

## Audiovisual Translation at the Service of EU Public Communication 2.0

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### Abstract

Communication is becoming more and more (audio)visual, *social* and mobile. This is true not only of the entertainment industry but also of commercial advertising and institutional public communication. Consequently, the audiovisual translation industry is flourishing. Although a growing array of products outside the field of entertainment are being localised and/or made accessible, they have received scant attention so far, whether in academic or professional circles. This is notably the case of the institutional video subgenre.

This practice report will first address the importance of using increasingly multilingual and multimodal audiovisual products in EU external communication – a tool for reaching out to more citizens on social media and boosting their active participation at a time when populism and Euroscepticism are on the rise. The focus will then shift to the audiovisual communication of the Council of the EU. Through a case study which aims to investigate the internal localisation in all EU official languages of the “#Europeans” series of videos – produced for the 2019 EU elections – the rest of the paper will then outline the main features of the institutional audiovisual translation subgenre. It will also identify some opportunities for improvement: a more integrated and interdisciplinary approach which – together with reinforced collaboration with academia – could lead to a real multilingual creative process right from the initial steps of the audiovisual production process.

**Key words:** audiovisual translation, subtitling, institutional communication, social media, mobile, European Union, multilingualism, digital transformation, video storytelling.

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## 1. Introduction

As Díaz-Cintas and Remael (2020) underline in their latest publication, although audiovisual translation (AVT) “has existed as a professional practice since the invention of the cinema,” it remained a niche both in academic circles and in the industry until the end of the last millennium, when the digital boom led to a proliferation of audiovisual material. Two decades later, the digital transformation process is far from being over: “80% of our mobile consumption is video;” “social media like Facebook or YouTube have more users than the whole population of China;” “more people own a mobile device than a toothbrush.” These three surprising facts presented by the communication guru Erik Qualman (2019) in his [video](#) on the digital modern world represent the starting point of this paper: nowadays, communication is more and more audiovisual, *social* and mobile, both in the entertainment industry and in the communication sector. These trends have caused the audiovisual translation industry to flourish, with an increasing number of products being subtitled or localised for more than merely entertainment purposes. Small private companies, major corporates, non-profit organisations and public institutions alike have all quickly realised the opportunities offered by the audiovisual medium to build their image and communicate more effectively with certain segments of the population, and they are becoming increasingly aware of the need to translate and adapt their audiovisual presence in order to overcome certain linguistic and cultural barriers.

While a number of scholars have studied the translation of video commercials or, more generally, the interlingual and intercultural transfer of an advertising message (Adab & Valdés, 2004; Valdés & Fuentes Luque, 2008), the institutional AVT subgenre has received scant attention so far, whether in academic or professional circles. This paper therefore seeks to explore this new niche of AVT studies and to demonstrate how audiovisual production and translation are also key elements of institutional communication today. In particular, the pages that follow will focus on the rapidly expanding use of AVT in the multilingual context of European public communication, where video production and social media distribution – if carried out in a well-prepared and professional way – can play a decisive role in bringing citizens closer to the EU and in increasing their sense of European citizenship, in a context of rising populism and Euroscepticism. A case study will then show how the abovementioned communication trends have been recently applied by the General Secretariat of the Council of the EU (GSC). The objective is then to outline the current AVT practices within that specific EU institution and to identify how they could be improved through a more integrated and interdisciplinary approach which – together with reinforced collaboration with academia and the industry – could lead to a real multilingual creative process right from the initial steps of the audiovisual production process, as per the accessible filmmaking approach advocated by Romero-Fresco (2019) in the context of the entertainment industry.

## 2. Communication 2.0 – Audiovisual, Viral and On-the-Go

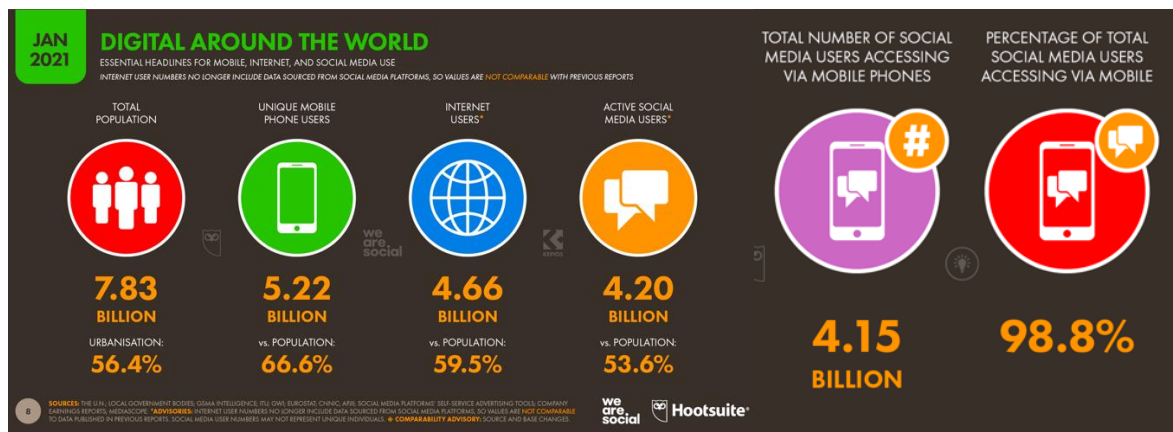
Every minute, over 500 hours of video are uploaded to YouTube.<sup>1</sup> Launched in February 2005, the video-sharing platform is actively used today by more than 2 billion people, making it once again, in 2020, the second most visited website in the world after Google (We Are Social & Hootsuite, 2021).

