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Political Communication Culture with a European Touch: A View from Brussels

Santrauka. Straipsnyje, remiantis nauju požiūriu, analizuojami Europos Komisijos finansuoto 6 BP tarptautinio mokslinio projekto „Adekvati informacijos vadyba“ (Adequate Information Management: (AIM) [2004-2007]) rezultatai. Tyrimo, kurį atliko mokslininkai iš vienuolikos Europos šalių, tikslas buvo atskleisti ES politinės komunikacijos specifiką bei europinių naujienų vadybos procesus, kurie lemia ES aktualijų – informacijos atrankos, analizės, naujienų redagavimo ir paskelbimo – pateikimą Europos žiniasklaidoje. Pagrindinis šio straipsnio analizės dalykas – Briuselio politinės komunikacijos kultūra, kitaip tariant, santykis tarp įvairių šalių korespondentų Briuselyje ir politikos veikėjų (politinės informacijos šaltinių). Analizuojant kokybinių interviu su korespondentais Briuselyje duomenis ieškoma panašumų tarp skirtingų šalių komunikacinių kultūrų, žurnalistinio darbo principų. Visa tai rodo, kad politinė komunikacija Briuselyje yra unikalus ir įdomus atvejis tolesniems tyrimams. Žurnalistams sukuriama unikali sąlyga pažinti ir dirbti skirtingų žurnalistinių ir politinės komunikacijos kultūrų kontekste. O mokslininkams – tai iššūkis, skatinantis kelti klausimus, susijusius su naujomis komunikacijos formoms.

Keywords: political communication, journalism culture, European news, news management, convergence, foreign correspondent, Brussels as a news site.

Raktažodžiai: politinė komunikacija, žurnalistikos kultūra, europinės naujienos, naujienų vadyba, konvergencija, užsienio korespondentas, Briuselis, kaip naujienų šaltinis.

1. Introduction: Changes in Communication and European Politics

Democratic problems of the European Union, or to put it more precisely – lack of legitimacy and transparency of European political institutions, no real basis for public debates, weak citizen participation as well as many others – have gained a considerable amount of interest among social scientists and researchers of communication all over

Europe. As a result of intensive political and economic integration in Europe, significant changes in the spaces of political communication can be observed (Schlesinger 1999; Calhoun 2004). Broad applicability of the democratic governing model made up of different levels of political institutions (supranational, national as well as regional and local) has challenged communicative relations between national publics and state-centered systems. A new kind of transnational and trans-border

der political communication (modifying the ways in which political life is constructed) has gradually emerged in the union of 27 European countries.

Alongside the shifts in decision-making (from domestic to EU-focused), a broader public engagement in European public affairs and reorientation of priorities from purely national to predominantly transnational (European) are needed. Research studies indicate that ordinary citizens treat the European Union as a complex supranational polity which is distant from domestic political realities. Overcoming these distances and communication deficits becomes crucially important (Habermas 2001; Eriksen 2005).

Generally, 'political communication culture' is defined as the interface between the two kinds of professionals, namely, the political actors and the media. To assess this relationship adequately, different historical, economic, political, social, cultural and technological contexts of media and political system intersection must be taken into account (Pfetsch 2004).

Noticeable shifts in political communication culture, – or to put it more precisely, in the practices and routines of communication between journalists and politicians – are observed in different countries. Alongside intensive Europeanization of national political and communication spaces, overall effects of the globalization on political communication cultures remain of no less importance. Recent research indicates the process of convergence as taking place on the economic, organizational and technological realms of media and politics in Europe (Curran and Park 2000;

Pfetsch and Esser 2004; Hallin and Mancini 2004; Negrine 2007).

Related to this, new questions are emerging: How are global developments reflected in communication patterns between journalists and political news sources? What is the impact of different market-led reforms (liberalization, ongoing commercialization, management of audience relations, etc.) on political communication cultures in different countries? Or to put it more precisely, how are routine communication relationships between political actors, media and citizens affected by the processes of secularization and commercialization?

