

European Commission 

## Some reflections on the evaluation of communication activities

Networking event for communication managers of CBC programmes. Strategic communication and evaluation of communication in ETC  
Leuven, 29 September 2010

Directorate-General Communication 

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**The basic question in the evaluation of communication activities is:**

- are we providing the right communication means and products
- to the right people
- through the right channel
- at the right moment?

If the answer is yes to all the questions, it is quite likely that we are having an impact in terms of communication.

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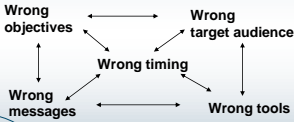
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## Why?

1. Because of the obvious possible breakdowns in communication



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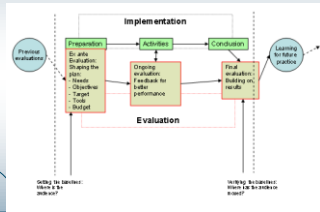
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### Evaluation as an element in the implementation of communication activities:



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### And why?

#### 2. Because impact is an elusive concept in communication:

Usually undefined beforehand

Difficult to measure

Short-lived unless constantly fed

Often simply unlikely to happen at the level of public opinion at large



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### So, go for the proxy

E.g.

- How are the media reacting to your message?

- Are you reaching your main target audience?

(..... Have you defined your main target audience, btw?)

- Address the delivery mechanism.



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Define the level of 'impact' you are expecting

- **Communication output** is the actual product of the communication activity, what is delivered to the target audience, such as press statements sent, money dispersed, ads brought, films sponsored, requests answered, or conferences held. It is hardly a valid indicator of anything. Such figures reveal nothing about the quality, reach, impact, or utility of communication activities.
- **Outgrowth** refers to the reception by, and the demand from, the target public of the output produced, such as response rates to communication, which can be measured through media clippings, sometimes further qualified by media reach, placement and 'advertising value equivalent'; attendance figures are used to evaluate the success of events, web hits... These measures allow assessing the availability of information to potentially interested stakeholders, and allow guesses how many were exposed to it. However, it neither considers whether the information was actually retained, nor whether it led to any impact beyond this.




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- **Outcome I: Awareness/Knowledge.** Impact can be assessed in terms of knowledge gains that can be traced to communication activities. The most common problem when knowledge is evaluated is that objectives are too vague (e.g., "raise awareness" - which is technically fulfilled if one more person claims to be aware). In view of assessing relationship qualities, both parties' accurate mutual awareness is clearly an important dimension of evaluation.
- **Outcome II: Attitude/Perception.** This is arguably the most difficult level to measure communication impacts. Public sector communication towards the general public and other powerful stakeholder groups often (more or less implicitly) pursues so-called attitudinal goals (e.g., increasing supportiveness, trust, openness). Evaluations of attitude changes however, if it is attempted at all, often suffer from unclear objectives, as well as the impossibility to trace detected changes (or lack thereof) unambiguously to communication measures.
- **Outcome III: Behaviour.** Paradoxically, the link to communication activities may be less ambiguous and most obvious when things have gone wrong (e.g., protests, complaints, no-votes). However, often behavioural change is the outcome intended by communication activities (e.g., compliance, providing resources or information, changing harmful lifestyles). Behavioural communication impacts can hardly be isolated validly.




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"You can boost 'evaluation success' by setting trivial objectives, or you can promise vast changes you will never deliver. Neither does the standing of the communication department much good".




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### And address the appropriate 'dimensions' of communication




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### Evaluating a communication strategy (possible evaluation questions)

- To what extent does the communication strategy respond to the information needs of the target audience(s)?
- How coherent are the tools and messages with the objectives of the strategy, with each other and with other existing initiatives in the same field?
- How effective is the communication strategy/policy in improving awareness and knowledge about EU policy in the field of X?
- To what extent does the communication strategy/policy contribute to a better understanding/perception of the Commission's policy in the field of (X)?




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### And some possible tools:

- Data collection tools:
- Desk research: Commission documents, existing research and studies, e.g. Eurobarometer, existing evaluation studies, social research...
  - Media content analysis
  - Interviews with relevant actors and stakeholders
  - Focus groups with relevant actors and stakeholders
  - Surveys, polls
- Analytical tools:
- SWOT analysis
  - Needs assessment
  - Problem diagram
  - Objectives and effects diagram
  - Focus groups
  - Expert panels
  - Benchmarking




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Ensure that the evaluation is designed in a manner that results are likely to be useful for you decision-making and management needs.

Evaluation should not be purely retrospective: it should always aim at drawing lessons for similar occasions in the future.



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Be proportional: the evaluation effort should be related to the resources invested and the scale of the objectives set.

The higher the resources, or the more ambitious the objectives, the more important the evaluation effort should be.

And conversely.

If your budget is limited:

Use low budget tools on a routine basis

Use secondary analysis and data that is available elsewhere

Use small samples

Small tools provide valuable insight



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## But be realistic

Ensure that enough resources are invested in evaluation to get meaningful results



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Evaluation, big-scale or low-scale,  
is always an asset for communication activities:  
whatever information you may get will help you see  
how far you are in communicating with your public.

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Thank you for your attention

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