This in itself shows just how much communication revolves around the production and consumption (or rather “prosumption”) of audiovisual content in today’s digital world, where (moving) images have become more and more pervasive, in particular over the last two decades, in that context of technological and cultural convergence (Jenkins, 2007) – and thus of greater accessibility and active participation – which characterises Web 2.0 and has exploded with the spread of social media.

According to the annual digital analysis carried out by We Are Social and Hootsuite (see Figure 1 and Figure 2), the number of active social media users continued to grow between 2020 and 2021, accounting for more than half of the world’s total population. It is also interesting to note that social media are almost exclusively used via mobile devices.

Figure 1.

### *Digital Around the World*

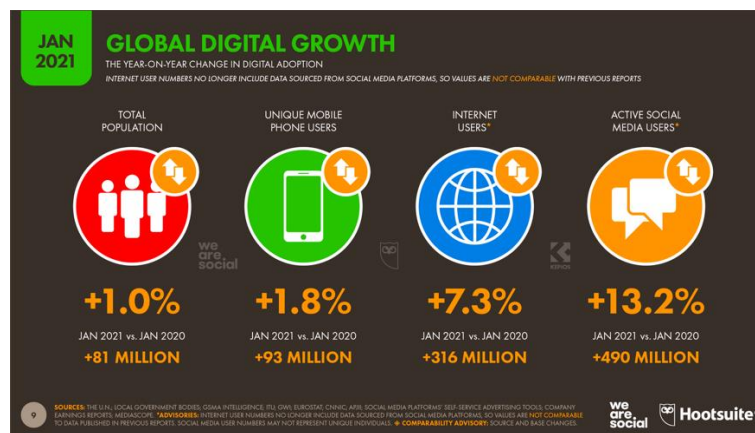


Source: We Are Social & Hootsuite (2021).

<sup>1</sup> YouTube for Press, <https://www.youtube.com/intl/en/about/press/>.

Figure 2.

### Annual Digital Growth in the World

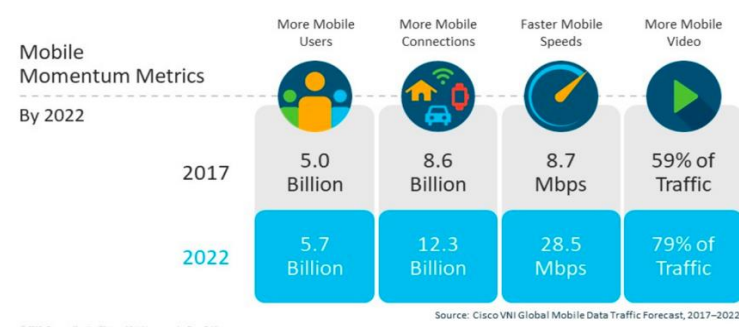


Source: We Are Social & Hootsuite (2021).

Finally, to conclude this brief overview of the contemporary mediascape, it is worth mentioning that already in 2017 59% of mobile data traffic was made up of video content – a percentage which is expected to rise to 79% by 2022 according to Cisco<sup>2</sup> (see Figure 3).

Figure 3.

### 2017–2022 Forecasts on the Use of Mobile



Source: Cisco (2019).

For those working in digital marketing, these trends are key guiding principles that must always be kept in mind in order to come up with effective campaigns. Communication professionals know that 93% of purchases are influenced in some way by social media.<sup>3</sup> They know that social media are

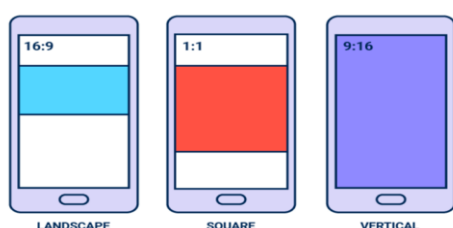
<sup>2</sup> Worldwide leader in networking for the internet. See its *Visual Networking Index (VNI) Forecast 2017–2022*, <https://newsroom.cisco.com/press-release-content?type=webcontent&articleId=1955935>.

<sup>3</sup> See *Global Advertising Consumers Trust Real Friends and Virtual Strangers the Most* (07/08/2009), <https://www.nielsen.com/us/en/insights/article/2009/global-advertising-consumers-trust-real-friends-and-virtual-strangers-the-most/>.

mostly used on mobile devices and that (audio)visual content has the greatest impact on such channels as it stimulates more likes, comments and shares – in other words, more user engagement. And while, until a few years ago, video content produced for other, more traditional media was adapted to mobile devices thanks to digital scalability, today it does not come as a surprise that more and more audiovisual products are being conceived – and thus optimised – from the outset to be watched or consumed (almost exclusively) on a smartphone. That is why vertical and square video formats are becoming more common, as they can be immediately (re)used on social media feeds and stories (see Figure 4).

Figure 4.

#### *Mobile Video Formats*



Source: Pryma Marketing.

This new mobile user experience has also affected the average duration of commercial or institutional videos, which has dropped considerably: on social media, very short clips (60–90 seconds) with a strong visual impact are more likely to capture users’ attention at any moment throughout their day, while they scroll through their feeds on the metro, in a lift or while queueing at the supermarket. These are the so-called “snackable”, bite-sized videos: easy and quick to watch, enjoy and share.