There is research available to prove that market-led reforms in the media affect the behavior of political actors, reproduction of political messages by the media (journalists working under pressure to meet deadlines, orientation towards profitable content, coping with oversupply of information, etc.) and eventually have an impact on how citizens consume the content and how they cope with vast availability of information genres, formats and channels.

New technologies, too, add certain corrections into the political communication process. With growing applicability of new interactive technologies in the political field, the political communication environment is undergoing even more changes: new media applications offer alternative ways and channels (institutional websites, online press services, blogs, online political advertising, etc.) for politicians to reach their voters without the help of mass media (see Figure 1).

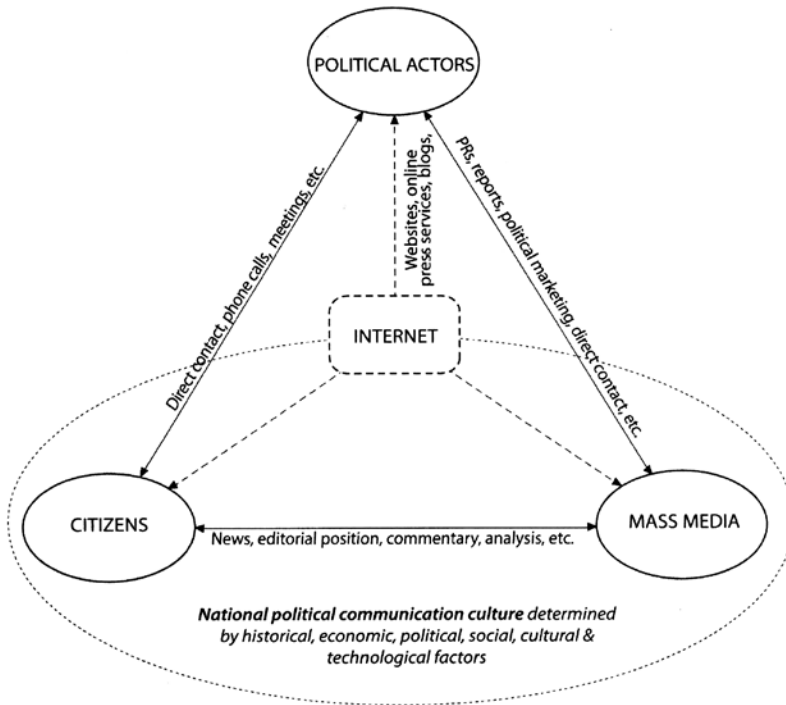


Figure 1. Actors and processes in contemporary political communication

Citizens are also better equipped (they have better competences, experiences and knowledge) to access and assess news provided on the Internet and thereby overstep the borders of the national political communication sphere by becoming global (European) communicators (Young et al., 2007). In short, the Internet has shifted the political communication to a more personalized one. As practice reveals, politicians start targeting their messages to specific groups of consumers and citizens (Dahlgren 2005). Furthermore, the most recent developments in the political landscapes in European countries manifest the new era of political communication, where successful politics becomes impossible

without careful planning, professional control and management of political information. Researchers talk about the overall professionalisation of political practices and the development towards the 'permanent campaigning' (Negrine 2007; Holz-Bacha 2004).

To conclude, changes in the nature of political communication in Europe have both structural (institutional conditions of political and media systems on macro and meso levels) and cultural dimensions. In this respect, the EU communication (in general) is an interesting research field. Due to the multi-faceness and complexity of research perspectives involved in this matter (actors involved and levels of analysis addressed such as national

and transnational as well as channels used in the EU communication), it can open new perspectives to old questions in comparative political communication research. In order to gain a better understanding of how media in Europe report and could report about the EU issues, it becomes of crucial importance to investigate the procedural aspects of the EU news making as well as the elements of political communication culture as having impact upon these.

