
The EU Goes Corporate:

*An Analysis of the European Commission's Use of Corporate
Communication Practices*

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List of abbreviations

Term	Abbreviation
European Union	EU
European Commission	EC
Directorate-General	DG
Directorate-General for Communication	DG COMM
Multiannual Financial Framework	MFF
Corporate Communication Index	CCI

Executive Summary

Communication has for a long time been the scapegoat of governments, institutions and organisations for explaining their failure to get the support of their audiences. Many observations on the European Union institutions have identified short-comings related to their external communication strategies. The object of this thesis is the analysis of the organisational and strategic aspects of the EU communication policy. More precisely, the study looks at the European Commission and its corporate communication under the Multiannual Financial Framework 2014-2020.

At the time of writing this study, at the cross-road between the Juncker Commission and the von der Leyen Commission, the aim of this thesis is threefold. From a theoretical point of view, it wishes to see whether the theories of corporate communication have a considerable role to play in the communication policy of a unique supra-national organisation such as the EU. From an empirical point of view, it seeks to analyse the use of corporate communication strategies by a governmental body such as the European Commission. From a practical point of view, it wishes to draw up recommendations that could possibly inform the communication policy of the future Commission.

This thesis takes the form of a case study. Through the lens of corporate communication theory, it sought to analyse the strategy of corporate communication under the Multiannual Financial Framework 2014-2020. The thesis followed a ‘multi-method’ approach for the gathering of empirical data, through semi-structured expert interviews, along with document analysis. From the analysis of the data, the results indicate that stakeholder centricity, a more unified branding, and the overall re-organisation of the communication function are the most apparent elements belonging to corporate communication practices.

In the discussion section, the thesis identified issues and benefits of the corporate communication under the Multiannual Financial Framework 2014-2020. First, there is a clear distinction between corporate communication and political communication which could lessen the communication impact of individual policies and their benefits to the EU citizens, caused by an over generalisation of what the European Union does. Second, there exists a confusion between the need to communicate as the European Commission or as the European Union. Third, there is a growing professionalisation of the communication function within the European Commission, which ultimately increases the effectiveness of its external communication efforts.

1. Introductory Chapter

The two words 'information' and 'communication' are often used interchangeably, but they signify quite different things. Information is giving out; communication is getting through.

Sydney J. Harris

1.1 Introduction

Communication has for a long time been the scapegoat of governments, institutions and organisations for explaining their failure to get the support of their audiences. Many observations on the European Union (EU) institutions have identified short-comings related to their external communication strategies. Criticised as ‘top-down’, elitist or having an inter-institutional focus, EU communication strategies do not always seem to reach the European demos in the way it wishes too. As pointed out by Spanier (2010)¹, “The European Union is a success story no one is interested in” (p.3).

The European Commission (EC) is the EU's politically independent executive arm and has for purpose to promote the general interest of the EU by proposing and enforcing legislation as well as by implementing policies and the EU budget². It has been said of the EC to be "the only body paid to think European"³. Commissioners have to act independently, regardless of their nationality and should not be influenced by the Member States governments that appoint them. As the initiator of legislation, the EC can be seen as most legitimate to communicate on how the

¹ Dr Bernd Spanier’s study, *Europe, anyone? The 'communication deficit' of the European Union revisited*, was published in 2012 and is based on a dissertation submitted in 2010 at the University of Zurich, Faculty of Arts.

² Self-definition on the EC: https://europa.eu/european-union/about-eu/institutions-bodies/european-commission_en

³ "Interview with European Commission Secretary-General Catherine Day". EurActiv. 25 September 2006. Retrieved 16 June 2019. <https://www.euractiv.com/section/future-eu/interview/interview-with-european-commission-secretary-general-catherine-day/>

EU positively impacts EU citizens. However, challenges arise as the EC is intrinsically *European* and distances itself by nature of the national reach. The EC is also initiating scientific-based policies, and therefore seems to be a less political institution than the co-legislators, the European Parliament and the Council of the European Union.

Communication policies of the EC historically vary as they are related to the Presidency of Commission, and more importantly to the socio-political context in which they were developed. As an example, after the EU's constitutional crisis of 2005⁴ which threatened the whole European integration process, the European Commission (EC) published a white paper on a European communication policy calling for the decentralisation of EU external communication. The aim was to create a “genuine dialogue between the people and the policymakers and a lively political discussion among citizens themselves” (EC, 2006), and to distance itself from a Brussel-centric approach (ibid). This widely publicised communication strategy aimed to strengthen collaborative links between the EU and the public, in an effort to enhance informed debates on EU issues and widen participation of the public in decision- making processes (Michailidou, 2008). However, over a decade later, the flagship strategy of the 2014-2019 Commission has gone *corporate*.

Indeed, the present Commission under President Jean-Claude Juncker has re-centralised the EC's communication efforts in an attempt to rationalise its external communication strategy. With large centralised framework communication contracts that are now under the leadership of the EC's Directorate-General for Communication⁵ (DG COMM), and a central Spokesperson's Service (SPP) operating under the political authority of the President, we are far away from the bottom-up communication strategy introduced by the Barroso Commission.

If the different communication policies have always evolved, it has been to tackle one of the main challenges the EU institutions are still facing today: a communication deficit. Although the concept of a “communication deficit” plays a key role in this study, this thesis aims at

⁴ The rejection of the treaty establishing a European constitution by French and Dutch voters.

⁵ The DG responsible for informing and communicating about the policies of the European Union with the public

distancing itself from analysing the role that the media play in this deficit, reason being that it has already been covered by numerous thorough researches (Spanier, 2010; Meyer, 1999). Furthermore, this thesis does not attempt to analyse the issue of a European Public Sphere which has also been extensively covered (Eriksen, 2005; Koopman & Statham, 2010; Fossum, 2007). Rather, this thesis looks at the organisational and strategic aspects of the EU communication policy, and more precisely, it looks at the European Commission and its corporate communication under the Multiannual Financial Framework 2014-2020.

This thesis takes the form of a case study. The strength of using a case study as a design frame in the social sciences is to uncover a wide range of political, societal and cultural aspects of one phenomenon. The thesis follows a ‘multi-method’ approach for the gathering of empirical data, through semi-structured expert interviews, along with document analysis. The EC’s structural organisation and its communication policy is indeed examined here from two aspects: the EC’s public communication policies (document analysis), and the views of European Communication specialists, including (ex-)EU officials (semi-structured interviews).

1.2 Research Interest and Research Gap

Eurobarometers have indicated over the years that a considerable chunk of the European population does not trust EU or is not even knowledgeable about it. In 2019, more than ever, the EU needs to improve its communication for factors that are now well-known and reported: Eurosceptic parties are on the rise and gaining ground. While the EU is painfully trying to get past Brexit, other countries seem to show a growing mistrust in the EU. However, interestingly enough, the Spring 2018 Standard Eurobarometer, a year ahead of the European Parliament elections, trust in the EU and hope for the future seems to be growing according to the recent Eurobarometers. If this research shows a positive change in public opinion, nuance needs to be highlighted. Indeed, according to the Pew Research Institute, although the Europeans credits the EU with promoting peace and prosperity, “Europeans also tend to describe Brussels as inefficient and intrusive, and in particular they believe the EU is out of touch – a median of 62% say it does not understand the needs of its citizens.” (Pew Research Institute, 2019).

