir Jeremy

In the British system, the Prime Minister's key ally in navigating the civil service – the "Whitehall machine," named for its location – is the Private Office at Number 10 Downing Street. This consists of a group drawn from the

best and brightest in the various government departments, people who know the workings of their "home" departments and the potential stumbling blocks. The current team is headed by Jeremy Heywood, who was described by former Conservative Chancellor of the Exchequer (finance minister), Norman Lamont, as "the best ever Private Secretary." Heywood, having done a stint in the private sector (as a banker at Morgan Stanley), before returning to work for Prime Minister Gordon Brown (Labour) and now Cameron (Conservative), is still a rarity among Britain's top civil servants in terms of moving from the public to the private sector and then back again.

Another modern phenomenon in the UK public sector is the special advisers ("SpAds"), hired from outside of the civil service to give political advice. Michael Portillo recalled recently that he was just one of five "SpAds" when he started work for the Conservatives in the late 1970s. This had swelled to 20 by the time he was defense secretary in the 1990s, and "SpAds" now number around 80.

Still, 10 Downing Street has relatively few politically-appointed staff compared with Washington, DC; mostly, it is a permanent, professional civil service, whatever the government. As one official remembers, looking back to the change of ruling party on May 12 2010, "One moment we were clapping Gordon Brown out and half an hour later we were clapping David Cameron in."

Toe the non-party line

Internal communication at Downing Street is, of course, fundamental to government and the Prime Minister is always in touch via secure communication, even while abroad.

This hasn't always run smoothly under the current Liberal-Conservative coalition government, the first in 60 years. For example, the propensity for Cameron and his Liberal deputy, Nick Clegg, to text each other constantly on their secure government BlackBerrys is known to infuriate officials who are unable to keep track of how decisions are reached.

The media is demanding too. During a newspaper interview in February while Cameron was in the Middle East, Clegg responded to a question about whether he was in charge, saying, "Yeah, I suppose I am, I forgot about that," leading to a slew of unkind headlines.

But the coalition has made extraordinary efforts to separate political and government business. A gathering of all the political special advisers was warned not to brief against either side of the coalition and that unprecedented order has held up – albeit precariously – for more than a year.

That is not to say that there aren't public differences between the coalition partners, as has been illustrated over health policy in recent months. But the presence of two parties in the government has led to a more formal process for internal communications and decision-making. The result in the coalition's first year was arguably better communications discipline than had been the case under some single-party governments. ❧



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