2. Studying Procedural Aspects of EU News Manufacturing: Brussels News Environment and the AIM Project

In spite of different attempts to shed light on the European political communication practices, a more concise understanding of the EU communication nuances is lacking. Although it is possible to find comparisons in the research studies that apply a similar instrument for similar analysis of events (by studying, for example, elections, referendum campaigns) or issues (European Integration, EU Constitution, etc.), still the majority of studies are one country focused. Research studies disclose how much and what kind of EU news is found in the media (de Vreese 2003; Morgan 2003; Meyer 2005; Statham and Gray 2005; Della Porta and Caiani 2006) and how journalists cover the EU topics (Gavin 2001; Statham 2006). Some of these studies also integrate analysis of differences based on structural, economic, cultural as well as other aspects of reporting in different countries (Russ-Mohl 2001; Kevin 2003; Koopmans and Erbe 2004; Gleissner and de Vreese 2005;

Trenz 2005; Downey and Koenig 2006; Van de Steeg 2006), but a proper understanding about procedural aspects of European coverage – relationships of journalists' with their sources, journalists' knowledge about the audience they are communicating to – is missing.

As already mentioned, the culture of political communication is context bound. Research studies show that how journalists interact with their EU news sources is dependent on practicalities (learned communication practices) in the national settings (Morgan 1995; Gavin 2001; Baisnée 2000; Lecheler 2007). According to these perspectives, the highest probability for the EU news to enter the national agenda is to "domesticate" these. The national relevance (implications of the EU decisions for national politics, economics and the life of citizens) is most important and common selection criterion for journalists covering the EU. Indeed, it is possible to find news about the EU as a political entity; still, this is reported rather seldom, mostly in the times of major crisis. Public broadcasters and big elite newspapers, very often, are the only media which cover the EU issues on a more regular basis.

In this respect, the "Adequate Information Management (AIM)" project takes a different approach. Organized within a three year period from 2004 to 2007, the AIM project analyzed the European news management practices as performed by different news media organizations in eleven countries in Europe. All countries that took part in the project (Belgium, Estonia, Finland, France, Germany, Ireland, Italy, Lithuania, Norway, Romania, United Kingdom) represent differ-

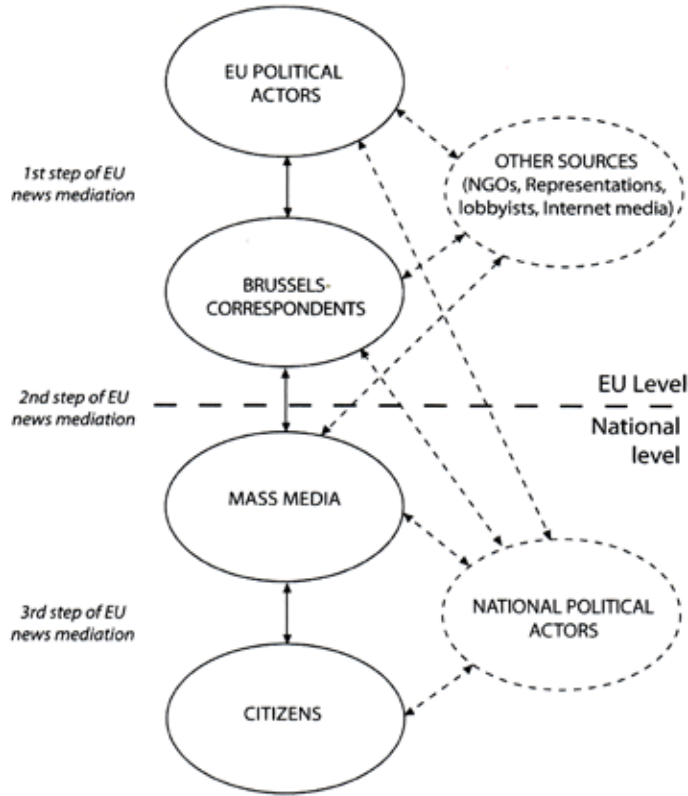


Figure 2. Three-step-flow process of EU news mediation

ent journalism cultures; they range from large to small, from old to new EU member states.

The scope of communication practices taking place in Brussels appears to be a complex one. It involves complex institutional structures, abundance of political and policy issues as well as political actors. In addition, the EU institutions are multinational as well as the Brussels’ press corps. Thus Brussels communication environment can be researched as a space where different journalism and different communication cultures meet. Therefore, the major effort in this project was di-

rected at better understanding the structural elements of the working practices of Brussels correspondents as well as their relationships with political actors and the EU institutional sources (the spokespersons of the European Commission).