In the framework of this paper, it is particularly interesting to highlight another trend in the mobile consumption of (audio)visual content, which is in fact increasingly being played in silent mode in order not to disturb those around us at specific moments, such as on a bus on our way to work, during a meeting or at the gym in the evening. As early as 2016, according to a study carried out by Digiday,<sup>4</sup> 85% of Facebook videos were being watched with the sound off. This percentage has constantly grown over the last number of years, in a way bringing us back to the silent era when the film was not yet that complex multi-semiotic system that often challenges and “constrains” (Pavesi, 2005) the work of audiovisual translators. While, from a technical viewpoint, this trend has led many popular browsers and platforms to adapt their settings to allow auto-play only for videos with no audio or in combination with an “auto-mute” feature, on a creative level it is resulting in the production of video content that is more “visual” and less “audio”, in particular in the context of commercial and public

<sup>4</sup> See Patel, S., 85 percent of Facebook video is watched without sound (17/05/2016), <https://digiday.com/media/silent-world-facebook-video/>.

communication material. The verbal component is of course not disappearing from the video products of the Web 2.0 era and beyond; it is simply taking different forms. This is the case with the “text on screen” or with the intralingual and interlingual subtitles which, in this context, make the audiovisual product in question more accessible not only to sensory-impaired or foreign audiences (to name just the main targets of these two types of subtitles), but also to that wide range of users who often choose to consume videos with the sound off.

### 3. European Institutional Communication 2.0

The technological, media and cultural convergence that has marked the past twenty years in the cultural industries has also deeply changed the way in which companies target their consumers and (inter)national institutions communicate with citizens. The final communication goals may differ, but they are achieved through the same channels and strategies, based on what works most in terms of user engagement in the contemporary mediascape.

#### 3.1. First Came the Information, Then Came the Interaction

Before Web 2.0 and the social media era, the primary purpose of any institution’s external communication had always been to provide information. In Italy, as pointed out by Baù and Bonini (2018), this is clearly defined in Law No 150/2000 (concerning the information and communication activities of the public administration), which calls on public bodies to promote and explain legislative provisions, to illustrate the functioning of the institutions and their activities, to promote public services and to raise public awareness on issues of social interest. At the same time, as stated by D’Ambrosi (2019), even at EU level public communication has always been primarily aimed at promoting, through traditional media, information about activities of common interest, be they policies, programmes, opportunities or rights made available by the European Union. In a nutshell, before the digital transformation era and the emergence of the challenges associated with today’s international political context, the EU’s communication policy was based almost exclusively on the principle of transparency enshrined in Article 1 of the [Treaty on European Union \(TEU\)](#).

On the other hand, as early as 2002, when the European Commission presented its new [Information and Communication Strategy for the European Union](#) (European Commission, 2002 - COM(2002) 350 final), it recognised that in a contemporary society where information can rarely remain transparent and neutral, as it constantly gets filtered and skewed by the media, other users and opinion makers, the information function remains necessary but is no longer sufficient.

Genuine communication by the European Union cannot be reduced to the mere provision of information: it must convey a meaning, facilitate comprehension, set both action and policy in a real context, and prompt dialogue within national public opinion so as to enhance the participation of the general public in the great European debate. (European Commission - COM(2002) 350 final, p. 10)

This means that there is a clear desire to improve institutional communication so as to go beyond a mere information objective and really promote the values of European integration. The main goal is therefore to communicate more directly with citizens, in a bi-directional and decentralised manner which aims to actively engage Europeans. It goes without saying that this objective can only find fertile ground in those meanders of Web 2.0 and social media which are, by their very nature, participative and democratic. However, to serve this purpose, it is crucial that these instruments are used in the best possible way by (new) trained professionals who are able to strike a balance between communication objectives and politics, both at national and international level. It is important that these spaces do not become an actual double-edged sword exacerbating populist and extremist drifts or spreading false and inaccurate information (D'Ambrosi, 2019, p. 89). These are indeed the greatest challenges that the EU and its public communication have been facing lately: fake news, online disinformation and, above all, the gradual shift from the general 'Euro-enthusiasm' of the pre-crisis years to widespread pessimism in the public opinion. Fuelled by hot topics such as increasing migratory pressures or austerity measures, this Euroscepticism has given rise to populist currents and even led to fully fledged anti-European political parties. Moreover, according to D'Ambrosi (2019), in a sort of vicious circle, these challenges may have been partly compounded by a European public communication strategy that has not been fully capable of making citizens understand how national and European bodies work and what their actual responsibilities are in the EU decision-making process. This is also why the new strategic approach aims at enhancing coordination between the various European institutions – in cooperation with local entities – in the field of communication so as to bring citizens closer to European policies, in the most transparent and effective way possible, including through an increasing focus on the cornerstone of the Web 2.0 communication seen above.

### 3.2. “United in Diversity” – European Multilingualism

Before analysing more closely how this new communication strategy is being implemented by one of the EU institutions, it is necessary to reflect on an aspect that D'Ambrosi (2019) only touches upon, but which is actually crucial, especially in the context of this paper, for the functioning of the EU. That aspect is multilingualism. As D'Ambrosi states:

The framework of actions undertaken at institutional level reiterates the need to make communication closer to multiple local entities, by using simple and clear language that takes into account the **cultural and linguistic diversity of its audiences** [emphasis added], while being able to showcase Europe as a project of transnational politics: a unified area of debate for its Member States. (D'Ambrosi, 2019, p. 125 – [text translated])

Multilingualism appears, then, to be a condition for any of the three common principles which are at the heart of the EU's current communication strategy: inclusion, diversity and participation. For the project of social inclusion to work, everyone needs to have the possibility of accessing and using information and resources in their own language. As a result, this also ensures the promotion and safeguarding of cultural and linguistic diversity, a value enshrined in Article 3 TEU.