This thesis is a relevant addition to the existing work on the European Union’s communication policies for different reasons. As far as specific research on government communication is concerned, a review of the relevant literature suggests that the subject of organisational communication is under-researched. (Canel & Sanders, 2012, p.89). In addition, most of the studies related to the communication deficit of the EU focus on either the EU media relations or the European public sphere, whereas this thesis aims at analysing the organisational aspect of institutional communication efforts. Moreover, studies about corporate communication are often rooted in the field of business management and marketing, rather than political and governmental organisations.

Furthermore, this study is conducted considering the idea that theory and practice need to complement each other in the field of corporate communication. It is Joep Cornelissen, a prominent scholar of corporate communication theory and practice who said:

“In essence, I believe that combining the specific and localised knowledge that comes out of the intelligent reflection and applied research of professionals in practice with academic research that is generally more conceptual and global in outlook will enlarge our overall knowledge base of the corporate communications field.” (Cornelissen, 2004, p.13)

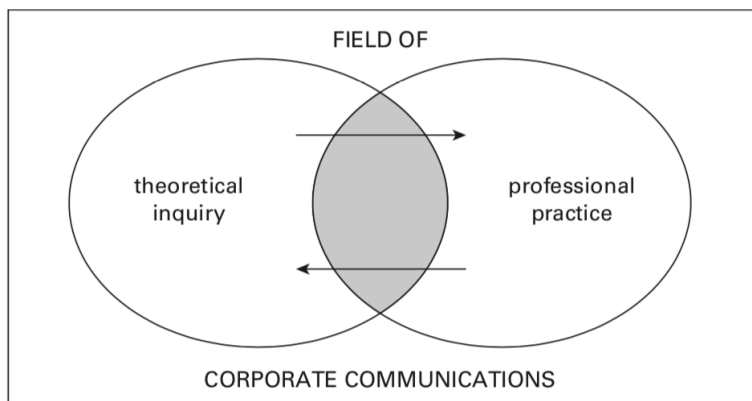


Figure 1: The intersection of theory and practice in corporate communications (ibid.)

1.3 Research Question and Rationale

This study aims at answering the following research question: **“What are the corporate communication practices used by the European Commission?”**.

To achieve that, other sub-questions are to be answered throughout this research:

- What is corporate communication?
- To what extent are corporate communication practices reflected in the EC’s communication strategy?

At the time of writing of this study, at the cross-road between the Juncker Commission and the von der Leyen Commission, the aim of this thesis is threefold:

- From a theoretical point of view, it wishes to see whether the theories of corporate communication have a considerable role to play in the communication policy of a unique supra-national organisation such as the EU
- From an empirical point of view, it seeks to analyse the use of corporate communication strategies by a governmental body such as the European Commission.
- From a practical point of view, it wishes to draw up recommendations that could possibly inform the communication policy of the future Commission.

1.4 Roadmap to the Thesis

This thesis is divided into 6 chapters. After this introduction, the second chapter lays down the background needed for the overall comprehension of the subject. Chapter 2 provides the Methodology used to conduct the research. Chapter 3 lays down a historical overview of the main crises that led to this so-called “communication deficit”. It then explains in more detail the different communication policies that existed since the early 1990s. Chapter 4 formulates the theoretical framework of corporate communication, from theory to operationalisation of the

framework. Chapter 5 is concerned with the actual analysis of the case, the EC's corporate communication under the Multiannual Financial Framework 2014-2020, and discusses the results. The closing chapter summarises and reflects on the research.

2 Methodology

Chapter 1 identified several research questions. This next chapter describes the methodology used to provide the data to investigate them. The chapter is organised around three matters: why choose a qualitative research method, what is a case study and how is this method used in this thesis, and how the data is collected.

2.1 Qualitative research

This thesis pursues a qualitative approach to the study. A study is classified as qualitative if the purpose of the study is primarily to describe a situation, phenomenon, problem or event (Kumar, 2011, p. 19). The appeal of qualitative research is that it enables one to conduct in-depth studies about a wide range of topics (Yin, 2011).

In particular, this thesis identified qualitative research as the most suitable because of its ability to represent the views, opinions, and perspectives of the participants in a study, which in this case are experts in their fields. It also enables the study to explain a phenomenon through existing or emerging concepts, such as corporate communication. Moreover, it enables the use of a variety of sources for data collection.

2.2 Case study

The aim of researching through a case-study method is often incorrectly understood as wanting to generate a generality, some explanations that will and can be applied to all other cases. However, Stake (1995, pp xi – 4) argues that a case study should not be undertaken to understand other cases but rather the particularity and complexity of one case. It is an in-depth study of a single case that is the preferred research strategy when the researcher has little control over the event or phenomenon they are studying, and when the object of the research is a contemporary phenomenon within some real-life context (Yin, 2003, p.1).

A case study is composed of at least two elements: the subject and the object. A case would not be of interest in social sciences if it was not a case of something, where the “of” constitute the analytical frame. This analytical frame forms the theory through which the subject is viewed (Thomas, 2011). As the research question is “**What are the corporate communication practices used by the European Commission?**”, the subject of the case study in this thesis is the *communication policy of the European Commission* and the object is *corporate communication*.

The analytical frame used, or the object of study, is created based on the theories of corporate communication. The intent of this thesis, by constructing a theoretical framework, is to operationalise the theory of corporate communication in order to use it as a tool to analyse the communication policy of the EC. In order to do so, this thesis undertakes an extensive literature review of the available literature on theories of corporate communication. This review aims at synthesizing the theories of corporate communication, first to contribute to a better understanding of the theory, but also to operationalise the analysis of the EC’s communication policy, which helps to direct the analysis.

2.3 Data Collection

2.3.1 Semi-Structured interviews

The interviews were conducted with experts in the field of European Union communication strategy and implementation. Expert interviews are a crucial source of data used to uncover the communication practices of the EU. Interviews are a qualitative research method that provide insight into the attitudes, values and opinions of individuals to apprehend how the individuals understand and operate within their role. Semi-structured interviews focus on the interviewee’s opinion and experience, aiming to get rich and in-depth data (Bryman, 2008). The interviews are analysed through coding, using patterns of themes and topics that are informed by the theoretical framework.

Annex 1 provides some background information on the respondents. **Annex 2** provides the interview guide that was used to conduct the interviews. As the method chosen was semi-structured interviews, this thesis used an interview guide that provides a selection of questions

that ought to be answered, but remains flexible to adapt to the conversation with the respondents and to gain complementary insights.

2.3.2 Document analysis

Document analysis is a form of qualitative research in which documents are interpreted by the researcher to make sense of them through the lenses of a framework. Documents are analysed in the same way as the interview transcripts, using the same codes, to ensure a sound analysis. The documents retrieved to be analysed are official documents published by the European Commission. These documents are all available online in free-access.

3 Background

The following chapter provides the background against which this study looks at the EC's corporate communication strategy as an important development in European communication policy.

