



THE DAWN OF EUPRIO. LOOKING BACK TO THE FOUNDATION THIRTY YEARS AGO¹

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Distinguished President and kind Colleagues,

I am honoured today to present at this annual Conference my memories about an important date for our Association, that of its foundation in Brussels thirty years ago on May 12, 1986, at the invitation of the Commission of the European Economic Community. In more detail, I would like to look back on that period and describe the process leading up to the foundation of Euprio, as well as the climate in which it took place and the goals set when our Association was in its infancy².

The point should first be made that, like every history, Euprio also has a prehistory, one which began in the early 1980s and featured two of our eminent colleagues, Jean Pierre Grootaers from the Catholic University of Leuven in Belgium and Lauris Beets from the University of Leiden in the Netherlands. Beets will be the first President of Euprio and Grootaers the first Treasurer.

The roots of the future Euprio can be found in the launch (promoted by Grootaers) of the College of Information Officers of the Dutch speaking universities in Belgium (Covonu), which brought together colleagues operating in the field of information, communication and public relations and was joined by the same 'college' for the Dutch universities.

¹ Euprio Conference – Antwerpen, 3 September 2016

² The aim of this speech is to complete my oral memories, as mentioned by V. Eloy – P. Pomati (eds.), *Euprio: a 25-year success story*, Atelijeur Půda, Prague 2011, p. 3. This meaningful publication appeared under the presidency of the Italian Paolo Pomati.



This led to the creation of “an informal network of contacts, exchanges, experiences and personal friendships between the members of the Dutch and the Flemish colleges”³.

The conversation between Beets and Grootaers gave rise in particular to the idea of extending this network at European level and some British colleagues were contacted, among them Anne Lonsdale of the University of Oxford and Ray Footman of the University of Edinburgh, who put their full weight behind the project and were subsequently both called on to be Euprio presidents.

As this network gradually extended its reach, three more colleagues were called on to represent France, Germany and Ireland. In 1985, they were among the signatories of the memorandum that would eventually lead to the creation of the Association.

Finally, the representatives of the other six countries in the European Community (Denmark, Greece, Italy, Luxemburg, Portugal and Spain) were invited to the first official meeting in Brussels, at which it was decided to set up Euprio.

As can be seen, there were three successive “waves” in the process of bringing together all the representatives of Community Member States.

It should be pointed out that the involvement right from the outset of the European Economic Community and the European Commission (which went on to finance the project) proved to be fundamental in the process of setting up the Euprio foundation.

Now, to return to the story of Euprio, the representatives of the 12 Member States in the Community (obviously, I was the Italian representative) were officially invited to the meeting of May 12, 1986, with a letter sent by the European Commission. But two of these representatives did not attend.

The absentees were the Greek representative, who was not allowed to leave his country for political reasons, and the representative from Luxemburg. No reason was given in the second

³ About the process leading up to the foundation of Euprio see *Euprio or the way of Science communication. An introduction* by J. P. Grootaers, in V. Eloy – P. Pomati (eds.), cit., pp. 6 f.



case, but we learned shortly afterwards it was a very simple one: there were no universities in Luxemburg at that time.

Another key aspect was getting to know each other, in the sense that we representatives, and particularly those from Member States invited for the first time, didn't know each other or even the members of the original Euprio group.

Another difficulty was linguistic, in the sense that some representatives, and particularly those from Southern European countries, were unfamiliar with English.

This naturally encouraged relations between the representatives of certain countries and, at the same time, brought about an apparently strange form of segmentation, with a distinction between Northern and Southern European countries. France and Germany were included among the former, while Central Europe seemed not to exist.

Despite these handicaps, the meeting proved fruitful and Euprio was established as an association. In addition, relations between the representatives of the various countries involved developed relatively swiftly at the subsequent meetings and the language situation improved too, albeit more slowly.

It should be pointed out that the representatives of various Directorates General of the European Commission with an interest in communication made an appearance during our meeting on at least two or three occasions and in all probability this contributed to better identifying the operational issues to discuss.

The document underpinning the foundation of Euprio contained the Bylaws, which we representatives of the Member States of the European Economic Community were sent in draft form⁴.

It was a document split into 10 points, three general ones (Introduction, The Aims of Euprio and The Programme of Euprio) and seven regarding organisational and financial matters.

The situation immediately established by the document was that Euprio's scope of action extended to cover not only the European Economic Community, but Europe as a whole.