And finally, how can a citizen really participate in European politics if they cannot use the language they are most confident in? As pointed out by Cosmai (2007), the need to regulate the language regime of such a supranational entity has been stressed since the beginning of the European project. In fact, in Article 1 of the very first act of the Union (Regulation No 1/1958), the six founding states established the four official and working languages of the time, subsequently supplemented by the languages of the other countries that have joined the EU over time, to reach the current total of 24 languages, all of which have the same legal value. In such a multicultural context, responding to the motto of “united in diversity”, languages were immediately recognised as the bearers of (national) identity and democracy, and they still remain a key element in the mosaic of European public communication.

#### **4. Case Study: The External Communication of the “House of the Member States”**

The multilingualism policy described above is not only a legal obligation, it is also a valuable communication tool – as precious as those new instruments brought by Web 2.0 – enabling the European institutions to reach as many citizens as possible. D’Ambrosi (2019) describes how these instruments are used in the EU’s communication today. Her main focus, however, is on the two largest and well-known institutions – the European Commission and the European Parliament – thus leaving out the third important body in the decision-making process: the Council of the EU (and with it, the European Council). This does not come as a surprise, as it is rare for these two institutions to be known outside the “Brussels bubble”. And this is perhaps the first challenge for the communication service of the General Secretariat of the Council (GSC): taking part in the communication effort of the EU as a whole, but at the same time raising awareness of its specific role and activities. The second major challenge is to communicate as the “house of the Member States”, i.e. with a single impartial voice, as a supranational entity serving the EU’s interests beyond the individual and national interests of ministers and heads of state or government. From a more operational viewpoint, the challenge is the same as for anyone else communicating in the contemporary mediascape: facing and surfing the digital transformation wave to reach out to the whole spectrum of European citizens through the active involvement of specific segments (e.g. media, EU and national officials and leaders, academia) that can function as multipliers. Participation through social media makes this a real two-way dialogue,<sup>5</sup> with a greater focus on user experience and the community’s needs, and, of course, with an increasing production and consumption of (audio)visual and multilingual content.

The [Council website](#)<sup>6</sup> is at the heart of GSC communication and it is where all communication flows, primarily from social media, redirect to. Its content – almost always produced in English and then translated into the 23 other official EU languages<sup>7</sup> –

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<sup>5</sup> See Halpern et al.(2017).

<sup>6</sup> See <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/>.

<sup>7</sup> See <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/about-site/language-policy/>.



aims to make web texts, images, forms and navigation accessible and understandable to the general public. It also looks to uphold equal opportunity and equal access to information for people with disabilities, according to the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities.<sup>8</sup>

Preference is therefore given to clear, inclusive, concise and not-too-formal texts that inform all European citizens about the policies and activities of the Council, the European Council and their preparatory bodies. These texts represent only part of the semiotic complexity of the entire Council website, accompanied by a wide range of (audio)visuals, which make content significantly more attractive and accessible. Infographics,<sup>9</sup> which combine verbal and visual codes, are another good example of the polysemiotic nature of communication and of the challenges faced by those who have to reproduce these products in another language: a transadaptation process which, like subtitling and other AVT practices, can be regarded as being “constrained” (Pavesi, 2005) by the medium itself. Infographics, together with other products (e.g. animations, topical videos) meant to visually convey a large collection of information, are mainly shared and promoted via the Council’s social media profiles (see Figure 5) – specifically designed to attract more visitors to the institutional website.

Figure 5.

#### *Council Social Media in Numbers*



(Data: 25 Feb 2021)

Source: author’s own elaboration.

<sup>8</sup> See <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/about-site/accessibility-policy/>.

<sup>9</sup> See <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/infographics/>.

#### 4.1. The Audiovisual Production of the “House of the Member States”

Most of the audiovisual content produced by the GSC is available on a specific section of the institutional website called [Newsroom](#),<sup>10</sup> where the media or any other users can find a free-of-charge series of audio files, photos and videos related to the Council’s most important activities.

As regards video production, in addition to a vast library of royalty-free [stock footage](#), two main subcategories can be distinguished. On the one hand, news-style videos capture live, or within a short delay, the most prominent public deliberations or press moments of the various Council and European Council meetings, thus covering the aforementioned information and transparency objectives. On the other hand, more “creative” products, still aimed at informing but above all at raising public awareness and promoting the values of European citizenship, are a rising trend.

From a formal and technical viewpoint, the latter subcategory can be segmented into two subgenres with distinct characteristics and involving equally distinct translation practices:

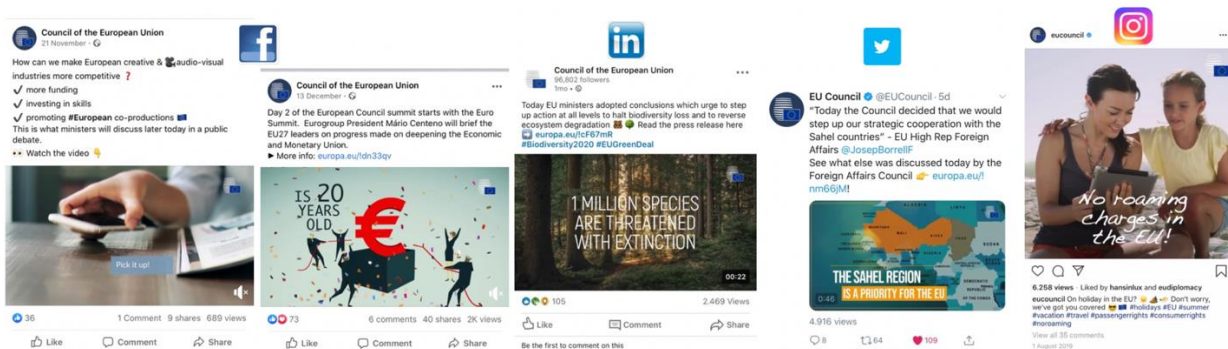
- [thematic videos](#), similar to what Toffanin (2016) describes as “video infographics”;
- [documentary-style videos](#).