3.1 The democratic deficit, communication deficit and information deficit

The democratic deficit issue “represents one of the most trenchant critiques of the contemporary process of European integration” (Ward, 2001, p.76), and is therefore the subject of a multitude of research and commentary. Academic attention on the so-called democratic deficit of the EU started to appear in the mid to late 1980s (Hix & Hoyland, 2011). This democratic deficit was seen as mainly concerning the European Parliament but also had (still has) an effect on the whole of the EU institutions as a supranational political organisation. The democratic deficit was summarised to five main claims used by commentators, often academics, practitioners, media commentators and ordinary citizens of the EU (ibid.). These five claims resume as such: (1) Increased executive power/decreased national parliamentary control; (2) the European Parliament is too weak; (3) there is no Europeans elections; (4) the EU is too distant; (5) policy drift: the EU adopts policies that are not supported by a majority of citizens (Weiler et al., 1995; in Hix & Hoyland, 2011). The EU describes its own deficit as such: “[...] a term used by people

who argue that the EU institutions and their decision-making procedures suffer from a lack of democracy and seem inaccessible to the ordinary citizen due to their complexity.”⁶

As mentioned by Fossum and Schlesinger (2007), analysts have consistently stressed that an important component of the European Union’s democratic deficit is the absence of a viable European public sphere.⁷ The concept of a European Public Sphere remains debated nowadays, virtually because it is a conceptualisation of a complex socio-political construct that is the European Union. From the issues of failing legitimacy and public spheres (or lack thereof), arose the issue of communication, a concept more tangible.

There seemed to be a clear shift of EU’s public communication strategy towards more dialogue-oriented actions since the shock the EU institutions experienced by the rejection of the Constitutional Treaty by the French and the Dutch citizens⁸ (Michailidou, A., 2008), therefore linking the democratic deficit from a less conceptual issue and a more practical diagnosis: the communication deficit.

Spanier (2010) points out that “the EU’s problem in communicating with the general public manifests itself first and foremost in a very basic sense: extensive and widespread indifference – reflected by the obvious discrepancy between the EU’s highly significant influence on the political processes on the one hand and the near absence of a public debate on the EU’s actions on the other”, which means that the EU is almost incapable of sparking the debate amongst the EU citizens, who feel disconnected from what the EU does legislatively even though the EU’s decision-making highly impacts their everyday lives. This begs the question: Can and should the

⁶ https://eur-lex.europa.eu/summary/glossary/democratic_deficit.html

⁷ Democratic deficit is here defined as ‘[The EU’s] deficiencies in representation and representativeness, transparency, accountability, and support’ (Fossum & Schlesinger, 2007)

⁸ For the EU Constitution, all member states of the EU had to ratify the charter, either by parliamentary vote or with a popular referendum. The French voters rejected the charter in a referendum on the 25 May 2005; Dutch voters followed on June 1.

democratic deficit be solved through communication? This study is not the first to attempt to tackle the question.

As Ward (2001) poses, the question of the democratic deficit must necessarily include an analysis of communication structures and best practices that can contribute in facilitating the link between citizenship and governmental bodies. Ward goes on to suggest that the democratic deficit and the lack of public identification with the EU is essentially bound to communication (p. 77). This issue has been acknowledged by the EC itself. Indeed, the Commission's White Paper on European Communication Policy (EC, 2006) accepts that the communication deficit is compounded by a democratic deficit (Rowinski, 2017). However, it poses that the political debate around the EU, if it ever reaches out to the citizens and appear on the mediatic agenda at all, is seen by most citizens from a national perspective (EC, 2006, p.4).

3.2 Communication Policy of the EU: An Evolution

This section addresses the different major periods of the EU's communication policy starting in 1993 until today, in order to get a full grasp of the evolution of the EU strategies related to external communication.

3.2.1 The inter-institutional declaration of October 1993

The start of an information and communication policy reaching EU citizens can be pin-pointed to the 1970s⁹. However, for the sake of conciseness, this thesis will start its review from the 1990s, as it is most commonly recognised as the period where the democratic deficit started to spawn debate.

⁹ For more information on the information and communication policy of the EU during the 1970s-1980s: Terra, A. L. (2010). *From information policy to communication policy: first steps towards reaching European citizens in the 1970s and 1980s*. In: C. Valentini, G. Nesti, eds. *Public Communication in the European Union. History, Perspectives and Challenges*. Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, pp. 49-66.

Indeed, talks about a democratic deficit started to spark following the tough ratification of the Maastricht Treaty in 1992. The Maastricht Treaty significantly expanded the competences of the EU¹⁰, and was consequently not ratified easily, with France approving it by a slight majority, and Denmark postponing the ratification. These encountered challenges, unprecedented in the history of treaty reform, spawned the infinite debate about the Union's democratic deficit (Christiansen et al., 2012).

The EU's response was the inter-institutional declaration of October 1993, where the Council, the European Parliament and the Commission adopted a series of measures on democracy, transparency and subsidiarity. The Commission overall committed to more transparency and adopted a new information and communication policy that would occupy a larger place in the EC's activities by publishing programs and actions planned by the EC, providing an easier public access to documents, enhancing coordination of information activities both inside and outside the Commission and making the necessary resources to the media available.

3.2.2 The Santer Crisis: Communication Mismanagement

The measures mentioned above prepared the grounds for a more serious approach to the EU communication policy to tackle the democratic deficit after the Maastricht Treaty. However, crises such as the resignation of the Santer Commission in 1999¹¹ did not help the EU's democratic legitimacy issues. Sometimes referred to as "the biggest political crisis" in the history of the Commission (Baisnée, 2004, p.46), the Santer Commission's resignation indicated underlying flaws in the Commission's communication approach.

Even after the Maastricht Treaty ratification issues, public communication continued to be treated as an extra measure rather than as a strategy to uphold public support (ibid., p. 625).

¹⁰ The Treaty intended to found the European Union that we know today and establish its pillar structure: the European Community, the Common Foreign and Security Policy, and the Cooperation in the Fields of Justice and Home Affairs, along with the creation of the single currency

¹¹ The entire European Commission resigned after a report written by an independent committee of inquiry which found evidence of mismanagement and fraud.

Although Santer's successor Romano Prodi merely marginally reformed the communication policy of the EU, the importance of external communication as a strategic tool to close the gap between citizens and the institutions was again emphasised in the 2001 White Paper on European Governance (CEC, 2001).

3.2.3 The first European Commissioner for Institutional Relations and Communication Strategy under President Barroso (I)

From an organisational point of view, the Barroso Commission was the first to show its commitment to the now acknowledged communication deficit of the EU. Barroso appointed Commission Vice President Margot Wallström as a Commissioner for Communication. This was widely regarded as more than just a symbolic move, clearly stating the new importance that needed to be given to EU communication policy (Spanier, 2010, p.25). In October 2005, Wallström launched the Commission's "Plan D for Democracy, Dialogue and Debate" (CEC, 2005). The objective of Plan D was to explore ways of stimulating debate between the EU institutions and its citizens in order to implicate the public into the decision-making process. This plan had the aim of resolving the legitimacy deficit of the EU and especially of the non-elected Commission. In summary, Plan D sought "to clarify, deepen and legitimise a new consensus on Europe and address criticisms and find solutions where expectations [had] not been met" (CEC, 2005, p.11).