Generally, European news production can be understood as a three-step-flow process, where European institutions provide information to foreign correspondents in Brussels (1st step), who in turn select and edit news and feed media at home (2nd step), which on their part inform the citizens of the European

countries (3rd step) (see Figure 2). This kind of arrangement is quite common to foreign coverage, however, as will be demonstrated in the following sections, information management and Brussels as a news site create their own specific particularities of European – as foreign news – reporting.

3. How Many Communication Cultures in Brussels?

The communication environment in Brussels is a complex one; it has a great number of events, great variety of different issues publicized, great variety of actors participating in decision-making process and countless institutions with different working procedures and routines. This creates a challenging working environment for journalists: foreign correspondents working in Brussels operate in the space between multinational EU institutions and news desks of their domestic editions, thus very often they are operating within two frameworks – international and national – at the same time (Baisnée 2007).

The news site in Brussels has become popular among social scientists and communication researchers for its unique culture (rules, norms and hierarchies of sources). For most correspondents, especially for journalists from the new member states, this communication culture differs from what journalists are used to work at home. Getting to know this political communication culture requires time, resources and professionalism. Between six months and two years is required for the newcomers to learn the nuances of communication. While working in Brussels,

journalists have to flexibly switch between different frames of reporting such as transnational and national, global and local. They must be equipped with analytical skills and be able to disclose background information on complex EU issues.

In short, Brussels communication culture is based on socialization and cooperation of journalists. Journalists meet in formal as well as informal situations; they also consider themselves as partners rather than rivals – this is mainly because they work for different national audiences. Different goals and audiences that journalists aim at, numerous opportunities where they can meet and socialize (at the daily briefings, press conferences, other social places such as cafés and restaurants) create unique spaces and possibilities for homogenization of journalism practices. Coming from different (national) political communication cultures, journalists are forced to assume common behavior, procedures and routines of addressing news sources, identifying necessary background material. Still, at the same time, they are confronted with certain hierarchies of sources as well as certain working models. For instance, the elite international media appears to be the most legitimized and professionally recognized in Brussels.

Over two hundred interviews conducted with correspondents within the AIM project have disclosed different challenges that media professionals have to meet in reporting on the EU matters (AIM Research Consortium 2007). It appears that the major problem is based not on quantity (indeed, numerous channels and information sources are avail-

lable for journalists), but rather on the quality of the information processing. As disclosed, the weakest side in the process of European information management lies in the analytical capacity involved on the second level of mediation – namely, at the level when news is selected and interpreted by Brussels correspondents (see, for e.g., Kopper et al., 2007).

Exactly at this point – the transnational political communication context of the EU institutions and national journalism culture – the major challenges occur. Indeed, political communication takes place in communication system when political messages are reproduced by the media. The goal of the media is to give publicity to political messages according to the rules and norms of the news organization, therefore a number of questions must be addressed: How are journalists from different countries handling the interaction with their sources? Which news worthiness criteria are guiding their working routines and other professional practices?

Relationships between political opinion makers and journalists are national journalism culture bound which makes transnational comparison a difficult project indeed. Although internationalization of communication practices in Brussels across different journalism cultures is observed, this process has other implications as well. To achieve their goals in political communication, both the media and political actors engage in a close relationship. A principal question in development of this relationship is whose logics dominate.

Even though Brussels news site is one of the manifestations of convergence of different

journalism cultures, divergence in journalism practices is observed nevertheless. Moreover, this is happening according to different indicators in addition to already mentioned national frameworks of reporting. There are several differences – those depending on the system of the EU and the different nature and attitude of countries (large vs. small and old vs. new EU member states), and those depending on the internal organization and structure of the national news media markets (e.g. differences in the EU reporting between popular and quality newspapers, public service broadcaster and commercial stations).

3.1. Country characteristics: small vs. large and young vs. old

As noticed from the interviews, for some countries, there is a shift from national communication culture into ‘Brussels communication culture’ which is both national and transnational at the same time. This observation especially applies to small and new member states. Although changes in Brussels press corps structure have gradually affected overall Brussels communication culture (with more accessibility and transparency of sources), still such communication culture seems to have little impact on the national news media (perhaps only in those situations when Brussels correspondents are considered to be the EU information experts, for example in small EU member states such as Lithuania or Estonia).

