

EXTRACT

REPORTING THE EU

NEWS, MEDIA AND THE
EUROPEAN INSTITUTIONS

JOHN LLOYD AND
CRISTINA MARCONI



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About the Book

In recent years, media coverage of the European Union has faced its most serious test. The crisis in the euro currency has thrown into sharp relief the shortcomings of a style of reporting too often unable to engage the interest of audiences broader than political, academic and diplomatic elites. Also under the spotlight is a method of journalism geared largely towards reporting on relations between the EU and the country that the news organisation serves. This book, based on extensive interviews with EU correspondents, editors, and public relations and other EU executives, will reveal for the first time how the powerful group of institutions at the heart of the Union are covered – or not covered. Exploring the difficulties in reporting on a multinational institution, the authors highlight the struggle to develop a modern, engaging journalism capable of fully holding the EU system to account.

‘This pioneering study by John Lloyd and Cristina Marconi is the first comparative analysis of how media have covered the EU’s biggest crisis since its inception. It offers vital insight into Europe’s differing cultures of communication as well as the health of its politics.’

Mark Leonard, Director, European Council on Foreign Relations

About the Authors

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What follows is a short extract from this book.

More information can be found at: www.ibtauris.com/reuters

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'I am not aware of any better book on how the media report the EU: John Lloyd and Cristina Marconi are rigorous, thorough, serious and fair-minded. They are particularly good on how reporting in Brussels has evolved over the past 20 years.'

Charles Grant, Director, Centre for European Reform

'Europe has common policies but no common politics. It appears only through the distorting mirror of national media. This pioneering study by John Lloyd and Cristina Marconi is the first comparative analysis of how media have covered the EU's biggest crisis since its inception. It offers vital insight into Europe's differing cultures of communication as well as the health of its politics.'

Mark Leonard, Director, European Council on Foreign Relations

'A much-needed, well-researched and lively account of the challenge of covering the EU, this book shows how crucial quality journalism on European affairs, both from Brussels and from various European capitals, has become, particularly since the financial crisis.'

Sylvie Kauffmann, Editorial Director, *Le Monde*

RISJ CHALLENGES

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Contents

Acknowledgements	vii
1. Introduction: Feast and Famine	1
2. The Limits of Utopia: Leaving Loyalty, Embracing Scepticism	9
3. Communicating to the Communicators: How the EU Presents Itself	23
4. Growing Apart: The Argument over Objectivity	35
5. The Limits: The EU from 'Dull' to 'Crucial' in a Time of Crisis	43
6. Living in Financial Times: Getting to Grips with Financial Complexity	49
7. Video Games: The Challenges for TV Journalists and the Role of 'Mass' Media	59
8. Absent Enemies: Reporting on Brussels out of Brussels	65
9. The Globalists: Reporting for the Elite	69
10. Dog Does Eat Dog: Peer Pressure and Peer Reviews	73
11. Tweeting into Clarity: Online is Demanding, But Helpful	79
12. The Next Act: Journalism in a Time of Polemics	83

EXTRACT

Appendix 1. Euroscepticism: Boris Johnson and Bruno Waterfield	87
Appendix 2. The Passionate Chronicler: Jean Quatremer	93
Appendix 3. The Ill-Matched Couple: TV and the EU – Hughes Beaudouin, LC1/TF1	97
Appendix 4. The Rape of Europa: Anglophone Bulls in the EU China Shop – Wolfgang Blau	101
Appendix 5. The Vision Betrayed: Democracy’s Deficit – Dirk Schuemer	105
Appendix 6. The Cost of Communicating	109
Notes	111
Bibliography	116

Acknowledgements

The present study takes into account the experiences and points of view expressed by correspondents based in Brussels from seven countries: France, Germany, Greece, Italy, Poland, Spain, and the UK. We interviewed people who have been in the EU capital at different times or who have been covering EU issues from other places, in order to reach a better understanding of the evolution over time of the topic at the centre of our study. We chose people working for different media: print press, TV and radio.