In 2006, the Commission published the long-awaited White Paper on Communication Policy. Its innovative trait was that communication policy was finally recognised as a policy of its own rather than a 'priority' or 'strategy'. The Paper uncovered a "fundamentally new approach – a decisive move away from one-way communication to reinforced dialogue, from an institution-centred to a citizen-centred communication, from a Brussels-based to a more decentralised approach." (CEC, 2006, p.4). This was done by means of five key area of actions, summarised from the White Paper on European Communication Policy (CEC, 2006, pp 5- 13):

- (1) To establish the right to freedom of information in the EU
- (2) To "empower citizens", by providing tools and instruments of communication
- (3) To work with the media and new technologies (not only the Brussels-based media)

- (4) To understand the European public opinion better
- (5) to "do the job together" by cooperation and partnerships between the EU institutions, Member States, regional and local government levels, political parties and civil society organisations.

3.2.4 The Barroso II Commission: corporate communication pilot

The Commission in place from 2010-2014, Barroso's second term, although placing new emphasis on the importance of communication yet again, had based the allocation of communication resources on individual communication, rather than specific resources allocated to the general communication on major political priorities (EC, 2015)

It is only in 2013 that the *corporate communication under the Multiannual Financial Framework 2014-2020* became operational. For the first time, the aggregation of resources from multiple DGs funded corporate communication at the EC level. As a result, the pilot corporate communication campaign project was developed in 2014.

3.2.5 The Juncker Commission: corporate communication under the Multiannual Financial Framework 2014-2020

As part of the Multiannual Financial Framework (MFF) 2014-2020, a corporate communication strategy was adopted on 23 September 2013 by the European Commission.¹² In the document *Corporate communication under the Multiannual Financial Framework 2014-2020* (2013), it is one of the first times the term "corporate communication" is used to describe what was previously understood as institutional communication.

The adoption of a corporate approach at the European level, was described by respondents as "ground-breaking" and "innovating". By looking beyond individual portfolios of the different DGs, and by communicating collectively on important themes, the EU corporate communication

¹² Ibid.

under the MFF 2014-2020 consisted of better conveying key political messages. As a result, communication strategies of the different DGs have therefore been aligned with the communication priorities of the Juncker Commission. This entailed the planning of common benchmarks for the activities of communication, as well as communication activities common to all DGs. A very important feature of the corporate communication strategy was the development of the 3 corporate campaigns: *EU that delivers*, *EU that protects*, *EU that empowers*.

These campaigns were 3 narratives encapsulating the 10 priorities elaborated by the Juncker Commission. They were first and foremost targeting citizens (not policy stakeholders) in order to bridge the gap established between them and the EU. They were focused on ambivalent individuals and especially the young. The campaigns were using techniques of storytelling, presenting real EU citizens and their real projects. This aimed at evoking emotions, and focusing on tangible results.

Beyond the campaigns, however, EU corporate communication also revised the internal structure and the ways of how communication was done. Among others, these changes included a centralisation of large communication framework contracts, the SPP, and the taxation of other DGs by DG COMM in order to get a higher budget for external communication efforts.

The analysis conducted in this thesis is exclusively based on the latter background section on **corporate communication under the Multiannual Financial Framework 2014-2020**, established by the Juncker Commission.

4 Corporate Communication: An Analytical Framework

This section provides an insight into which theoretical framework is used to find an answer on the question of what corporate communication practices are being used by the European Commission. This chapter first lays down the extensive literature review, that was undertaken to understand the theoretical scope of the study. The findings of this review are then operationalised

into an index that is further used in this thesis to analyse the corporate communication under the MFF 2014-2020.

4.1 ... From theory

Corporate communication, as a field of research in academia, has emerged as a diverse and evolving field in the 1990s (van Riel, 1997, p. 288). Van Riel¹³ advocated that corporate communication should be considered as a field of its own instead of existing within the boundaries of the fields of corporate advertising, media relations, financial communication, employee communication and crisis management (p. 289).

Jackson and Blauw's definitions of corporate communication were among the first to exist in international literature (van Reil & Fombrun, 2007). Blauw (1986) described corporate communication as: "The integrated approach to all communication produced by an organisation, directed at all relevant target groups. Each item of communication must convey and emphasise the corporate identity". While Jackson's (1987) take on the concept was that "Corporate communication is the total communication activity generated by a company to achieve its planned objectives". Van Riel and Fombrun's (2007) definition, while based on Jackson's and Blauw's, seems to be a more complete interpretation of the concept:

"We define corporate communication as the set of activities involved in managing and orchestrating all internal and external communications aimed at creating favourable starting points with stakeholders on which the company depends. Corporate communication consists of the dissemination of information by a variety of specialists

¹³ Professor Cees van Riel, professor of Corporate Communication at Rotterdam School of Management (RSM), Erasmus University. Van Riel is the founder of RSM's specialist Corporate Communication Centre (CCC) for applied and scientific research into the business of reputations at RSM. <https://www.rsm.nl/about-rsm/news/detail/3308-royal-honour-for-business-reputation-specialist-professor-cees-van-riel/>

The theoretical Framework of strategic communication will mainly be centered around his work, his research and elaboration of theories, along with prominent scholars/commentators of the field of corporate communication.

and generalists in an organisation, with the common goal of enhancing the organisation's ability to retain its license to operate (p.25).

Van Riel (1995) places three broad categories of communication under the umbrella of corporate communication: marketing communication, management communication, and organisational communication. This thesis focuses on the category of organisational communication, and shall therefore refer to corporate communication from the organisational point of view.

In his previous work, van Riel (1995) concurred that research in the field of corporate communication should focus on three elements: (1) "corporate identity"; (2) "corporate reputation"; and (3) organisation of communication". This idea will be at the foundation of the theoretical framework used in this thesis.

The term corporate communication is intrinsically linked to the communication activities used by business corporations. Because they operate in competitive environments, businesses have been aware of the importance of developing an attractive image and reputation for themselves. However, in recent years political developments and negative press have been pressuring institutions and government agencies to forge a positive image and reputation to attract their audiences – the citizens. We therefore see growing use of corporate communication techniques and practices in non-corporate organisations (Van Riel & Formbrun 2007, p. 26).

Indeed, as this thesis defends, the theories underlined in the field of corporate communication can also be applied to organisations other than business corporations. Van Riel and Formbrun (ibid) argue that corporate communication should rather be interpreted in relation to the Latin word "corpus", meaning "body", as in organisation. According to Cornelissen (2011) using the term "corporate" emphasises a unified way of looking at 'internal' and 'external' communication disciplines. Indeed, the corporate communication function starts from the perspective of the 'bodily' organisation as a whole when communicating with internal and external stakeholders (p.5).

4.2 ... To Operationalisation

From the theories mentioned in the above section, a **corporate communication index**¹⁴ was created for the purpose of this thesis. The index is based on the extensive literature review and will serve as a tool to analyse the data in Chapter 5. The following sections summarises the analytical framework of corporate communication.

4.2.1 The Corporate Communication Index

The following table summarises the corporate communication index (Table 1). It is composed of three indicators: *corporate reputation*, *corporate identity*, and *organisation of communication*. These indicators are in turn each divided into three sub-indicators, which helps the direction of the analysis.

Table 1: Corporate Communication Index	
<i>Component</i>	<i>Indicator</i>
Corporate Reputation	Stakeholder-centric
	Brand
	Corporate Image
Corporate identity	Internal identification
	External stakeholders' identification
	Identification mix: communication, behaviour, symbolism
Organisation of communication	Organisation of functions reflecting the Strategy
	Leadership/managerial position of communication function
	Communication seen as key to meet strategic objectives, 'creator of value'

¹⁴ This index has been developed by the author of this thesis. It reflects the understanding of the author of the main components and indicators of corporate communication.