⁴ *Constitution of Euprio, Draft, a duplicated copy, 1986, pp. 2 f.*



This document stated that: “Euprio provides a professional network of colleagues in universities throughout the Community who are engaged in public relations and related tasks ... who are ... eligible for membership”.

At the same time, however, the document added: “Euprio offers the chance to meet and exchange information with colleagues throughout the Community and beyond, as Associate Membership is open to colleagues outside the universities of the twelve Member States”.

From the origin, Euprio set itself basically two types of aims: professional and instrumental, as they were labeled.

The draft Bylaws in question stated this concisely: “Euprio has a pure professional role amongst its own members, but plays an instrumental role in relation to the work of the Liaison Committee [of European Rectors] and the European Community”.

These were the Association’s “two legs”, about which our first President Beets made the following comments a few years ago: “... we have the impression that the two ‘legs’ of Euprio ... - the professional and the instrumental one – are not in use anymore. The ‘professional leg’ has become predominant, and the ‘instrumental leg’ in relation to the European Commission seems to be almost non-existent. Membership of Euprio is also extended today to non EU-countries, and the close relation we had with the European Commission has changed”⁵.

But let’s take a closer look at these “two legs”.

Beets himself, in his first official speech as President, which he gave at the Press Conference held by Community Education Ministers in the Hague on May 16, 1986 (i.e. a few days after our Brussels meeting), said that: “Euprio is a professional Association for colleagues from the Higher Education Institutions of the EC. This Association of professionals intends to publish a newsletter, undertake research in the field of PR-projects, and organise meetings to discuss the results of this research. The Association hopes to set up a secretariat, where colleagues can

⁵ *The President’s word* by L. Beets, A. Lonsdale, J.P. Grootaers, in V. Eloy- P. Pomati (eds.), cit., p. 20.

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They were the first three members of the future Euprio Steering Committee. In particular, Anne Lonsdale was the first Euprio Secretary before becoming the President, as already remembered.



obtain information, not only on university PR and information, but also on other important developments of universities in Europe or on programmes of the Commission of relevance for universities.

Apart from this professional aspect, we propose to give Euprio an instrumental role as well. The Association can assist the Commission to target and speed up the information-flow about programmes of research and student mobility, both from Brussels to the universities and within the universities themselves. Euprio can also provide feedback on the success of these programmes ... and Euprio," it is stressed once again, "can also ... play this instrumental role for the Liaison Committee of European Rectors to assist with the information it sends to the universities and the general public, and help with the setting up of a PR-programme".

And the need for Euprio to play an instrumental role in supporting the European Commission was not in question.

"There is, in Brussels," Beets said, "a lack of coordination between several parts of the administration in sending of information to the universities. Several EC-institutions send information to different points in the universities without a common strategy. Information from the Commission in some cases has to be 'translated' for it to be able to play its proper role".

It was also noted on this subject that Euprio "was founded with the financial support of the EC, that was seeking a communication network based in Brussels which would inform universities about EC programmes, especially Erasmus"⁶, which was certainly one of the most important of the Commission's various programmes.

Incidentally, the Summit recently attended by France, Germany and Italy (Ventotene, August 2016) proposed relaunching the Erasmus programme as a basic tool to strengthen the European identity.

By any standard this is an objective of fundamental importance that should involve the entire university system in the European Union.

⁶ *Ipsa dixit* by A. McCreary in V. Eloy – P. Pomati (eds.), cit., p. 16.



Now, while the European Commission might not have stood out for its communication skills, there is no doubt that the communication functions at the various universities, although they dated back to the 1960s, particularly as regards information activities, were characterised by different levels of development not only between different Member States, but also within the more developed Member States in terms of communication.

And here I come back to the famous segmentation between “Northern European States” and “Southern European States (Greece, Italy, Portugal and Spain)”, but prefacing my remarks in any case with a reminder of the widespread lack of awareness of what was happening in other Member States in the field of communication, even by the more highly developed Member States, not least because at that time, university communication activities never usually extended beyond national borders.

The need for a better understanding of the university communication situation, specifically with regard to Southern Europe, encouraged the Association to charge various members of the Steering Committee to undertake study visits in the period from 1987 (shortly after the foundation of Euprio) to 1989, with the help of Erasmus funding.

In any case, the final conclusion was basically that the distinguishing parameter between Northern and Southern Europe was the level of development of university communication activities.

“The first point worth noting,” it was stated, “is that communication between universities in Northern and Southern Europe is not always easy. This is partly because the Southern universities do not have the same network of Information Officers as in the North, where communication in professional and personal terms is now well-developed”⁷.

