

Black Box Brussels

EU Journalism: Lapdog or Watchdog?

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A project for the political elite?

„For a long time we have been a project for a political elite and we have been bad at listening, bad at explaining and bad at anchoring EU issues in national politics. This was perhaps acceptable when the results of cooperation - peace and prosperity - were self-evident. But now it is no longer enough.”

(Margot Wallström 2005).

- 84% of the laws and provisions are based on decisions taken in Brussels.
- Only 5% of the coverage in the main news is dedicated to EU issues. (the numbers are referring to a period between 1998 and 2004; Brettschneider and Rettich 2005)
- Most of the coverage is from a clearly national perspective. (Voltmer and Eilders 2003)

Research Questions

- Does (German) journalism fulfil its role as “fourth estate“ on a European level?
- What are the weaknesses and difficulties of EU-Journalism?
- Which parameters would have to be changed to improve the coverage of European issues?

Sample

- Qualitative interviews with correspondents in BRUSSELS and BERLIN

- Theoretical sampling:
 - Press: *Süddeutsche Zeitung, Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung, die tageszeitung, Die Welt, Financial Times Deutschland, Handelsblatt, Der Tagesspiegel, stern, Die Zeit, WAZ-Gruppe, (die dänische Zeitung Information)*
 - TV: *ARD, ZDF, Deutsche Welle*
 - Radio: *MDR, RBB, Deutschlandfunk*
 - Online: *stern.de, europa digital*
 - News agencies: *Reuters, dpa*

European politics: hardly any news value

- Bureaucracy instead of showdowns.
- Complex issues instead of “catchy news”.
- As negotiations often take place behind closed doors, institutions appear as black boxes.
- It is difficult to cover EU issues in a personalised way since most EU politicians are unknown to the public.

Journalists in Brussels: no “usual” correspondents

- Spaceship Brussels: journalists become part of the “Brussels game”.
- EU-correspondents work under high time pressure.
- Home editors often lack knowledge about EU issues but still act as “gatekeepers”.

The typical EU-correspondent

- Journalists have very positive attitudes towards the European Union.
- They perceive their role as educational and informational.
- They see their audience as generally disinterested and not well-informed about European politics.

EU-Journalists and their sources of information

- The European Commission is strongly criticised for its PR-work.
- The European Parliament is described as more transparent but less interesting as a source.
- Journalists describe the communication of the European Council as dominated by the respective presidency and by the national governments.

EU-Journalists and their sources of information

- Off the record information is often used to manipulate journalists.
- International cooperation among EU-correspondents enables more effective research and strengthens the journalists' position.
- The news agenda is often set by the schedule of the political institutions.

Conclusion

- The obstacles for an adequate coverage of European affairs lie in the institutional setting of the European Union as well as in the organisation of the mass media.
 - Political actors are less dependent on public support than in the national context.
 - Because of intense international collaboration journalists also depend less on political actors.

- The peculiar institutional setting of the European institutions and the peculiar organisation of the EU-correspondents in Brussels shape a unique culture of political communication.
 - Even though journalists think of themselves as critical reporters, working conditions and infrastructures often do not allow them to cover EU politics independently and critically.

Policy implications

For Politicians and Spokespeople

- **POLITICS:**

- National governments should continuously inform the domestic press about their work in Brussels: Stop the “blame game”.
- Negotiations and conflicts between member states should be transparent for the press: Less marketing and more transparency is needed.

Policy implications

For Politicians and Spokespeople

- **POLITICS:**

- EU Institutions should improve their press work. Instead of spending vast amounts of money on advertising and PR, they should be more transparent and should provide resources to adequately deal with the daily requests by journalists.
- EU institutions should communicate the entire political process. Not only the decisions.
- The highly influential politicians of the European Commission should be more open to the media, even though they do not depend on public support for votes.

Policy implications

For Media Organisations and Journalists

- **JOURNALISTS:**

- International cooperation between journalists should be institutionalised. Examples of best practice are the international offices of Reuters, Financial Times, and WAZ-Gruppe.
- The EU should not be treated as “a topic” among others.
- More correspondents have to be based in Brussels.

Policy implications

For Media Organisations and Journalists

- **JOURNALISTS:**

- EU-correspondents and correspondents from the national capitals should collaborate on a daily basis.
- Journalists' knowledge about European politics must improve.
- Journalists should not underestimate their audience.

Thank you for your attention!

The publication is available online at:

www.netzwerkrecherche.de/docs/Studie_Black_Box_Bruessel_2008.pdf