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Towards a more Successful European Communication: Research Findings and Media Policy Recommendations

Santrauka. Žiniasklaidos sistemų konvergencijos, žurnalistikos kultūrų homogenizacijos, politinės komunikacijos priemonių, formų ir turinio įvairovės kontekste svarbu suvokti, kaip visi šie procesai paveiks Europos viešosios erdvės (trans)formacijas. Deja, kol kas nėra susiformavusios europinių naujienų darbotvarkės, todėl galime stebėti tik pavienius atvejus, kuomet ES tampa žiniasklaidos priemonių tema Europos mastu. Šiais atvejais naujienų šaltiniais tampa sensacingi įvykiai, krizės, oficialūs ES atstovų susitikimai. Kita vertus, žurnalistai orientuojasi į auditorijos poreikius, neišsamias jos žinias apie ES. Straipsnyje siekiama įvertinti svarbiausius Europos kaip naujo socialinio vaizdinio ypatumus, aptarti esamas ir potencialias problemas, įvardyti priemones, kurias galima panaudoti veiksmingiau perduodant informaciją apie Europos aktualijas.

Keywords: *European public sphere, social imaginary, political communication, EU coverage, news sources, journalism education, European journalism.*

Pagrindiniai žodžiai: *Europos viešoji erdvė, socialinis vaizdinys, politinė komunikacija, pranešimai apie ES, naujienų šaltiniai, žurnalistikos mokymas, europinė žurnalistika.*

1. Foreword

There are more channels, chances and incentives to tailor political communication to particular identities, conditions and tastes than ever before; the mass audience declines and this facilitates the diversification of political communication channels, forms and messages. Therefore, research is necessary to assess how political communicators and media are navigating change, redefining their purposes, and resolving their conflicts. To put this more concretely: Are different media agendas diversifying across the many different outlets of political communication? Another point of departure is related to certain tendencies

in media development that are taking place in media systems worldwide; for instance, scholars are talking about convergence of media systems and journalism homogenization. More precisely – boundaries are dissolving between journalistic and non journalistic genres, between matters of public and private concern, between quality and tabloid approaches to politics, between journalists serving audiences as informers and as entertainers. Consequently, a question arises: How this will affect the European public space?

Indeed, communicating Europe is a big challenge. Although the media is the intermediaries between the political actors and

the citizens of Europe, with growing popularity of new communication technologies the mainstream media is loosing its primary function of being a channel of information. Instead, other forms and formats of information and communication are emerging such as specialized web sites, blogs, web casting, as well as alternative media channels generated by the publics.

In this chapter, research results and policy recommendations are presented on the basis of the findings from the 6th Framework Program project “Adequate Information Management in Europe (AIM)” (AIM Research Consortium, 2007). The AIM project was organized within a three year period from 2004 to 2007 and aimed at understanding the European information management practices as performed by different news media organizations across Europe. One of the principal focuses in this project was the goal to assess the particularities of European reporting processes across different journalism cultures, as well as the impact of the media with regard to the emergence of (a) European public sphere.

2. European reporting has a national focus

As AIM research results confirm, it becomes an almost impossible task to obtain a clear picture on what is happening on the EU level just by browsing pages of newspapers or looking at TV broadcasts in different countries in Europe. Indeed, the ‘European agenda’ as an overlapping network of EU news does not exist across media in Europe. There are only rare exceptions when Euro-

pean Union becomes an item of major importance across media in Europe, and these are most often sensational events (especially the ones that fit general stereotypes), crises or events taking place regularly such as summits and meetings of the officials. In addition to regular political events, business and economy news are the topics dominating the European matters.

In spite of few commonalities, the media across Europe, generally, has its own logic of reporting on the European affairs. The most common approach for the media, as disclosed in the AIM project, is to focus on the audience needs, or to put it more precisely – to provide information which is relevant to consumers; moreover, to provide that information in a simplified and understandable way. As appeared from the interviews with journalists and editors, media professionals take action and seek to make news to be relevant to the public. In other words, news has to have direct link to Norwegian, Lithuanian, Estonian, etc. affairs. From here it also follows that competence of a journalist mainly rests on two criteria.

Firstly, EU reporters should be competent to bring information to the public: according to the journalists, EU reporting looks alike to any other kind of reporting if assessed from general journalistic professionalism, e.g. the news value, balance and objectivity, perspective. As indicated by a journalist from Norway, he is “writing for Mrs. Hansen in the milk shop”. Similar news writing logic is also shared by other respondents, e.g. an editor from the Lithuanian public service broadcaster has said that they have an older audience, therefore they try to explain

and to show things. Other journalists have also said that they write as if they are talking to 12-year-olds. Secondly, some journalists argue that the media has to make things understandable to the public, i.e. news has to be presented for ordinary people and supplied with clear examples.