This is exemplified by a reference to the comments about Italy: “Despite the wide spread of universities and student numbers, - it was remarked – only a handful of institutions in Italy have an Information Officer or Public Relations Department ... Generally speaking, Public Relations and information in Italian universities is in its infancy”.

⁷ *Ipsa dixit* by A. McCreary in V. Eloy – P. Pomati (eds.), cit., p. 29.



But the judgement also contained a message of hope.

However, “Italian colleagues ... showed a keen interest in the practical advantages of an efficient Information and Public Relations system within a university network”. And on the subject of Italian universities – it was observed –, they “are now very aware of the potential and challenges of international relations, through Erasmus and other European community schemes. ... All these developments point to the need,” in conclusion, “for a professionally-organised and well-staffed university Public Relations and Information network, as events have dictated elsewhere in Europe and particularly in the North”.

It was therefore decided to organise the second Euprio Conference, held in 1990, at the University of Siena in Italy.

This acted as an important encouragement for Italy, but it was also a source of serious concern, in view of the underwhelming reputation enjoyed by communicators in Southern Europe.

In fact, I remember that on the evening before the Conference, I had a long conversation with my Irish colleague Alf McCreary, a future President of the Association who had been charged with organising the event, about the Conference programme and developments.

Our conversation continued late into the evening.

The Conference on “Higher Education information flows in Europe. A Southern perspective”, included in addition to my paper on “Southern perspectives”, an overview of the situation of communicators (Press and Information Officers, PR and Publicity Officers, etc.) in five Community Member States, as well as three papers on specific programmes (Erasmus in particular), including that by Siena University Delegate for European and international relations Valerio Grementieri, who made a significant contribution to the organisation of the Conference. The Siena Conference, as I mentioned earlier, followed on from the one held in Leuven in 1989 - the first organised by Euprio - which was chaired by the President Inge Knudsen from Denmark’s University of Aarhus, who had a strongly operations-oriented approach (publication of the Network Bulletin, continuation of study visits, organisation of Conferences, etc.). The title of this relevant Conference was “Information outreach 1992”.



I would like to point out in passing that because the various Member States were not always immediately available to host the annual Conference, I myself proposed Italy as the venue at the turn of each decade (Lecce 2000 and Stresa 2010), while our extraordinary Paola Scioli has halved this interval, with the organisation of last year's Conference in Perugia.

In any case, it was on the occasion of the Siena Conference that Euprio decided to alternate between North and South in its choice of venue for the annual Conference: after Leuven and Siena, it was then held in Berlin, followed by Granada and Stockholm.

It was also at the Siena Conference that the first Eastern European member joined the initiative, but the decision to accept Members from outside the European Community had in any case been confirmed by the Steering Committee on the occasion of the previous Conference in Leuven.

In particular, this marked the start of an extremely interesting experience, that is "the progressive inclusion of colleagues from Eastern Europe whose institutions' previous PR practices had proved not always totally relevant to changed circumstances. And as in many examples of Euprio's working, this was very much a two-way process where Western information Officers also had a steep learning curve"⁸.

At the same time, the segmentation based on the confrontation between Northern and Southern Europe was joined by that based on the confrontation between Western and Eastern Europe. In such a way, university communication experiences across Europe were virtually bounded by this overall segmentation.

The study trips and transfers abroad, some for long periods of time, were not however organised only in countries regarded as less highly evolved in the field of university communication, but also in highly developed countries, like the US and Canada.

Which is why Ray Footman, who had already completed a study trip to twenty North American universities in the early 1980s and returned for another stay in 1989, with a view to learning more about the country's Council for the Advancement and Support of Education (CASE), found

⁸ *The President's Word* by R. Footman in V. Eloy – P. Pomati, cit., p. 46.



himself at the end of the decade, as he himself said, “helping keep Euro-colleagues in touch with ... Transatlantic developments” in the university communication sector.

Likewise his successor as President, Alf McCreary, who devoted one of his visits to Canadian universities, recognised the high level of evolution in the country in the field of communication when compared with Europe⁹.

In any case, there were significant developments in Europe too¹⁰.

During the second half of the 1980s, and even more so in the 1990s, communication in its various forms began to play a central role in universities, in a process that originated, it should be acknowledged, in Northern European universities.

In the new market conditions (not least with regard to methods of university funding) and the more competitive environment, and with the need to develop internal and external relations with an ever growing number of audiences, universities increasingly took on the characteristics of “entrepreneurial universities”. It was for this reason that public relations and marketing, as has been noted, were taking on “a new relevance in a context which is developing similarities with the highly competitive scene in the States”.