Two important aspects must be mentioned here as related to the Baltic journalism culture, namely, weaker journalistic

professionalism and signs of clientelism observed through very close journalists' relationships with their political or economic news sources. Partnerships between journalists and politicians (a culture of communication based on face-to-face meetings rather than on official channels), however, may be a "natural" outcome related to the question of proximity.

In a small market journalists' relationship with sources is built differently than in a large market (often in a small country only a limited number of sources are available for journalists to comment on a particular political or economic matter, thus there are more opportunities to establish cooperation). According to the Lithuanian journalists working in Brussels, the communication culture there and at home is different: at home, journalists are accustomed to speaking to primary sources, while, for instance, at the Commission, everything has to be planned far in advance. Lithuanian journalists said that, in contrast to communication at the EU level, with the Lithuanian government institutions it is easier to receive information just by telephone. Politicians, also the heads of the state and government, are easily accessible as a first source, while in the EU institutions all the work is done by press representatives (Balčytienė et al., 2007; 105-106).

According to the Lithuanian journalists, in many cases, working in Brussels is more comfortable than working at home (in Lithuania): their chief editors and media directors are far away which gives them more freedom regarding news planning and presentation. In addition, newsroom politics (po-

litical and business impacts on the media) do not influence how the correspondents work in Brussels, thus foreign correspondents feel that they can report about the 'real' news and not the local political scandals, which tend to be the number one topic in the press in Lithuania. Being rather small groups of journalists from new EU member states, Lithuanians as well as Estonians, do not have very close informal relations with the spokespersons of the Commission, nor are they in very close cooperation with other foreign colleagues. Despite the fact that informal relations can be very useful for their work, they receive information mainly via formal channels: the Internet, press releases, midday briefings and press conferences.

Finnish journalists based in Brussels also constitute a small professional group. Finnish correspondents also pointed out that correspondents from small member states have a more difficult task to develop personal relations with important sources than the journalists from influential EU countries. They strongly emphasized the importance of establishing the network of so called 'of the record' sources. According to one Finnish journalist: "The *Financial Times* is very good precisely because it gets all important information exclusively" (Heikkilä 2007, 31). Still, in spite of the effects of proximity, the Baltic political communication culture certainly contrasts with the situation in the Scandinavian countries (which are also considered small media markets), where journalistic professionalism and editorial independence are emphasized as essential elements of the democratic corporatist model of the media.

To conclude, the emergence of a formal communication (greater distance) between journalists and political sources was recognized in the practices of some journalism cultures, most often in small member states with fewer foreign correspondents. Reliance on professional journalistic norms (journalists as taking the role of neutral observers) creates greater autonomy on both sides of the relationship between the press and the politics. In other words, if journalistic norms prevail, political actors have to adapt their messages to the logic of the media, thus offering communication which is more professionalized in terms of availability of information.

3.2. Media types: print vs. audiovisual and elite vs. mainstream

The news media based in Brussels differ among themselves. There is the popular and the mainstream press (with their own news selection criteria that are very different from elite newspapers); there is broadcast media present in Brussels too. Media type that journalists work for affects the news reported. Audiovisual journalists prefer news that allows an appealing visual kit while print journalists may be more interested in stories requesting commentary articles with conflicting views. Local newspapers seem to be very little interested in what happens in Brussels while national papers have a different angle. For instance, the regional quality daily in France *Quest France* aims at creating a 'pedagogy of Europe' which requires detailing basic elements in each article. In contrast, for the daily newspaper *Les Echos*, belonging to the eco-

nomic press, the need for popularizing the EU information seems less important: "I'm lucky to work for *Les Echos*. I know that in some newspapers there is a huge work of vulgarization to make hard news from here accessible. For us, obviously we have to transpose a bit. Yet we can be very technical" (Baisnée et al., 2007; 46).