The index was constructed through the literature review of corporate communication academic articles/books that uncovered a set of key concepts that to understand and analyse practical corporate communication efforts. The review is based on the most influential theorists of corporate communication in Europe, Cees B.M. Van Riel, Joep Cornelissen, and Charles J. Fombrun.

As van Riel (1995) explains it, corporate communication features three elements for organisational performance in communication (mutually independent): (1) “corporate identity”; (2) “corporate reputation”; and (3) orchestration of communication”. These three elements form the basis for the **corporate communication index**.

4.2.2 Corporate reputation

Van Riel and Fombrun (2007) define **corporate reputation**” as “a multi-stakeholder construct that is particularly appropriate for measuring the effectiveness of an organisation’s communication system” (p.38). The studies of corporate reputation capture the effects that brands and images have on the overall idea and judgement that stakeholders make of organisations (p.40). Therefore, corporate reputation can be understood as the performance of brands and image of an organisation and its effects on the overall assessment of the organisation by stakeholders. By **brand**, this thesis means “a combination of verbal, visual, and emotional cues that encourage targeted observers to identify with the brand” (p.39). By **corporate image** it means “the features of the company that stakeholders come to perceive.” (p.40). In the perspective of business circles, the expression “corporate reputation” is increasingly used to refer solely to the reputation of the organisation as a whole and not to sub-brands (p.45).

4.2.3 Corporate identity

Corporate identity is how the organisation comes to be defined, understood, and conceptualised – identified – by its stakeholders. Corporate identity is the answer to these questions: “who we are”, “what we stand for”, “what is our core purpose?”, and “what does it mean to be involved in this company?” (Van Riel & Fombrun, 2007, p. 60). An organisation with a strong identity generates identification, not only externally but internally as well. Therefore it is imperative to

examine what the authors call “employee identification” and “stakeholder identification” as being the juxtaposition forming corporate identity.

Cornelissen (2011) distinguished corporate identity from organisational identity. This distinction is explained as follows: “corporate identity is thus concerned with the construction of identity to differentiate a company’s position and offerings in the eyes of important stakeholder groups. Organizational identity, on the other hand, is founded in deeper patterns of meaning and sense-making of people within the organization and leads to shared values, identification and belonging.” (p.71) For the sake of overall comprehension, this thesis uses the notions of corporate identity and organisational identity interchangeably, as Cornelissen argues that they are “two sides of a coin” (ibid).

4.2.4 Organisation of communication

Organisation of communication, within the paradigm of corporate communication literature, refers to the structure of the communication function in an organisation. This concept can also be found in the literature as *orchestration of communication*. Van Riel and Fombrun (2007) pose three imperatives for the organisation of the communication function: *structure should always follow strategy; the leadership of the communication function; the communication function needs to be treated as a creator of value*.

Structure should always follow strategy – meaning that communication, from an internal organisational point of view should be adapted to the overall strategy of the organisation. Ultimately, the communication system in place must serve the organisation’s strategic choices (Van Riel & Fombrun, 2007, pp. 260-261).

The leadership of the communication function is reflected in the elevation of the communication practitioners/departments of an organisation to the high-managerial and executive spheres. This practise formalises the strategic involvement of communications at the corporate level and credit corporate communication as a strategic management function existing to achieve an organisation’s overall strategy, rather than a technical support function (Cornelissen, 2004, p.47). The underlying argument is that if corporate communication is to exist in support of strategy implementation, the senior corporate communication officers should also be key participants in

the strategy formulation process, pointing to the need of *professionalisation* of communication practitioners (Van Riel & Fombrun, 2007, p.265).

The communication function needs to be treated as a creator of value. The perceived value and accountability of the corporate communication function should be enhanced, by for example increasing the budget of the departments in charge of corporate communication. The following ‘business case’ argues for seeing corporate communication function as a key component of the healthy development of an organisation. It was expressed by Van Riel and Fombrun (2007) as such:

“First, communication affects the operating performance of a company, and so its profitability. Second, profitability affects market perceptions of the company’s future prospects – and so influences a company’s market value. Third, the company’s operating activities themselves contribute to building “reputation capital” – a shadow asset whose value encompasses the equity hidden in both a company’s product brands and corporate brand, and that describes the positive regard in which it is held by all of the company’s stakeholders.” (p. 270)

5 Analysis

The first part of Chapter 5 (Section 5.1) presents patterns of results retrieved from the data and analyses them for their relevance to the research question “**What are the corporate communication practices used by the European Commission?**”. In this chapter, the research objective is achieved through systematic analysis of the data in the light of each component of the Corporate Communication Index elaborated in Table 1. The results are summarised in Table 2.

In the second part of this Chapter (Section 5.2), the discussion and interpretative analysis will be elaborated. Some recommendations stem from this discussion.

5.1 Findings

5.1.1 Perception on the EU’s Corporate Reputation

While analysing the interview data and the official documents, two themes emerged in the framework of corporate reputation, which will be discussed in this section. These themes are: **the citizens are the key stakeholders of EU communication**, and the **need for branding, and building an image for the EU**.

Stakeholder centrality focused on EU citizens

As mentioned in section 4.2.1, reputation should be understood as the multi-stakeholder construct of the organisation, that is to say how the key stakeholders of an organisation perceive and judge said organisation. Following this logic, the basis of reputation management is **stakeholder-centric**. When talking about a supra-national government as unique as the European Union, one would first need to analyse who the key stakeholders¹⁵ are. When one focuses on a company that produces and sells good, a narrow mapping of the stakeholders might be customers, shareholders, governments, or employees. Mapping stakeholders of the EU is much more complex, even with such a narrow interpretation.

¹⁵ According to renowned economist R. Edward Freeman stakeholders are “groups without whose support the organisation would cease to exist” (2013)

During the interviews, one group of stakeholders was particularly put under the light by the respondents: the European citizens. Why is there even a need for a communication policy in the EU, what is the purpose of it? With unanimity, the citizens were at the centre of the answers.

Béla Dajka, former Head of Corporate Communication at the EC, noted:

“If you look at the corporate communication decision that is the basis for running the campaigns, it says it's “better knowledge about the EU” and “what the EU does for its citizens”, so that would be the purpose. But for me, the real purpose would be **to make people understand what the EU actually is** because people do not understand what the EU actually is, that it's a community of 500 million people, and that we are so intertwined in so many different ways”.