Light years, as President Beets recalled, seemed to have passed since “‘marketing’ was almost a dirty word”!

The approach adopted by universities in the field of communication had become increasingly similar to the one used by businesses and there was therefore talk of an “industrial approach to university communication”, despite enduring criticism and puzzlement.

“If universities are being forced to behave more and more as market-oriented organizations, its managers will naturally want to adapt their communication policy to those needs”.

“There is a lot,” it was stated even more explicitly, “for us to learn from those [organizations] in modern industry. First and foremost is their expertise in market-oriented thinking ... Research

⁹ *A Canadian perspective* by A. McCreary in *Euprio Network Bulletin*, 1990, 4, p. 9.

¹⁰ About these developments see the introductory contributions *Higher education in the United Kingdom* by R. Footman, in *Euprio Network Bulletin*, 1991, 6, pp. 6 f. and *University PR. A central role* by P. Aben, in *Euprio Network Bulletin*, 1992, 7, p. 6., from which the following citations are taken.



and teaching are still much valued products, but for the first time they are seen as 'products' on a 'market'".

At the same time, there was a focus on the need not only for integration of the various communication activities, but for a "communication policy" that permeates all the other policy areas of the university. They were thus moving towards the concept of total communication¹¹.

Nevertheless, the problem remained for university communication of the need "to construct a practical model to serve the needs of all universities within the European network. In practice," it was reasserted once again, "the 'Northern' universities, including those in the UK, Germany and Scandinavia, had more advanced systems of disseminating university information, and better funding, than our colleagues in the 'Southern' group, including Spain, Italy and Portugal"¹². In passing, Greece had disappeared.

I nevertheless believe that the creation of the national Associations in Italy (The Italian Association of University Communicators - AICUN) and in Spain (The Spanish Association of University Information Officers - AUGAC) in 1992 has made a significant contribution to the development of communication activities in Southern Europe and not only.

It should be noted that, in Italy, the activities of AICUN began with a research project, the first in the country to get an up-to-date picture of developments in the area of communication activities in Italian universities¹³. This research, promoted by Brunella Marchione from the University of Parma, is now in its eighth edition.

Aicun also made reference on several occasions to the basic problem of the role of the communicator in universities, which brings us back to the origins of Euprio.

¹¹ About this concept see the introductory contributions *Universities' communication: torn between academia and business or putting them together?*, Opening report from the Euprio Conference in Lecce, 2000 and *Total business communication. Profiles and problems for the new century*, Vita e Pensiero, Milano, 2006, both by myself, as well as *A comparative study in business communication. Integrated Marketing Communication, Total Business Communication, Koukoku*, by E. T. Brioschi – Y. Kobayashi, Vita e Pensiero, Milano, 2008.

¹² *The President's word* by A. McCreary, in V. Eloy – P. Pomati (eds.), cit., p. 55.

¹³ See *A Report on the recent establishment of AICUN, The Italian University PR and Information Officers' Association* by B. Marchione in Euprio Network Bulletin, 1993, 8, p. 4.



“From May 1986 onwards,” the first President was at pains to point out, “Euprio was established as a network to help enhance the role of people working in Public Relations and communication in higher education institutions in Europe”.

Now, the role of the communicator continues to be a hot topic and will be the subject of debate at our Forum in Rome next March, 25 years after the foundation of Aicun.

Do communicators have to be skilled at executing strategies drawn up by university administrators or do they have to contribute to the preparation of these guidelines, remembering that communication ought not to be the result of decisions taken at the top, but a concurrent process and a part/component of these decisions, so giving communicators the chance to offer all the know-how and experience they have?

This is such a basic question!

In conclusion, I believe that for all those who were part of the experience of Euprio during the second half of the 1980s and the early 1990s, or in other words those who contributed to the foundation of the Association or became its Members (initially limited to the members of the Steering Committee), the challenges connected with learning about the various countries and their communication professionals, as well as with a view to acquiring ever greater professional skills, have been particularly significant in the development of their lives, and not only professionally speaking.

It was basically a question of putting into practice that European dimension of humans and their activities of which we were so badly in need, and I continue to think, even today, that there remains a pressing need for this at a much more general level.

I would like offer my heartfelt thanks to Euprio for the experience it has given me.

I would also like, and I really will conclude here, to thank once again the President and the Association for having given me the opportunity to meet you here today, and with this I offer my best wishes for Euprio and its future anniversaries and thank you sincerely for your kind attention.