Journalists representing the Irish media (the national broadcaster *RTE* and *The Irish Times*) claim that their organizations have a specific interest in stories about the EU as a political entity. The foreign desk at *The Irish Times* gives a high value to stories about the EU as a political story in itself and gives a prominent coverage on its foreign pages. For the other newspapers, such as *Irish Independent*, the EU stories do not have any degree of privilege. "In many ways, a lot of what I do is almost like being an Irish political correspondent, covering the EU, covering the Commissioner, issues that affect Ireland across sectors, covering ministers when they are here and, increasingly, covering MEPs who have more and more power" (Corcoran and Fahy 2007; 80). News organizations with a more market-driven approach to news described the Irish interest as being the primary value in most of their EU reportage (Corcoran and Fahy 2007; 86).

In Norway, working for a popular newspaper or a television news channel with more 'tabloid' news values, one has to give priority to dramatic and personalized news events. If one is a correspondent for a business paper with an up market orientation, this will influence the kind of news that is given a priority. However, for the leading financial daily

a national framework is typical. “The desk in Oslo is most fond of EU news directly related to Norway, especially economic news with relevance for broad audience groups at home. The salmon-conflict is such an example”, journalist from this daily explained (Allern 2007; 116).

Negative coverage of the EU affairs is mostly evident in the UK media. According to one broadcast news correspondent, “the news agenda, which is formed in London is very much driven by the tabloids and papers like the *Daily Mail* and so on, which have an axe to grind” (Golding and Barnard 2007; 146). On the other hand, the *Financial Times (FT)* is a special case. Having the largest foreign desk in Brussels, they are seen as a key media outlet by European institutions and as one of the main reference media for other media. According to one *FT* journalist, “if there is a specific area, or if the Commissioner is launching something huge that they wanted to get out then, I think you’d find that they wanted to give the *FT* an interview because people are reading the *FT*. It’s a good bulletin board for them. They are going to get a reasonably fair portrayal. They know that everybody in Brussels will read it and that they know that people in national capitals will read it” (Golding and Barnard 2007; 146).

Differences in the EU reporting also arise between different kinds of media: audiovisual, radio, press agency and print media. French journalist from *Radio France* said: “We are more superficial than the printed press. Then, I cannot explain to my listeners something which I did not understand myself. While in the newspapers, I can see it eve-

ry month, there are four or five pieces where obviously they just reproduced an official statement, perhaps written in a foreign language, and they did not give them hard time to know what it meant based on the principle that the specialists would understand. I cannot allow that. A radio journalist cannot do that” (Baisnée et al., 2007; 46).

German journalists working for the news agencies emphasized that their medium requires neutrality and including no commentaries or opinionated articles. Despite this, they claimed that the EU has high relevance in their reporting, especially in economics and politics. The media who address the professional business-oriented audience (*Financial Times, Deutschland* and *Handelsblatt*) certainly considered topics affecting their audiences’ professional lives to be of the highest importance (Leppik et al., 2007; 66).

Broadcast news relies more heavily on visual aspects to communicate a story and interest their viewer than the press. “Generally speaking the big problem with the EU and television is more fundamental. It’s very difficult to illustrate because what you get in the way of pictures is men and women in suits walking into a meeting. What they call the ‘tour de table’. That is the picture of either Commissioners or politicians sitting around the table. And then a bit of chat afterwards, a statement afterwards. Which is pretty dull television”, a U.K. TV news correspondent said (Golding and Barnard 2007; 147).

Italian broadcast journalist commented: “Here [in Brussels] you never see a strong position, they never argue with clenched fists and this is not sexy at all. Moreover, TV

needs strong things, black or white; here everything is grey” (Cornia et al., 2007; 94). His colleague added: “The EU is a very difficult subject to treat on TV, so often we just ignore it. TV news must not be a report simply illustrated by images, but it has to gain its meaning from images. In Brussels, significant images are very difficult to gather” (Cornia et al., 2007; 95).

4. Discussion and Outlook

In Brussels, information management and goal oriented behavior is practiced on both sides – the media and the political news sources. On the one hand, journalists need the information that news sources can offer, while, on the other hand, political actors need the visibility to their performance that media creates. In short, there must be a mutual understanding of each other’s goals in this relationship. Political actors are controlling the process of news making, but the content of the messages and how these are framed in the media are determined and controlled by journalists. Therefore, the interactions between journalists and their sources (most often, the spokespersons) are built on negotiation, on mutual respect, trust and understanding.