Mikel Landabaso, Director of Strategy and Corporate Communication at the European Commission, stated:

“[The purpose of communication for the EU] is moving **citizens** brains and emotions in order to **get them interested at participating in the process of European construction.**”

While Carolien Peeters, Head of the Corporate sector at DG COMM, mentioned that

“The main purpose of governmental communication... It is our core business, our duty, we should be accountable, we should be transparent, because we're working with taxpayers' money and we are representing people, who at one point choose to have a government, to put a government in place, to take care of the organisation society, and I think **we should explain to our citizens how we do that.**”

In the official documents, one can find statements such as “Corporate communication implies having a powerful and compelling narrative showing how the EU improves people’s lives”¹⁶ or that the general objectives of corporate communication in the context of the EU are:

- *To listen, exchange and engage with citizens on what the EU stands for, its main challenges, opportunities and how best to face them together*
- *To raise public awareness about the EU as a whole, its role, values, aims, priorities and its work to address current issues in line with (i) the Commission political priorities for 2015- 2019 (and for 2020 the Political Guidelines of the future Commission President), (ii) the annual Commission Work Programmes, and (iii) the general objectives of sector-specific regulations and policies under the 2014-2020 Multiannual Financial Framework.*
- *To demonstrate the positive impact of EU policies and laws on European citizens, companies and other stakeholders and the added value of EU action.*
- *To address the most widespread myths and misinformation about European Commission and EU. To raise public awareness about the ways the EU citizens and stakeholders can contribute to the EU policy and law making, thereby contributing to strengthening of ownership of the European project.¹⁷*

These comments and extracts seem to provide evidence that citizens are at the heart of the Corporate Communication strategy under President Juncker for multiple reasons. First, “to make them interested” in the EU so that they would want to participate in the European construction. Second, “to make them understand” why and how policy is made. By means of a better

¹⁶ European Commission (2018). Communication to the Commission from President Juncker and Commissioner Oettinger: Corporate communication action in 2019-2020 under the Multiannual Financial Framework 2014-2020. C(2018) 4063 final.

¹⁷ Ibid.

understanding, the EC wishes to get more support from the citizens. To make them interested and to make them understand could possibly invert the current trend marked by increased indifference, and even hostility of European citizens towards the Union.

Brand/Image of the EU

The image and brand of the EU seem to be very central to the corporate communication under the MFF 2014-2020, as stated in DG COMM's 2014 Annual Activity Report, "[Corporate communications] Aim to improve the Commission's corporate image"¹⁸.

The said image of the EU, in this context, is referred to as the main KPI used by DG COMM to measure the efficiency of communication. DG COMM's Strategic plan for 2016-2020 mentions that "From 2016, all Communication units in the Commission and DG COMM will work towards the same overarching long-term objective. Over the long term, the indicator of a "positive image of the EU" (Eurobarometer) is at best a proxy for measuring the impact of this work."¹⁹

But a reputation, an image and a brand for whom? On this point, from the respondents' perspective and from the official documents analysed, the answers seem much more confounded. On the one hand, one respondent considers that branding the European Commission, and fostering its image as the European Parliament has done, is increasingly important. Béla Dajka commented:

"When we introduced the commission logo, I advocated (but I couldn't persuade any decision maker) that now with the creation of the commission logo, we actually have to create a narrative and communicate the narrative behind the commission for what it actually is", and "I would say the Parliament is the most positive example trying to actually project itself to the outside world as an institution. The Parliament was doing very strongly during the election campaign, but already the Parliament started this work

¹⁸ European Commission (2015). *Annual Activity Report 2014. DG COMMUNICATION – Annexes*, p.3.

¹⁹ European Commission (2016c). *Strategic Plan 2016 – 2020 for DG COMMUNICATION*, p.8.

in 2009 [...], it already started profiling itself as an institution. The commission still doesn't do anything to profile itself as an institution”.

On the other hand, the necessity to communicate under the unified EU brand becomes increasingly apparent. Carolien Peeters remarks:

“[...]And that's what corporate communication tries, to do something with one voice so cross policies, cross DGs, even across institutions, because you will see these are posters from our campaigns²⁰ this is a commission campaign, I mean commission has paid for it and DG COMM is implementing it but we branded with European Union, that's the corporate brand.”

“People, citizens, are not interested in the fact that there is a Commission and a Parliament. It's the EU government level. That what we want to do, we communicate under the flag, to citizens and in language that is non-expert and tailored to citizens.”

These comments seem to provide the evidence that the *image and branding* of the EU still lead to confusion as to which brand, and which image to use for which institutions.

5.1.2 Corporate identity

During the analysis of the data, this thesis uncovered themes linked to the concept of *identity*. Studying the question of identity in the European context is delicate and sometime worrisome for defenders of the European construct. While interviewing the respondents, this thesis uncovered that some of the challenges to effective communication from the EC can be traced back to identity issues. These challenges will be discussed in the following sections.

Internal Identity

How is the Commission generating an internal identity with its employees? The answers to the questions of “who we are”, “what we stand for”, “what our core purpose is”, and “what it means to be involved in this organisation”, are not easy to apprehend. For the respondents, internal identification to the European Commission was highlighted in different manners. For some, clear

²⁰ Ms. Peeters is referring to the 3 “Corporate Communication Campaigns”: EU and Me; EU Invests; EU Protects.

values for the European Commission that ultimately create identity, were lacking. Béla Dajka observed:

“What are the values of the commission? You have, how they call it, “the principles of good administrative behavior”. For me, those principles like transparency, honesty, impartiality in the European interest, [...] this is very different of organisational values than what your behaviour as a member of the organisation is supposed to be. I mean that behaviour is ethical principles of organisational values is something that everybody can actually leave, as organisational values create a stronger belonging to the organisation and the European Commission. I don't know what are the organisational values of the commission [...] And that is actually a basis for corporate communication, a basic need to know what the organisation is about”

This observation suggests that there are no well-articulated values behind the European Commission, which in turn creates difficulty to generate a sense of internal belonging to the organisation that is the EC.

External Identity

External identity has not come up significantly during the respondents' interviews. However, Mr Landabaso noted that within the new corporate communication strategy,

“We reach the normal citizens in order to explain in our voice framed by **European values** what we're trying to achieve together. This is very important if we are to gain the hearts and minds of citizens to the European Project.” (Mikel Landabaso)

Although the term identity is not explicitly mentioned, this extract seems to provide an explanation for how common EU values are used to attract the citizens to the EU, by gaining their “hearts and minds”, fostering a deep connection between them and the institution.

5.1.3 *Organisation of Communication – Restructures*

While analysing the data, another theme emerged which will be discussed in this section. This theme was **the organisation of communication**. This section analyses the organisation of the communication functions, the leadership role of the communication function, and if and how the communication is perceived as a creator of value.

Organisation of the communication functions

In the official documents issued by the EC, communication is defined as a tool to achieve the overall strategy of the EC. In *The Working Methods of the Commission 2010-2014*, one can read extracts such as:

“Communication should be oriented towards the political and strategic priorities of the Commission”, or again “The external communication of the Commission delivers the political messages of the College of Commissioners to the public [...]. To be effective, it must be focused on the political and strategic priorities of the College as a whole”.

But how is the function of communication organised and what does this organisation mean for the overall understanding of the EC’s corporate communication practices? It is interesting to note that the organisation of the communication function has been completely re-arranged under President Juncker to follow the strategic needs of the EC through centralisation, cooperation, and strategic guidelines.

The Spokesperson’s Service (SPP), is the official voice of the European Commission providing information about the priorities and decisions of the Commission to the media via the spokespersons²¹. According to the same document, “The SPP is designed to support the President and Commissioners so they can communicate effectively – in the media and with citizens, more generally”. The head of the SPP “reports directly to the President of the European

²¹ European Commission (2014). *Communication from the President to the Commission. The Working Methods of the European Commission 2014-2019*.