An attempt to be close to the public was implicitly mentioned in responses of many journalists. For instance, a journalist from Estonia says that journalists have to cover information that is relevant to the public, especially if they want to get audience feedback; their practice tells that there is little audience response on EU topics that are not entertaining enough. Here one can notice a direct implication of an economic factor in news production which has a direct outcome such as news commercialization. As journalists claim, the media has to produce news that is read by the audience; otherwise little or no attention will be paid, and the media business will suffer.

From this discussion an important indication is found that journalists implicitly discuss about their role as active players in EU reporting. They bring information to the public, they seek to make it relevant, they sometimes fill knowledge gaps, etc. However, they are confronted with their audience, which, most often has limited understanding, is not interested in EU issues and is concerned about affairs of domestic value.

3. Audience has little knowledge about the EU

Generally, disinterest of the audience is explained mostly by the complexity of the EU structure and its functioning; most of

EU-related information is supposed to remain abstract and irrelevant to readers and viewers. This affects the type of reporting – as expressed by journalists, they seek to inform rather than reform opinions of their readers; in addition, they seek to explain different things to audiences by filling knowledge gaps – a method for this is to provide examples. Therefore, it is important to bring background information to the readers: it is necessary to write article in a comprehensible way; to explain and provide background information; to contextualize information so that to reduce various myths and make the EU coverage more tangible. In short, the reason why the audience is poorly informed and has inadequate knowledge about the EU is supposed to be not a matter of the quantity of the information available about the EU, but rather the *nature* of that information, as well as the attitudes (such as a lack of interest) prevalent among the audience.

Another interesting finding disclosed in the AIM project relates to the development observed in the media worldwide. The media targets selected audiences rather than applying the logic of a mass audience. The fact that media audiences are becoming smaller and more fragmented hinders the possibilities of media to reach a relatively actual version of a common European space.

4. Journalists face different obstacles in European reporting

As AIM research findings have disclosed, journalists talk about a number of challenges in reporting Europe, such as difficult language of official bodies, lack of time; in addition,

there is an abundance of information which comes from the EU institutions and representations, but it has little value: journalists are not the EU experts, thus much of information slips through their eyes. This constitutes one of the major and most demanding differences between national systems of news management and production (of which journalists are very well aware) and that of the European Union and its institutions.

Indeed, creating a European social imaginary could be seen as a tendency of the gradual Europeanization of the national public spheres where European issues and actors become approached and evaluated from a common European perspective. From this idea it follows that the emergence of a European public sphere is seen to be dependent on the recognition of common interests in a European context which would provide a framework for the public debate connecting different national publics.

Journalists acknowledge that the media should expand a national approach currently prevailing in the news agenda and provide more information about other member states of the EU as well. However, national newsrooms are still little informed about EU journalism in other countries, and for different reasons few efforts are made to investigate these aspects more in depth.

Current EU coverage is too Brussels institutions' centred; to achieve expected results – broader perspectives, interesting stories, different examples and angles – reporting of EU news should move to the grass-root level. It should show the impacts of particular EU policies and political deci-

sions to ordinary citizens' and their everyday life. However, such kind of reporting is very difficult to achieve because of the abundance and complexity of EU subjects that requires the journalist to have good knowledge and professional skills not only about EU matters, but also broader understanding about things which are going-on elsewhere in Europe.

5. The Internet has a better role to play in EU communication

Taking into account EU communication drawbacks – overflow of information, democracy deficit, lack of transparency, bureaucratic jargon, pitfalls of cross-cultural misunderstanding on all levels and concerning all aspects of politics, etc. – independent online news sources could become of crucial importance for the journalists to gain insights into the EU policy making process and offer conflicting perspectives to the European issues discussed and debated.

Indeed, with the arrival of knowledge-based society obvious changes are taking place as related to the application of new media technologies. These are being used as means of information, communication and production. As AIM study confirmed, most of the correspondents read media websites and check information from the government or other official bodies online; they use the Internet in this respect quite frequently. The correspondents also find it helpful that official documents and reports are accessible directly on the Internet without any delay so that they can get a sufficient view on what is going on. In addition, electronic versions of documents

as other information published online allow effective search features to find new inspiration and new topics for their work. Journalists also turn to weblogs, communities and forums to find out what is being discussed in the Internet community and where news might develop.