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The Interviewees

Anonymous, EU press spokespeople
 Hughes Beaudouin, TF1
 Ruth Berschens, *Handelsblatt*
 Tomasz Bielecki, *Gazeta Wyborcza*
 Andrea Bonanni, *La Repubblica*
 Jochen Buchsteiner, *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*
 George Candon, FTI (Consultancy)
 David Carretta, *Il Foglio*
 Vangelis Demeris, freelance (Greece)
 Alain Franco, freelance journalist (France)
 Federico Fubini, *La Repubblica*

Andrew Gardner, *European Voice*
Luigi Ippolito, *Corriere della Sera*
Matthias Krupa, *Die Zeit*
Anton La Guardia, *The Economist*
Dick Leonard, *The Economist* (formerly)
Karl de Meyer, *Les Echos*
Bernardo de Miguel, *Cinco Dias*
Chris Morris, BBC
John Palmer, *Guardian* (formerly)
Giovanna Pancheri, Sky Italia
George Parker, *Financial Times*
Griselda Pastor, Cadena Ser Radio
Annalisa Piras, Euronews (formerly)
Jean Quatremer, *Libération*
Philippe Ricard, *Le Monde*
Dirk Schuemer, *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*
Bettina Schulz, *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* (formerly)
Peter Spiegel, *Financial Times*
Matina Stevis, *Dow Jones-Wall Street Journal*
Paul Taylor, Reuters
Enrico Tibuzzi, ANSA
Toby Vogel, *European Voice*
Bruno Waterfield, *Daily Telegraph*

1

Introduction: Feast and Famine

Commoner: Just think. Which one of these stories do you believe?

Woodcutter: None makes any sense.

(Rashomon, Akira Kurosawa, 1950)

The European Union occupies a central position in the politics and economic life of its 28 members and an important one in much of the rest of the world. Few other institutions of governance have such a contested role, and its very existence is increasingly called into question by uncompromising critics, while a growing constituency want it radically reformed. A debate on the legitimacy of the EU's action has always existed and has been quite trenchant in the past, but it has never reached the current level. The EU public has never been so engaged with and opinionated about the EU project as it is now: news media have to take this into account.

It is clearly important that citizens from the 28 EU countries understand what effect the EU Commission, the Parliament, and the Council of Ministers have on their lives – what policies they discuss and approve, what relationship they have with national governments, what assistance they offer to the member states, how much they pay to them, what power they have and what powers they seek to have.

The findings of this study of the journalists whose job it is to cover the institutions of the EU are contradictory. Until the economic crisis hit Europe in the late 2000s, with severe effects on many of the member states and a major threat to the viability of the 14-year-old euro currency used by the 18 member states in the eurozone, most national media covered the EU much less than their own political centres of power, which in some cases meant that they covered it very little. News editors and producers came to view European stories as boring for readerships and viewers. Even after the crisis broke, the coverage remained patchy, and in some cases

suffered from a lack of understanding of the issues and mechanisms under discussion, and/or a lack of sufficient staff to give more than a sketch of even critically important issues.

On the other hand, the amount published about and by the European Union is vast. The Union's institutions are lavish with news announcements, with briefings, with prepackaged but often detail-rich interviews with commissioners; think tanks in Brussels and in all the main capitals pour out analyses and advice; the many specialised journals and websites are knowledgeable, up-to-the-minute, and distant enough from their subject to be critical; the global newspapers and wire services continue to support relatively large and active bureaux, whose output enjoys a high reputation.

The problem is with the larger public which is only sporadically interested in politics and public institutions. In times of crisis or of important decisions, the attention reaches a peak, but in good times news coming from Brussels is the first to disappear from newspaper pages and from TV programmes. This seems to us the largest problem facing the news media which have the responsibility of covering the EU: its very structure and mode of operation renders the task of engaging the general European public with it, in journalistic terms, difficult.

Thus 'who cares?' becomes a pertinent question, and the consequences of the general lack of interest in the EU – except at times of crisis, which have brought a more critical, even hostile, attention than before – underpin much of the report's findings. It is first on the list below: but other issues, also set out briefly here and treated in greater detail in the main body of this study, also seem to us to be major ones facing the journalism of the European Union.

A note on the form of this report. It relies on a series of interviews done by the two authors – mainly Cristina Marconi – over a period at the end of 2013 and the first months of 2014. Most of the interviewees are journalists. Though we refer to some of the large academic and expert literature on the EU and the news media, this report is not in the academic tradition.

Who Cares?

The problem of interesting a wide public has different facets.

1. The coverage of the EU is inherently difficult for journalism, above all for broadcasters and for popular papers. Most journalism has long

assumed that it must woo the reader into the story told, since s/he reads or watches, usually, at leisure without any externally imposed need to do so: a few moments of boredom will mean a decision to move on. This is especially true of the most popular news medium, TV.