Commission”²², which ensures a greater centralisation of the communication function, as also mentioned by one of the interview respondents. Moreover, the SPP aims mostly at *political communication* by “continuously engaging with media, announcing new initiatives implementing the 10 political priorities of the Commission, and supporting the President's and the Commissioners' communication”²³

However, it is interesting to note that the SPP does not fall under the strategy of corporate communication according to EC officials respondents. *Political communication* and *corporate communication* seem to be two different things in the world of DG COMM. One respondent mentioned:

“Before, we were doing political communication mainly to the bubble here (in Brussels), to the media here, and through the press corps SPP, Daily Press Conference, and we were doing stakeholder communication through the DGs responsible for the policies addressing their stakeholders (people interested in participating somehow in their policies). In between the two, the normal citizen was not being addressed”.

Another respondent also stated:

“With the Juncker Commission, it has become much more centralised in terms of the Spokesperson's Service dealing with media relations, you have a much more centralised organisation now, both for this part of Spokesperson's Service and for the corporate communication part”.

It seems like these extracts shed light on the fact that that the organisation of communication function has been extensively rationalised through increased centralisation and coordination via bodies such as the SPP and DG COMM, in order to serve and achieve its purpose and the strategic priorities enounced under President Juncker.

²² Ibid.

²³ European Commission (2016c). Strategic Plan 2016 – 2020 for DG COMMUNICATION.

The Leadership role of the communication function: DG COMM in command

The 2014 Annual Activity Report of DG Communication (DG COMM) states that, as defined in *The Working Methods of the European Commission 2014-2019* adopted on 11 November 2014, communication is now part of the presidential powers. This report elaborates on the important objectives and changes instituted by President Juncker at the communication level. Here, the role of DG COMM is redefined.²⁴ As mentioned in the *Working Methods* both DG COMM and the SPP are placed under the authority of the President. But what does this entail?

Some respondents declared:

“During the Juncker Commission, the DG COMM has become a presidential service. So, the whole organisation was lifted, and DG COMM people felt more important.”

“DG COMM is redirected under the president for the first time as the presidential service that runs the show in terms of corporate communication, it taxes the other DGs to get money to be able to develop corporate campaigns that cover many policy areas in a corporate effort, in a joined-up effort, not for this or that particular commissioning policy, but in the name of the European Union as a whole.”

This reorganisation leading DG COMM to become a Presidential Service formalises the strategic involvement of communications at the corporate level and credit corporate communication as a strategic management function.

Communication is a creator of value

From the analysis of the data, evidence supports that under President Juncker, communication has developed into a concept of creator of value for the EU. Official documents mention:

“The Members of the Commission are the public faces of the institution and the best advocates and the best "spokespersons" of Commission policies. Their communication

²⁴ As mentioned in the background section, the DG is now responsible for providing advice and tools for strategy and communication, and its mission is to share and explain what the EU does as an entity and what it brings to European citizens.

activities and the structures that support them are closely linked to their political role as Members of the Commission. Their success in terms of media and public perception depends on their ability to communicate convincingly on a large number of issues in all Member States and to be seen as a strong team contributing positively to the achievement of the key objectives and priorities of the Commission as a whole.”²⁵

This extract showcases the role of communication as a means to an end, the end being to achieve the key objectives and priorities of the Commission. However, in the larger sense, the EC’s communication has been perceived as an important contributor to the level of voter turnout of the 2019 European Parliament elections, Mikel Landabaso comments:

“Looking at the evaluations that we have, the most recent Eurobarometers, and the 51% voters in the last election, you can think that there was a contribution. It is not the *direct result* of us of course, but if we would have had 42% of participants in the elections, they would have blamed communication”.

This quote suggests that communication practices of the EC, under the MFF 2014-2019, have had an impact on the overall democratic deficit of the EU by contributing to the overall voter turnout during the 2019 elections²⁶. These results generally enhance the perceived value and accountability of the corporate communications function.

Summary of findings

Table 2 present a summary of the different quotes and extracts that were used as samples of the data during the analysis.

²⁵ European Commission (2014). *Communication from the President to the Commission. The Working Methods of the European Commission 2014-2019*. C(2014) 9004.

²⁶ In 2019, the elections have achieved a record the voter turnout of 50.6%, demonstrating a growth of 8% compared to 2014. <https://election-results.eu/turnout/>

Table 2: Summary of the findings

	Corporate Reputation		Corporate Identity		Organisation of Communication		
	stakeholder centric	brand / corporate image	internal identification	external identification	organisation of functions reflecting the strategy	leadership/managerial position of communication function	communication seen as key to meet strategic objectives, 'creator of value'
Interviews with the 3 respondents	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ “To make people understand what the EU actually is” ▪ “Moving citizens brains and emotions in order to get them interested at participating in the process of European construction.” ▪ “We are representing people [...] we should explain to our citizens how we do that” 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ “[Except for the logo] The commission still doesn't do anything to profile itself as an institution” ▪ “We branded [the 3 Corporate Campaigns] with European Union, that's the corporate brand we communicate under the flag” 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ “Organisational values create a stronger belonging to the organisation and the European Commission. I don't know what are the organisational values of the commission [...] And that is actually a basis for corporate communication, a basic need to know what the organisation is about” 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ “We reach the normal citizens in order to explain in our voice framed by European values what we're trying to achieve together this is very important if we are to gain the hearts and minds of citizens to the European Project” 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ “Before, we were doing political communication mainly to the bubble here (in Brussels)[...] In between the two, normal citizens that was not being addressed” ▪ “With the Juncker Commission, it has become much more centralised in terms of the Spokesperson's Service dealing with media relations, you have a much more centralised organisation now, both for this part of Spokesperson's Service and for the corporate communication part” 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ “DG COMM is redirected under the president for the first time as the presidential service that runs the show in terms of corporate communication, it taxes the other DGs to get money to be able to develop corporate campaigns that cover many policy areas in a corporate effort” ▪ “During the Juncker Commission, the DG COMM has become a presidential service so it'll be the whole organisation was lifted” 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Looking at the evaluations that we have, the most recent Eurobarometers, and the 51% voters in the last election you can think that there was a contribution.
Official documentation from the EC	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ To listen, exchange and engage with citizens on what the EU stands for [...]. ▪ To raise public awareness about the EU as a whole, its role, values, aims, priorities and its work [...]. ▪ To demonstrate the positive impact of EU policies and laws on European citizens, companies and other stakeholders and the added value of EU action. ▪ [...]To raise public awareness about the ways the EU citizens and stakeholders can contribute to the EU policy and law making, thereby contributing to strengthening of ownership of the European project. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Over the long term, the indicator of “positive image of the EU” (Eurobarometer) is at best a proxy for measuring the impact of this work [DG COMM's work] ▪ “[Corporate communications] Aim to improve the Commission's corporate image” 			<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ “Communication should be oriented towards the political and strategic priorities of the Commission The external communication of the Commission delivers the political messages of the College of Commissioners to the public” ▪ “The SPP is designed to support the President and Commissioners so they can communicate effectively – in the media and with citizens, more generally” 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ “Their [Members of the Commission's] success in terms of media and public perception depends on their ability to communicate convincingly on a large number of issues [...] and to be seen as a strong team contributing positively to the achievement of the key objectives and priorities of the Commission as a whole” 	

5.2 Discussion of the Findings

In this section, the last one before the conclusive chapter, this thesis presents a critical analysis of the findings uncovered in section 5.1. The aim of this section is to place the questions that were raised into the bigger picture, to make sense of connections that exist between the results of the data analysis and its implication for the professional practices of EU communication.