At the same time there are justified worries that Internet news, especially that provided by do-it-yourself journalists can lead to new sources of error, rumour and/or propaganda. But it is also true that such 'alternative' websites offer valuable perspectives on the news often missed by traditional media, especially when the number of traditional foreign correspondents is in decline. In her chapter "The Utopia of Mass Media: Towards Public-Generated Media" of this issue, Slovenian media policy researcher Mojca Pajnik highlights a thorough discussion on the alternative ways of creating public sphere through the public-generated media.

In short, with growing popularity of the Internet, with growing audience needs to overcome mediators in receiving EU news, a new kind of model of communication in Europe is about to emerge. While the general news and information management is still largely based on the mediators (journalists and national media) this new mode is nevertheless gaining a big popularity.

6. Interesting EU stories are missing

There is a potential for the emergence of the European journalism in Brussels, however Brussels correspondents are primarily serving their national audiences. Europeani-

zation of journalism does not indicate giving up a national framing of news, as the audiences are still seen nationally located and rooted. Brussels correspondents are facing numerous constrictions: while working in Brussels they have to constantly switch between two frames – national and transnational.

Altogether, reporting of EU news should involve more than presenting factual information, as repeatedly revealed from journalists' comments. EU media coverage on the whole should include more examples by providing not only facts but also interpretations that would help the audience to understand the relevance of particular EU news. Since EU reporting is considered to involve a rather time consuming news making process, journalists are not willing or able to invest as much time as expected in the EU media coverage. As for special training, many journalists are in agreement that more training would be necessary; however resources from the media are not enough – both economic and time. To produce explicit and analytical articles requires time and knowledge, debates and continuous updating. However, the media do operate under very fierce competition: it is not economically reasonable to invest in thorough analysis if you want to be first with the news on the market. For more discussion on the challenges of media commercialization, please refer to the chapters provided by Mojca Pajnik, Tuomo Mörä, Auksė Balčytienė and Aušra Vinciuonienė in this issue.

As appeared in the AIM project, certain news organizations (large international media organizations, also strong media organizations from new EU member states) play a very im-

portant role in international news flow. These organizations have resources and capacities to find, interpret and provide leading views on the European matters. Most often, these media are large corporations, international news agencies – media, which can provide a big impact on large audience groups. In their articles, Finnish researchers Hannu Nieminen and Tuomo Mörä refer to the major European agenda-setters like “Economist” and “Financial Times” serving more to the European elite rather than ordinary citizens.

7. What can be done?

Briefly, developing a transnational approach to EU reporting could lead to social imaginary, developing and generating audience attention and concerns, i.e. providing people both with background knowledge and possible comparisons between their own experiences and the experiences of people in other member states of the EU.

Since the EU issues as well as institutions are so complex, most journalists do not have in-depth knowledge about the EU. At present, the reporting is mainly concentrating on the agenda set by the events happening in Brussels. Instead, issues could be generated as relevant to citizens and then provided on what the EU has to say on this. Diversification of the EU coverage is needed so that to include not only business and economics related information, but also cultural and social stories to ‘humanize’ EU policies and make it more audience-friendly.

Proliferation of new forms and formats of communication, particularly online re-

sources, including web blogs, community press and broadcasting channels becomes a significant factor in the European public sphere formation. Apparently, there is a growing tendency to rely on the non-institutionalized, non-governmental, non-administrative and clearly transnational information rather than official European news sources. An important and distinctive feature of these platforms is their trans-national orientation, which is especially needed by journalists to get access to background material and other views to policy matters than those communicated by the official sources.

Low level of interest in EU coverage among the publics indicates a lack of education and understanding of the role of such news in one’s life. Proper education on the EU is a challenge not only for a journalist, but also general publics. Questions to be addressed by journalism and general education are the following: What is the necessary level of knowledge to understand complex EU issues? What are the basic things that journalists and publics must know about the EU? What kind of practical competences are needed for journalists to cover European affairs in a comprehensible way?

On the whole, the current EU coverage is expected to involve more analytical and educational journalism. However, the limited competence and knowledge of journalists appears to be restriction here. Therefore, a parallel process of educating citizens in EU issues is necessary so that the publics could apprehend and get engaged into the EU affairs.

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ABSTRACT

In the context of media developments world-wide including convergence of media system, journalism homogenization, diversification of political communication, it is important to understand how these processes will affect (trans)formation of the European public sphere. There has been no European news agenda across media in Europe so far, except for rare cases when European Union becomes an issue of top importance across Europe. Most often these are sensational events, crises or official meetings of the EU representatives. On the other hand, journalists are confronted with their audience, which is poorly informed and has inadequate knowledge about the EU. The aim of the article is to reassess the major challenges of European social imaginary by addressing key measures to be taken to communicate Europe effectively.

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