Communication strategy

1) State of play *de jure* and in practice

Each agency has its own communication strategy. There is no general communication policy applicable to all agencies.

Provisions in agencies' constituent acts on communication

The provisions on communication in agencies' constituent acts can be found:

1) as a stand-alone articleⁱ;
2) along with the provisions on transparency²;
3) among the agencies' tasks³;
4) as part of agencies' mission⁴.

According to their founding regulation, agencies enumerated in point 1) and 2) communicate on their own initiative in the fields within their mission. They ensure in particular that the public and any interested party are rapidly given objective, reliable and easily understandable information with regard to their work.

Those agencies which have communication and raising awareness among their tasks (grouped in point 3) have the following specific provisions on communication:

- **EIGE** and **FRA** raise EU citizens' awareness of gender equality and fundamental rights respectively, organise conferences, campaigns and meetings at European level, and present their findings and conclusions. Both also develop a communication strategy and promote dialogue with civil society, in order to raise public awareness of respectively fundamental and gender rights and actively disseminate information about their work.

- One of the tasks of **EMA** is assisting the Member States with the rapid communication of information concerning pharmacovigilance to health-care professionals, as well as distributing appropriate pharmacovigilance information to the general public.

- **ECHA** provides guidance on communication regarding the risks and safe use of chemical substances, in preparations or in articles, with a view to coordinating Member States' activities. ECHA also supports the competent authorities of the Member States in informing the general public about the risks arising from substances where this is considered necessary for the protection of human health or the environment. ECHA also has to make information on all registered chemicals publicly available, free of charge, over the internet.

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ⁱ ECDC, EFSA
² Agency for Operational Management of SIS II, VIS and EURODAC (as per Commission proposal), CFCA, EASA, EMSA, FRONTEX
³ CEDEFOP, ECHA, EIGE, EMA, FRA
⁴ ECDC and EFSA
The founding regulations of agencies grouped in point 4), the mission of which is to communicate on risks or threats, comprises the following provisions:

- EFSA and ECDC shall communicate on their own initiative in the fields within their mission without prejudice to the Commission's competence to communicate its risk management decisions.

- EFSA shall ensure that the public and any interested parties are rapidly given objective, reliable and easily accessible information, in particular with regard to the results of its work. In order to achieve these objectives, EFSA develops and disseminates information material for the public. In addition, a communication strategy related to a general plan for crisis management in the field of the safety of food and feed is prepared by the Commission in close cooperation with EFSA and the Member States.

- Both, EFSA and ECDC, shall act in close collaboration with the Commission and the Member States to promote the necessary coherence in the risk communication process.

- ECDC shall prepare a communication strategy in the field of health threats.

Two former 2nd pillar agencies - EDA and EUSC - are tasked by their constituent act to ensure appropriate security and speed in their communication.

**Heads of Communication and Information Network (HCIN)**

There is a certain level of coordination of communication strategies within the network of agencies' Heads of Communication and Information.

The Network aims at increasing the visibility and strengthening communication and information about agencies' activities and results through joint activities and by knowledge-sharing and exchanges of good practice. Common initiatives do not replace the individual communication strategies and activities, but complement them.

The meetings of HCIN are organised by an agency coordinator, which for this network can be different from the coordinating agency within the network of Heads of Agencies. The current, previous and subsequent coordinating agencies form the so called Troika. The chairperson of the HCIN (often the Head of Communications of the coordinating agency) is elected for the term of office of one year by simple majority. The secretariat is provided by the agency of the chairperson. When taking the internal decisions the chairperson should seek to reach a consensus. If consensus is not possible, the decisions are adopted by qualified majority of two-thirds.

The HCIN holds one annual meeting, during which an annual work programme is adopted. It establishes the priority areas and need for specific seminars and workshops, discusses topics of common interest on communication and provides for sharing examples of good communication practices.

The HCIN may set up working groups dealing with specific communication issues and/or covering and reporting on news in the area of communication.