The former, just like the “static” infographics mentioned above, are based on the concept of data visualisation and are therefore meant to translate sometimes quite complex concepts and topics into images in order to make them more accessible, memorable and attractive to the general public. Here, the informative and persuasive message is transmitted through a fast-paced juxtaposition of (little) text – be it static or animated – and images with a strong visual impact – again static and/or moving. There is almost always a musical component and, more rarely, an explanatory voice-over. These are very short videos – around 30 to 60 seconds – in which the audio part is often optional, in line with that growing tendency to (dis)play videos on mute. These videos are therefore easily “digestible”, snackable, ideally consumed on mobile devices and shared on social media. They can be purely informative videos inviting the audience to find out more on a given topic on the institutional website or to follow one of the ongoing meetings (see Figure 6), or they can be persuasive videos, aiming at a more emotional involvement of the target audience and thus calling for more active participation. This is exemplified by the video created for the 2019 European elections campaign (*What Europe do You Want?* in Figure 7).

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<sup>10</sup> See <https://newsroom.consilium.europa.eu>.

Figure 6.

*Selection of Informative Thematic Videos Promoted on Different Social Media*

Source: author's own elaboration.

Figure 7.

*Persuasive Thematic Videos Promoted on Instagram*

Source: author's own elaboration.

In the documentary-style subgenre, graphic elements are not absent, but the data visualisation here opens the door to some proper visual storytelling, where European policies and values are conveyed through real stories of political leaders or “ordinary” people. As Baù and Bonini (2018, p. 42) point out, putting someone in the spotlight triggers that sense of familiarity and emotional involvement, known to be one of the key ingredients of a successful narrative. These videos often mix stock footage with scenes of the protagonists “in action” (be they spontaneous or scripted) or as first-person narrators in front of the camera (“talking head” format). These are more complex to produce, both in terms of budget and processing times, and they are therefore usually dedicated either to special

and important events or to broader issues and aspects with a longer “shelf life”. The duration of these products usually ranges from 3 to 10 minutes, but they can also take the form of a medium-length film (i.e. 30 to 40 minutes). It goes without saying that such longer videos are published on YouTube or used on specific occasions and at specific venues (for instance, in the GSC Visitors’ Centre or during events such as the EU institutions’ Open Day), whereas they do not work in the fast-paced world of social media. This is why, in parallel, shorter teasers of 15–30 seconds to maximum one minute are produced and shared on social media to catch users’ attention and lead them to the full-length videos. See, for example (Figure 8), a teaser of only 15 seconds inviting Facebook users to watch on YouTube the *Europe Through the Generations* documentary on the founding fathers of the EU,<sup>11</sup> or a 43-second trailer presenting the then new President of the European Council and suggesting that Twitter followers consult his biography on the institutional website, where the full version of the video in which Charles Michel describes his mission “in his own words”<sup>12</sup> can also be found.

Figure 8.

#### *Examples of Teasers and Trailers to Promote Documentary Videos on Social Media*



Source: author’s own elaboration.

## 4.2. Institutional AVT in the “House of the Member States”

While the language policy of the Council’s main activities is well established and regulated, the same cannot be said when it comes to the application of the principle of multilingualism to its audiovisual production. As mentioned, a number of provisions of EU primary law require, for the sake of transparency and inclusion, the production of documents and legislative acts in all 24 official EU

<sup>11</sup> See <https://newsroom.consilium.europa.eu/events/europe-through-the-generations>.

<sup>12</sup> See <https://newsroom.consilium.europa.eu/events/20191130-charles-michel-in-his-own-words>.

languages. For this same reason, the Council's website follows a well-defined multilingual policy for most of its content. However, it should not be taken for granted that a given video launched online in English – which is still the main working language within the Council, not only for drafting documents but also for internal and external communication – will then be translated<sup>13</sup> into the other languages.

There are two main factors undermining the multilingualism of these communication products. Firstly, they are often videos which are relevant for only one or two days, sometimes even less, as they are closely linked to specific meetings or events primarily aimed at the specialised press (which should not have difficulties in understanding English). The return on investment for such short-lived videos would not justify the time and resources involved in the GSC's multilingual production workflow. Secondly, as the number of multilingual projects is increasing but is still rather limited compared to the Council's audiovisual production as a whole, for the time being the GSC does not have at its disposal tools and professionals that are specifically dedicated to AVT practices.

While the staff of the Council's audiovisual service – responsible, *inter alia*, for the creation of (English) intralingual subtitles to be then used as locked time-coded templates for producing other language versions – are highly qualified in the various aspects of audiovisual (post-)production, they do not always seem to have the necessary know-how to create appropriate subtitles/templates, especially in terms of readability and translatability, e.g. with syntactic and semantic units split across subtitles. Moreover, it is still rare for the multilingual aspect to be considered from the very beginning of a new audiovisual project.