It is difficult because the Union and its institutions – including, and sometimes most of all, the Parliament – are largely devoid of the dramas, confrontations, rows, large and well-known characters and issues which make up much of the political coverage within the nation states. Instead, the journalists must deal with (changing) officials who are mostly, and remain, unknown to most Europeans. The processes of the Union and especially the Commission are slow, complex, and hard to grasp by a layman; many of the issues handled are technical and detailed; there are constant and often opaque negotiations in the Council of Ministers which brings together departmental ministers and the European Council which unites the heads of state and government of the member states, both of which meet in closed session and retain the largest power.

Even news which significantly impacts on everyday life – a decision which can affect a community in a positive or negative way, and there are many – is delivered in different steps over an extended period, and it can take years before the measures enter into force. If on one hand this shows how carefully every step is taken by the EU authorities, on the other hand it is hard to retain wide interest in the enforcement of a decision taking place years after it has been announced for the first time. The Parliament especially – unlike national assemblies, where the actors are known and the dramas often vivid – has been hard to televise and often soporific. After the May 2014 European elections, with a much increased Eurosceptic representation, the debates have become less tedious, the arguments much fiercer: though the designation ‘Eurosceptic’ covers a spectrum from anti-euro on economic grounds (the Alternative für Deutschland in Germany) to overtly fascist (Jobbik in Hungary and Golden Dawn in Greece).

2. Popular media – mass-circulation newspapers and television – could in theory do much to convey the central issues being discussed and agreed in the EU to a wide audience. There are two reasons why this is true only to a very limited extent. The most powerful and influential among the European popular newspapers – *Bild* in Germany and the

Daily Mail and the *Sun* in the UK – are strongly critical of the EU or of some aspects of it, take a combative posture vis-à-vis the EU and, especially the UK papers, are accused by the Commission and by many journalist colleagues of distortion and gross inaccuracies. More importantly they – especially the British papers – convey little of the substance of the Union.

However, this press has at times revealed, even if through exaggeration and sometimes falsehood, something of the underlying contradictions and silences of the EU – especially the contradiction between the long-term aim of ‘ever closer union’ and the reality of continuing national control. Yet a usually confrontational approach, with neither news nor commentary informed by having a permanent correspondent in Brussels, means that polemic and a focus on errors and absurdities is preferred to facts. At the same time, the practised skill with which the popular tabloids present the news means that their message comes through much more powerfully than that of the quality media, influencing voters and public opinion in a way that inevitably has to be taken into account by politicians.

Television coverage is much less polemical – and is legally barred from being so in many European states – but is generally brief. In addition, in nearly every state, the regular habit of watching the news is in decline, especially among the young, with the news accessed when one is interested in specific issues. This might include the EU, but probably only when crises seem imminent.

3. The growing conviction among editors that news about the EU is unpopular with readers and viewers led to a shrinkage, during the 2000s, of the permanent correspondent corps based in Brussels and a greater dependence on coverage from the news media’s home base, or from other capitals, such as Paris. EU information depended much more on freelancers and fixers, a less expensive workforce which replaced the established correspondents. In addition, the crisis itself forced further cuts on the news media – leaving the worst-hit countries, which arguably needed the news and analysis the most, with a shrunken representation.

All news is local

Most news organisations, when reporting the EU, produce coverage which is not aimed at Europeans, but at French, Dutch, Polish, and other national citizens. The subtext is: what is the EU doing for, and to, us? Journalists, who find themselves assigned to cover the EU, or ‘Europe’, thus do what seems to come naturally: they bring their nation with them.

Most journalism from Brussels covers the central institutions of the EU with both eyes on the business of determining how far they act in or against the interests of the home country. To cover it in this fashion is, of course, to miss most of what these institutions do – jerking them into life in print, sound, or images only to judge how far they are useful to the national interest; who are the losers and winners, the opponents and allies; what the national ministers, especially the prime minister, have achieved at their meetings, with the content generally briefed to the national news media representatives by the public relations officials of the government in question. ‘Europe’ thus becomes an adjunct to the nation, and is simply another chamber in which the latter ‘speaks to itself’ – or a chamber which each nation can blame when something goes wrong.

The exceptions to this rule are the transnational media – the global wire services, such as Reuters, Bloomberg, AP, and AFP; the global economic papers, such as *The Economist*, the *FT*, and the *Wall Street Journal*; and – to a lesser extent – the global broadcasters, such as the BBC, CNN, and others. These organisations see their mission, and their business model, as providing coverage which has little or no national focus: ‘news from nowhere’.