The AIM study has disclosed that in the EU communication different communicative strategies and different channels (meetings, press conferences, face-to-face communication, Internet) are applied in political issue management. For journalists, the establishment and further development of interpersonal relationships becomes crucially important: informal channels, confidential sources and background talks have become of sig-

nificant importance in framing of political messages. As a result of this interaction, a completely new culture of European communication emerges which combines both perspectives, namely, the political and the media logics. To achieve this level of understanding, both parties (journalists and their sources) must invest in cultivation of interpersonal relations and networks. For some countries this becomes a very difficult task though (because of some objective reasons such as a small number of correspondents, lack of media resources, etc).

As already mentioned, the character of the EU coverage in the national media is largely dependent on local politico-economic preconditions: it is context-based. In some countries, the media critically reports on politics and plays a watchdog role (the media in the UK and Ireland). Still, in other political communication cultures, the relationship between journalists and their sources is constructed on mutual understanding and respect to each other’s goals (the Nordic countries). In young democracies, the media is characterized as practicing a consumerist approach towards their audiences at the same time favoring hidden agendas and clientelist relationships with politicians.

In spite of the divergences in the performance across national media, an internationalization of communication culture is observed in Brussels. This new culture (based on common patterns of reporting, partnerships between different journalists covering politics) is both national and transnational at the same time. There are contradictions observed between journalists’ national belonging, on

the one side, and the supranational topics they are asked to cover and the transnational environment within which they operate, on the other.

The transnational character of communication is inspired by different things. Generally, relationships between journalists and their sources in Brussels appear to be built on professionalism. First, greater source accessibility, availability of different actors to comment on political issues as well as other factors lead to autonomy in both political and journalistic fields. One more characteristic emerging in European journalistic routines is the tendency to build the news around facts, documents and data. Thus a general tendency observed across all journalism cultures is the predominance of the official dimension within the working routines (apparent in communication with sources as well as in the essential role of documents delivered from the EU institutions). This highlights internationalization of communication practices that become less dependent on the national contexts.

To conclude, the institutionalization of relationships, acceptance of more media-oriented-way of communication logic, emergence of new technological tools to bypass official information as well as many other factors signal to ongoing professionalisation of political communication when political

sources adapt to a different way of information communication.

This tendency is affected by at least three kinds of developments. First, the arrival of more countries with different journalism cultures has changed how communication in Brussels is organized. Second, the number of professional communicators (spokespersons with professional backgrounds in journalism or communication) has increased alongside other reforms related to communication policy development. Third, an obvious tendency is observed across national cultures worldwide such as increasing media commercialization with a greater emphasis on visual communication and personification of issues.

Results of the AIM study confirm converging communication strategies in the EU news production and presentation in mass media in Europe to a certain extent. Even though the respective national audiences demand news that is focused and is relevant (thus fitting the respective national political agenda), all news formats similarly show tendencies towards more popularized, more human-interest focused and more sensational reporting. Briefly, market-led reforms in the media have culminated with more or less similar results worldwide: infotainment and marketization of politics. This shift is apparent in political communication matters in Brussels.

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ABSTRACT

This article looks into research findings of the “Adequate Information Management (AIM)” project¹ in the new light. A principal issue investigated here concerns the political communication culture, or to put it more precisely, the interface between the Brussels correspondents and their political news sources. While focusing on differences that can be detected in the processes of the EU news gathering in Brussels, the article highlights commonalities in reporting as appearing across national communication cultures. Indeed, the communications’ context in Brussels is an interesting research case: for journalists, it creates unique conditions for different journalism and political communication cultures to meet; for scholars, it requires to address new questions in European communication research.

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¹ Eleven countries took part in the 6th FP project AIM in the period of 2004-2007. Its aim was to disclose specific news production processes (EU information selection, analysis, editing, presentation) resulting in the EU coverage in mass media. Information about the project is available online at <http://www.aim-project.net> (accessed in March 2008).