If we look at this from the translation service's viewpoint, the challenges are twofold and relate, on the one hand, to a lack of tools and specific technical skills and, on the other hand, to a lack of certain linguistic and translation skills specific to subtitling or AVT in general. It is difficult to determine whether the limited, albeit growing, number of AVT projects is a cause or a consequence of this, but the GSC's translation service has not yet decided to invest in the purchase of specific subtitling software/tools and in advanced AVT training for (some of) its staff. What is currently in place is a series of internal training opportunities aimed at making GSC translators familiar with the alternative procedures temporarily adopted for subtitling (which will be described below) and, above all, raising their awareness of the challenges and conventions that characterise AVT and make it very different from the core translation tasks which they carry out on a daily basis. As Fuentes-Luque (2015, p. 16) points out with regard to certain cases of institutional subtitles analysed in his work, "institutional AVT is almost entirely devoid of the creativity that is usually found in AVT for advertising and film/TV. Translations tend to be very literal, which could mean a shift from a creative component to an almost word-for-word rendering." This is certainly due to the fact that the more typical institutional translation of legislative and political texts does not require those two additional operations which, according to Perego (2005), complement the actual translation practice within the subtitling process:

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<sup>13</sup> Hereafter the concepts of "localisation", "adaptation" or "transadaptation" (Gambier, 2003) will be preferred to "translation".



diamesic transformation, involving a change in language mode, and textual reduction. In their daily work, in fact, Council translators are never asked to make a shift from oral to written codes, as the message, to re-use Gottlieb's (2000) terminology, is "simply" transmitted horizontally from a source to a target language. For equally obvious reasons, there is also no need to reduce the source text. On the contrary, some of the strategies which are typical in subtitling, such as condensation/reduction, deletion, resignation or even expansion (Gottlieb, 1992, p. 166), would result in serious errors if applied outside the audiovisual field, for example in politically sensitive texts where "formal equivalence" (Nida, 1964, p. 159) – i.e. a scrupulous rendering of the source text – is of utmost importance. It is therefore not surprising that, as affirmed by Fuentes-Luque (2015, p. 16), "text reduction (be it partial, in the form of a condensation of the source text; or total, by deleting or omitting lexical items [...]) is practically non-existent in institutional subtitling." It is also interesting to note that Fuentes-Luque's aforementioned work is one of the few academic contributions that closely examine the subgenre of institutional AVT.<sup>14</sup>

Even in professional circles, it is becoming more and more evident that subtitles, and AVT in general, are not the exclusive domain of the entertainment industry. From Brazil, Raquel Lucas de Sousa makes a plea to her fellow translators on the website of the American Translators Association (ATA):

If most translators specializing in subtitling translation are working with entertainment – and I believe this is common knowledge in the translation medium – who is getting the material that is not for film, cable, or streaming that does not come from producers' hands? (Lucas de Sousa, 2019)

As the Brazilian translator goes on to explain, this new demand comes from a market which is not usually aware of AVT good practices and conventions and which therefore often entrusts this kind of work to "traditional" translation agencies, which are used to handling mainly text documents, computer-assisted translation (CAT) tools and translation memories, and which are not specialised in subtitling or other modes of AVT, much like the Council's translation service (at least for the time being).

What then are the workflow and procedures currently used within the GSC to localise (some of) its audiovisual products? As mentioned in section 4.1, it is first necessary to distinguish between two different translation approaches depending on the type of video produced.

(1) The "thematic videos", in which there is no audio component to translate – as the message is transmitted solely by images and (animated) text on screen – are not subtitled. Subtitling would lead to an overload of written information, which would then be difficult to read for the viewer, especially considering the fast-paced editing. These are therefore completely recreated in all other languages by replacing the original (English) copy with its localised version. This is the result of close cooperation between the different language units – where translators, after watching the original video, adapt

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<sup>14</sup> See also the article by Tarquini and McDorman (2019) on the translation of video tutorials, another rapidly expanding AVT practice outside the film and TV industry which is still not widely considered by professionals and scholars.

the script in their own language in a Word or Excel document – and the audiovisual service editors – who incorporate these translations into the master video (see Figure 9 for an example).

Figure 9.

### *From the Script to a Multilingual Thematic Video*



Source: author's own elaboration.

As in subtitling, space and time constraints are to be kept in mind: translators are required to preserve the same number of lines as in the original (with a segmentation which is readable in their language), stick to more or less the same number of characters and, where appropriate, keep the same formatting (e.g. different colour or font to emphasise a word). All this is intended to facilitate the work of the video editors, who are unlikely to know the target language in question. That is also why the final product is always sent back to the relevant language department for a quality check which allows linguists to see their translation in context, thus ensuring that the localised video is linguistically and graphically ready for publication. This is of course more challenging when the video in question is not designed from the outset to be a multilingual product, and where some graphical/animated text effects are difficult to reproduce in all languages. For example, in March 2017, on the occasion of the 60th anniversary of the Treaties of Rome, and in response to the wave of Euroscepticism discussed above, the GSC produced the video *They say the EU is useless*.<sup>15</sup> Initially produced only in English, this short, sarcastic video message met with loud applause from the EU leaders attending the celebrations and it quickly went viral on social media. Member States therefore requested that the Council adapt the video into all languages so that they could disseminate its message at local level across Europe (see Figure 10).

<sup>15</sup> See <https://newsroom.consilium.europa.eu/events/they-tell-you-the-eu-is-useless>.



Figure 10.

*16 of the 24 Language Versions of the Video They say the EU is useless*



Source: author's own elaboration.

(2) The same procedure as that described above for thematic videos is followed to localise the text on screen appearing, with varying degrees of creativity, in documentary-style videos (usually captions/descriptive headlines or nametags/identifiers – see Figure 11).

Figure 11.

*Examples of Captions and Nametags<sup>16</sup>*



Source: author's own elaboration.

<sup>16</sup> Taken from the video *European Council – the making of*, <https://newsroom.consilium.europa.eu/events/european-council-the-making-of>.