There is a clear distinction between corporate communication and political communication in the European Commission worldview.

The findings of this research, analysed against a historical and factual background presented in Chapter 3, indicated that a clear-cut distinction was made between the EC's so-called "corporate communication" and "political communication". While what the EC calls "corporate communication" is merely implemented through the three corporate campaigns, *EU that delivers*, *EU that protects*, and *EU that empowers*, targeting the citizens, "political communication" is centralised under the SPP and focuses on the Brussels Bubble audience consisting of journalists and policy stakeholders.

Having a communication strategy that targets citizens and that views them as the main stakeholders of the EU construct is worthy of further elaboration and forms the basis for effective reconnection of the EU institutions and their citizens. However, as the analysis of the data uncovered that there is such a great difference between corporate communication and political communication, it seems like the importance of individual policies and the benefits to the EU citizens might be lost, caused by an over generalisation of what the EU does.

There exists a confusion between the need to communicate as the European Commission or as the EU.

It is important to notice that the documents and the interviewees' accounts detailing the corporate communication strategy, speak of a strategy sometimes applying to the Commission, sometimes to the EU. As mentioned previously in this thesis, the notions of stakeholder centricity, brand, and image, are elements on which the reputation of organisations bases itself on. If the stakeholders (the citizens) are not interested in the complex mechanics of the European organisational and

legislative system, wouldn't it make sense to only communicate externally (i.e. to the citizens) exclusively under the flag, rather than the Berlaymont logo? This has been done by the three corporate campaigns implemented by the EC but ought to be done systematically while communicating externally, if the EC wants the EU to build a brand, an image, and an overall common reputation in the Union and beyond.

As also pointed out by the analysis, external identification to the organisation is a theme that has not been extensively covered by either the respondents or the official documents implicating the communication strategy under Juncker. This omission seems reasonable as the question of the construction (or strengthening) of a European identity is on the one hand a sensitive topic to approach, and on the other hand requires a long-term view, past the 5 years-span of a Presidency. Nevertheless, the values of an organisation are a core component and form the basis for effective communication, as mentioned by one respondent, and ought to be clearly elaborated as part of the EC's communication strategy.

There is an increasing professionalisation of communication

The EC's increasing professionalisation of communication manifests itself in three ways. First, the function of communication is elevated to the managerial level. For DG COMM, it means having been chosen as a presidential service. This formalises the strategic involvement of communication at the decision-making level of the EC. Second, the organisational structure of DG COMM, its purpose, and working methods are redefined into a means to attain the strategic political priorities of the Commission under Juncker. Third, professional techniques of tailoring the message seem critical to the implementation of this corporate communication strategy. Moreover, the experts in the fields recognised the need for a thorough target audience research with the aim of increasing the strategic layer of external communication activities. These three components seem to provide evidence that communication, within the institutions, is increasingly professionalising in order to meet the set communication objectives of the EC but also its political objectives overall.

6 Conclusion

This research aimed at analysing the organisational and strategic aspects of the EU communication policy and its corporate communication under the Multiannual Financial Framework 2014-2020. In practice, the study foremost aimed at identifying the corporate communication practices used by the European Commission. Based on qualitative analysis of three interviews with former and present EC officials from DG COMM, and official documents about the EC's communication strategies, it can be concluded that elements stemming from the theory and practices of corporate communication find themselves apparent in the EC's communication strategy under the MFF 2014-2020. The results indicate that stakeholder centricity, a more unified branding, and the overall reorganisation of the communication function are the most apparent elements belonging to corporate communication practices.

However, by analysing the above-mentioned data, this thesis has shown that key elements forming the basis of corporate communication seem to be lacking in the case of the EC's communication strategy. The results appear to indicate that there is a lack of the inclusion and formation of common European values, which foster identification to the organisation. It has also shown that although processes of professionalisation of communication, such as a better tailoring of the message, are well under-way, more extensive research on the inspirations of European citizens needs to be done on a Pan-European scale to achieve even more effective communication.

Corporate communication strategy under Juncker seems to be more efficient than the communication strategies of the former Commissions, according to the respondents. However, all the interviewed respondents believe that there is still a long road ahead to achieve all the goals. Based on the aforementioned observations in Chapter 5, practitioners should consider allocating greater funding to support research on demographics of European citizens. The data retrieved should be able to answer such questions "what does this particular demographic hold dear? What touches them emotionally? What is the most important to them?". These researches should then inform the foundation of the strategy used by the EC.

Furthermore, founded on the later in-depth research, practitioners should consider a wider variety of thematic communication campaigns, coordinated and approved by professionals of communication in DG COMM. These should also directly address the concerned citizens about a

EU policy, program, or fund. These campaigns should ideally be communicated under one single brand, flag, logo and identity and framed by clear values.

Although the limitations of the research were previously acknowledged, I believe that this study at the very least helped to shed light on the shift of the organisational and strategic aspects of the EU communication policy under the last European Commission.

Where communication has long been the blamed in the context of the EU, this thesis has shown that corporate communication, when using the right elements, could provide a strong basis for the communication strategy of the EC. The term *element* is used here with caution, as I believe that the EU is a unique supranational organisation, and should therefore embody its uniqueness at the organisational and strategic level. Certainly, the EU cannot be put in the same box as corporations. However, findings of this research do seem to identify possible well-working implementations of elements of corporate communication that could help closing the gap between the EU and its citizens, by improving its brand, image, and by professionalising the communication practice in general.

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Annex 1: Respondents' Background

Mikel Landabaso - Mikel Landabaso has worked at the European Commission since 1990 and is currently the Director of Strategy and Corporate Communication in DG COMM. Mr. Landabaso is the director responsible for a strategy communication and corporate campaigns. He has been working specifically communication for 3.5 years. Before, he was an economist working on economic development and strategic planning.

Carolien Peeters – Carolien Peeters is the Head of sector for corporate campaigns. She works in the unit responsible for strategic communication and corporate campaigns, and is leading the sector of corporate campaigns. Ms. Peeters centrally joined DG COMM in October 2017 but has been working before as a press officer, in the representation of the European Commission in the Netherlands, The Hague. Before joining the European Commission in 2011, she was the head of communication in her local town in Belgium.

Béla Dajka – Béla Dajka is currently working as a communication consultant for strategic communication. Mr. Dajka joined the European Commission in 2008 as a Senior Consultant Specialist in the in the Directorate-General for Information Society and Media. He had a 10 years long career in the European Commission, including as Head of Corporate Communication for over 3 years. Before that, Mr. Dajka worked at the BBC for over 9 years, first as a news producer and later on as the Head of the BBC Hungarian service and Albanian service.

Annex 2: Interview guide

Expertise

1. Could you describe your role/responsibilities regarding the communication activities of the European Commission?
2. Since when are you involved in this topic?
3. What is your background/how did you get into this career?

Point of view

4. From your organisation point of view/or your point of view what is the purpose of communication policy in the EU?
5. Could you describe from your organisation / your personal point of view what corporate communication entails in the context of the EU/Commission
6. What are the main key elements that distinguishes the Present-Past Commissions?
7. What is the role of DG COMM in the present communication policy?

Future oriented

8. How would you assess the success of the communication policy under President Juncker?
9. If any, what could be bettered?
10. How do you see the future of the European communication policy?