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5 The Heads of Agencies network meets normally 3 times per year, twice in Brussels and once in the premises of the agency-coordinator. Under its hat there are five other networks: Network of the Heads of Administration; Heads of Communication and Information Network, including the network of webmasters; Inter-Agency Legal Network, including procurement issues; Information and Communication Technology Interagency Network; Inter-agency Network of Accountancy Officers.
2) Critical analysis of the issue at hand

Agencies' communication strategies are closely related to the matter of agencies' visibility, i.e. the fact that stakeholders and citizens perceive the agency as an independent body, distinct from the Commission and from the other European Institutions. At the same time, while agencies' communication strategies clearly focus on their core business, they also contribute to the broader communication on EU issues.

The need for agency's own visibility

The extent to which there is a need for agencies to create their own independent image depends very much on the tasks which they undertake. Active communication can be said to be a precondition for achieving the intended impacts for example in cases where the agency:

- produces politically challenging information or advice on disputed issues,
- produces information on which future policies or international negotiations are to be based,
- deals with opposite interests of different categories of stakeholders, or
- carries out certification activities and issues decisions binding on third parties.

This is mainly the case for CEDEFOP, EASA, ECDC, ECHA, EEA, EFSA, EIGE, EMCDDA, EMA, OSHA, EUROFOUND, and FRA.

In all other cases, there is less need for the agency to design such a communication strategy that aims at distinguishing the agency's own independent image from that of the Commission/the other institutions.

However, the active communication aimed at projecting the agency's independent image, does not exclude a certain level of coordination with the communication strategy of the Commission/the other institutions. This is particularly the case when communicating on a crisis (i.e. could be the case for EFSA, EMA, EASA).

Funding of agencies' communication policy

Agencies often note the lack of funds for a strong communication policy. This is particularly the case when communication is not mentioned in the agency's constituent act amongst its tasks or mission, and thus there is no dedicated budget line. As shown in part 1 of this fiche, the constituent acts of four agencies from among those for whom distinct own visibility is of importance (EMCDDA, EIGE, OSHA, and EUROFOUND) do not have an article on communication policy. This fact may negatively impact those agencies.

Access to central communication tools

Agencies suffer from lack of access to central communication tools such as framework contracts for communication services or Eurobarometer. The result is the multiplication of tendering procedures by each agency for the same services and tools, often leading to the selection of the same contractors. Similarly, agencies tended to be cut off from the coordination structures dealing with communication activities.

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6 Evaluation 2009, Volume I, point 4.1.7, p. 17
Both shortcomings are gradually being resolved with framework contracts progressively including agencies when they are renewed and agencies being increasingly informed of and included in the key coordination groups for communication (eg: External Communication Network, Project Teams, Planning Ahead). It is necessary to ensure that this trend is further developed.

Consistency of agencies’ communication strategy with the Commission's sectoral communication

Among those agencies that have an explicit communication strategy are EEA and ECHA, where the need to ensure/increase the visibility of the agency is explicitly acknowledged. Their strategies are both overall consistent with the Commission’s overall communication approach, although there are differences in target groups - for EEA, the general public (citizens) is a key target group alongside policy-makers, whereas ECHA’s strategy, although it includes the general public, is more focused on other target groups which are more direct users of the agency’s outputs.

Need for ground rules for agencies' communication strategies

The 2008 Commission communication “European agencies - the way forward” identified the need for ground rules for the communication strategy to be followed by agencies, in order to help to improve public understanding of their role, and ensure that agencies' communication policies are consistent with the Union's overall approach. Such ground rules would be beneficial for all agencies, in particular as regards clarifying the role of individual agencies’ external communication: is there, for instance, a need to communicate to the general public, or should the focus be on other target groups; and how should these target groups be reached. Such common principles or ground rules could help focus the communication strategy, align it with relevant Commission strategies (whether overall and/or sectoral), ensure optimal use of resources for communication, and also make most of agencies' presence on the ground.  

The agencies have welcomed the possible development of basic guidelines to ensure that general and specific needs – as well as expectations – are addressed. However, defining a common framework to enhance consistency of approach and objectives in the communication area, should not interfere with the agencies autonomy in this field and should not seek to harmonise communication strategies too closely (thereby ignoring the specific needs of each agency).

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7 Evaluation 2009 Volume II, point 2.4.6, p. 81