On the other hand, interlingual subtitles are used to transpose the aural-verbal mode of this second type of audiovisual product. However, since there is currently no specific subtitling tool available within the GSC, its translation service can only work on the basis of the intralingual subtitles created by the audiovisual team, which then serve as templates for translation. The original templates are mainly in English, as this is the language used most frequently for the Council's audiovisual products, but in some cases English is also used as a pivot language for translating videos produced in other European languages.<sup>17</sup> They tend to be *verbatim* templates and are not always ideally spotted and segmented because, in contrast to the common practice among many language service providers described by Díaz-Cintas and Remael (2020, p. 45), video editors are not necessarily conversant with subtitling norms and best practices and only rarely undertake the task of condensing the original dialogue to improve the readability of the intralingual subtitles and their translation. Reduction and other subtitling strategies are in the hands of the GSC's English-language translators, who are being trained for these tasks and who adjust the master file accordingly in a text editor (SRT file format), reporting at the same time the most problematic spotting issues back to the audiovisual service, before the file is sent to the other language departments for translation.

The ready-to-use template is then opened again in a text editor by other translators who overwrite the original (or pivot) subtitles with their version. They are instructed not to tamper with time codes or with the structure of the file more generally. While far from being considered ideal by those professionals who are accustomed to working with templates<sup>18</sup> (be they "locked" or not) in modern subtitling workflows, this procedure<sup>19</sup> at least allows translators to preview their subtitles on screen by uploading the translated SRT file into a video player and to revise their translation, where necessary, before delivering the file to the audiovisual service, which is then responsible for finalising the video in the various language versions (often with burnt-in subtitles). Here again, the final stage is a quality check carried out by the language departments before the video is published online and distributed on social media.

In this context, not only is there a "separation of the act of translation from the more technical aspects of the craft of subtitling for the second time in AVT history" (Georgakopoulou, 2019, p. 518), as happened with the introduction of the template in the industry, but GSC translators cannot rely on all the useful features offered by subtitling software or cloud-based tools either. They cannot yet interactively and simultaneously check their subtitles on screen to ensure the actual synchronisation of the written text with the acoustic and visual codes as they work, while keeping under control factors such as the maximum number of characters per line and reading speed in cps/wpm.

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<sup>17</sup> The latest trend is to actually produce multilingual videos (e.g. with all 27 EU leaders speaking in their own language) as a way to promote linguistic diversity across the EU.

<sup>18</sup> In an online survey on the quality of templates conducted in 2019 by Oziemblewska and Szarkowska (2020), only four out of 344 participants stated that they do not work with any subtitling tool (be it desktop- or cloud-based).

<sup>19</sup> As opposed to the use of plain dialogue lists without time codes.

Translators are nevertheless required to comply with the following spatial and time constraints and established norms ensuring readability and therefore a good user/viewing experience.

- **Maximum number of characters per line (cpl):** 45.
- **Number of lines:** one or two at most, also depending on the duration of the subtitle, approximately applying the well-known 6-second rule (3 seconds = 1 full line; 6 seconds = 2 full lines) (Díaz-Cintas & Remael, 2020, p. 109).
- **Graphic distribution** (for two-liners): rectangular structure (more or less the same length for the two lines) or pyramidal structure (shorter top line to pollute the image to a lesser extent).
- **Segmentation and line breaks (within and across subtitles):** logical units from a syntactic-semantic point of view should be kept together (e.g. full sentences and clauses where possible, article+noun, subject+verb, compound verbs, proper names, etc.).
- **Correct and consistent use of punctuation and other signs** (e.g. the use of hyphens to indicate a dialogue exchange within a subtitle).

The above represent general guidelines which, within the GSC context, are highly dependent on the production choices made by the audiovisual service, and this is particularly evident in two aspects. On the one hand, the aforementioned use of different video formats for different social media has made it necessary to reconsider the spatial dimension of subtitles in some cases. Square videos for Facebook and Instagram feeds require a further segmentation and/or condensation of the uttered speech allowing for a smaller number of cpl than in horizontal videos (around 30/35). In the vertical format, typically used for “stories” on Instagram and other social media, the number of maximum cpl gets even smaller and has increased the number of lines within a subtitle to 3 or even 4. On the other hand, since responsibility for the master SRT files lies with the audiovisual service, and translators (as often happens in the industry) cannot in principle tweak the spotting or split or merge subtitles, the quality of the master files is paramount for the success of the subtitles in all other languages. As stated by Georgakopoulou (2019), who defined templates as “the Holy Grail of subtitling,” it is first of all crucial that the timing be accurate (duration between a minimum of 1 second and a maximum of 7 seconds, with at least 1 frame between subtitles, and in perfect sync with the speech) and that it can also work with a variety of target languages, some of which are inevitably more verbose than English or have completely different syntactic structures. Full lines should therefore be avoided – e.g. by using reduction strategies and omitting whatever is irrelevant or obvious – and syntactic and semantic units should already be taken into account when segmenting the templates in lines and subtitles, by trying to create sentence-long subtitles or at least subtitles that will not hinder the reading flow, and thus the viewer’s understanding and overall experience, in any language.

While, on the one hand, the linguistic aspect of the subtitling practice within the Council could be significantly improved by investing in subtitling instruments and training for its staff, research and experience (Romero-Fresco, 2019) has demonstrated that it is equally essential to enhance the technical aspect by raising the GSC video editors/producers’ awareness of the paramount importance

of creating intralingual subtitles/templates of good quality, thus improving not only their translation but also the viewing experience. Alternatively, the translation service should be entirely entrusted with this task. In either case, looking at both AVT and film(making) practices and research could only be beneficial.