Holding to harsher account

The journalists who covered what became the EU in its first decades were pioneers of a new kind of reporting. Brussels was not only the headquarters of a supranational organisation which had constantly developing powers, but also the crossroads where different journalistic cultures met and worked together on a common project over an indefinite period. In the aftermath of the war, the new correspondents were largely supportive of the organisation and felt they had a role to play in its construction: they saw the institutions through the prism of their founders – Jean Monnet, Paul-Henri Spaak, Altiero Spinelli, and others – who in turn believed that it was a way to stop Europe from again descending into war.

From the 1980s onwards, new generations of journalists adopted a more distant attitude towards the institutions, seeing the Union as a legitimate source of political and economic power which still had to be held to more severe account – whatever their own views were about it. This critical approach deepened and turned harsher in the 2000s, as more evidence emerged of an increasing public disillusionment with the EU in countries, such as France and the Netherlands, where the bulk of the political classes had professed themselves keenly pro-integration. In many cases it became aggressive from 2008, when the EU's most ambitious innovation, the euro currency, demonstrated its fragility and its malign effect – at least in the short term – on (especially) Southern European economies.

As this attitude took firmer hold, the public relations officials charged with communicating with the world via the news media became more embattled and defensive, and were increasingly seen by journalists as overprotective of their masters, and at times unhelpful in explaining the urgent issues of the crisis. The latest moves in terms of economic and financial measures were sometimes developed outside of the EU structures. This marginalisation did not prevent them from trying to convey a strong message on the benefits of the measures taken, even when they were proving largely unpopular in member states. As Hans Magnus Enzensberger puts it in his pamphlet *Brussels, the Gentle Monster*, given the lack of a 'EU public sphere of debate worthy of the name', there has been 'an increasing temptation for the Union to take opinion-shaping in hand for itself'.¹

The gap in understanding

The economic crisis has significantly altered the work of journalists who cover the EU. It has

- Forced them to keep up with the pace of a decision-making which was highly technical and complex. They had to undergo a steep learning curve and had their relative ignorance exposed. Most were not well versed in economics and finance, and even those who were could hardly understand, at least initially, the new debates, policies, and mechanisms which quickly reached an uncommon degree of complexity. They also had to translate a very complicated message into simple words, given that many of the decisions taken often directly affected their public.

- Encouraged many of them to shift the focus of their reporting from the Brussels/Strasbourg centres to other cities in Europe – especially Athens (for the riots), Berlin (for the decisions), and Frankfurt (for the European Central Bank).
- Widened the gulf between them and the EU, especially the Commission, since it came to seem less relevant to addressing the crisis and its communications were constrained by the market sensitivity of the issues.
- Created a genuine and unprecedented interest among the public looking with concern for fresh and reliable news about new taxes, austerity measures, welfare cuts. Viewers and readers became increasingly demanding, but increasingly sceptical too.

Look what the voters brought in

Journalists covering the EU now see it as undergoing a series of changes unprecedented in its near-sixty-year (since the 1957 Treaty of Rome) history. The strains put upon it by the economic crisis have, at least in the first moment, encouraged many politicians and officials to point the way to ‘more Europe’ – a much greater fiscal coordination at the centre of the eurozone, both to address the continuing problems in many of the eurozone countries and to give the euro the political backing it has lacked since its invention in 2000. Then, quite abruptly, the political narrative surrounding the EU changed and ‘more Europe’ became, in many quarters, suspect.

The centrifugal pressures have never been so evident, and the popularity of the anti-EU parties in several countries brought into the Brussels Parliament groups of parties, of the far right and the far left, who agree on one big thing – much ‘less Europe’ for many, the ideal for most of these being no European Union at all. This happened both in Southern countries as a protest against the austerity measures, and in Northern countries as an expression of the malaise for, as many see it, having to pay for other countries’ profligacy.

This means that, for the first time, the European Parliament has the potential for both real drama and a real debate about the most fundamental of issues: the right for the EU to exist. Politicians have been elected who have a reputation for being outspoken and populist, keen on starting controversies and using abrasive language, much more suited to television

and popular journalism than the Brussels debate to date. This will represent a temptation for media struggling to engage their public with the EU: it will make it harder for reporters to attempt to explain the substantive decisions and policies under discussion in the Union. For a journalism which claims to hold power to account and act in the public interest, it is likely to do little. For a journalism which wants to interest the people, it is a large step forward.

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