#### **4.2.1. Subtitling the Series of Institutional Videos #Europeans**

As outlined in section 3.1, one of the factors that resulted in the proliferation of audiovisual products in the context of European institutional communication was the need to get closer to citizens, especially to those who are more disoriented and who have started to question the tangible impact of the EU on their daily lives. Audiovisual communication, aiming straight at people's hearts and heads, appeared from the outset to be an ideal counter-narrative mechanism capable of curbing the spread of those populist and Eurosceptic currents that had undermined, in particular, the campaign for the European elections in May 2019. It did not come as a surprise, then, that both the Commission and the European Parliament decided to invest extensively, in terms of time and resources, in big, well-structured communication campaigns aimed at raising European citizens' awareness of the importance of voting.

The Council decided to participate in this collective communication effort by focusing on the "human factor" and on the emotional involvement of its public by putting citizens in the spotlight (the user-centred approach described by Baù and Bonini (2018, pp. 42 and 69)) as protagonists of a series of video portraits telling the stories of ordinary European citizens with (in)direct links to EU policies and projects in their daily lives – hence the title initially considered for the whole series: #YOUropeans, later changed to #Europeans. The editorial choice to maintain the hashtag in the title is clear evidence that the series was conceived from the outset for wide distribution on social media, with the aim of reaching as many people (i.e. voters) as possible. The title also serves as a sort of thread tying together the various videos of the series, either in their "long" version (approximately 3 minutes, in horizontal format, for example for the Council's website<sup>20</sup> or for its YouTube channel), their shorter version (no more than one minute, in square format, optimised for social media platforms such as Instagram or Facebook), or their vertical story version.

The initial project provided for the production of at least one video per Member State (in the end, 34 videos were produced). The goal was to represent the European population in all its diversity in terms of age, gender, origin, level of education and, of course, language. The stories are in fact told directly by the protagonists in their own mother tongue. The videos were then accompanied by intralingual subtitles with a condensed transcription of the original audio – crucial, as outlined above, not only in terms of accessibility, but also for the increasing consumption of videos on muted mobile devices, or for optimising their ranking on online search engines (SEO) – and then used as templates

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<sup>20</sup> See <https://newsroom.consilium.europa.eu/events/20191027-europeans>.

for the production of English interlingual subtitles. All videos were also fully reproduced (not only with subtitles, but also with translated text on screen) in any other language present in the various videos (either directly from the original or using English as a pivot language). In addition, some videos were also subtitled in other languages in order to be promoted on social media in specific countries. For example, the video about a young French man who decided to live and work in Lapland was produced in French and fully localised into English, but also subtitled (from the English subtitles as pivot) in Finnish. Since then, some of these videos have been subtitled in other, if not all, EU languages. They are, in fact, broad products that can be re-used to promote European values on many other occasions beyond the 2019 political campaign. For instance, to celebrate Europe Day (9 May) in 2020, the Council shared on social media a one-minute square video made of a collage of the various #Europeans protagonists: in one word or in a very short sentence, they say what the EU represents for them – a real homage to the founding values of the European project, straight from the mouths of its citizens.<sup>21</sup>

The vast linguistic diversity of the whole project posed a real challenge for the GSC audiovisual service, which had to closely cooperate with the translation service right from the production phase. This linguistic support proved necessary in order for the audiovisual service to be able to make editorial choices, edit the videos and create the intralingual/template subtitles in source languages which were totally unknown to them. This reinforced the idea of exploring the benefits of an integrated and cooperative approach where audiovisual and linguistic services could work together from the very beginning, rather than seeing translation as one of the last steps in the production workflow. The #Europeans project can therefore be regarded as an example of the accessible filmmaking approach advocated by Romero-Fresco, where a close “collaboration between the translators and the creative team” can ensure the quality of the final product across languages and cultures.

## 5. Conclusions

The case study presented in this paper on the use of AVT – or lack thereof – in the context of the EU’s public communication, in particular in the Council, has shown that this type of translation, which is well-consolidated in the entertainment industry, remains somewhat overlooked when it comes to its application in other audiovisual genres, such as the institutional one.

Even in contexts like the one examined here, where audiovisual and language services are part of the very same organisation, there remains a certain tendency to consider AVT as a separate, post-production process rather than part of a multidisciplinary, integrated approach. In fact, even though the strategic and political importance of multilingualism is recognised, translation almost always comes as an afterthought and rarely seems to be taken into account at an early stage in the

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<sup>21</sup> See the video on the Council YouTube channel: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=f8buRnIEfmc>.

conception of multimedia and multilingual projects. First, a product that communicates effectively in one language (mostly English in this case) is designed and produced, and only as a second step is there a request for linguists to translate, and perhaps adapt, that product into their language and culture. Following this approach, it should not be taken for granted that the translators in question are familiar with the communication strategies underlying a given audiovisual product and know how to make the most appropriate and creative choices to reproduce the same strategies when translating texts – or rather sets of multimodal codes – that are quite different from the political and legislative documents making up most of their work, which, as mentioned above, require greater formal equivalence. At the same time, the lack of an interdisciplinary approach does not allow audiovisual operators to fully understand the limits and challenges faced by translators and thus to design from the outset a product that is truly multilingual, for example by creating templates that are “agnostic, a fair compromise among country-specific subtitling styles, which could easily be tailored to the norms and needs of each country if needed” (Georgakopoulou, 2019).

However, it can be said that the situation in this regard is gradually changing and that the “forced” cooperation between the Council’s audiovisual and translation services described in the case study is a good starting point for a more integrated and multilingual approach in the audiovisual communication of the “house of the Member States”. This could simultaneously enhance the quality, effectiveness and efficiency not only of the translations in question but also of the Council’s public communication in general. Establishing a dialogue with both the film industry and the academic community, in which this shift towards a more interdisciplinary approach has already been happening (Romero-Fresco, 2019; Chaume, 2004), could significantly improve working practices in institutional contexts, too.

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