

Introduction

Auksė Balčytienė, Tanja Leppik, Julia Lönnendonker

The final report of the *Adequate Information Management in Europe* (AIM) project focuses on the main findings of research conducted over a three year period from 2004 to 2007 on European news management practices as applied by different news media organisations across Europe.

Mainstream journalism in general and specific news production processes (EU information selection, analysis, editing, presentation) resulting in EU coverage in mass media in particular were at the centre of our attention. The project also had the goal of assessing the particularities of these processes of news management by identifying major drawbacks as well as the impact of the media in terms of the emergence of one or several European public spheres (EPS). In other words, major efforts of this project were directed at better understanding the structural elements of communicating within Europe based on the routines, channels, and methods applied by traditional mass media (including working practices of Brussels correspondents) but also to some extent by political actors and EU institutional sources.

In this project, 'European news management' is understood as a three-step-flow process (see Figure 1), where European institutions provide information to foreign correspondents in Brussels (1st step), who in turn select and edit the news and feed media at home (2nd step), which on their part inform the citizens of the EU countries (3rd step). This kind of arrangement is quite typical of foreign coverage, however, as will be demonstrated in the chapters following this introduction, Brussels as a news site creates its own specific particularities of European – as foreign news – reporting.

The AIM project research design comprises *four levels of analysis*. First, theoretical concepts and definitions related to the idea of journalistic news management were clarified in the state-of-the-art reports of the participating countries. At the following stages of the AIM project, to comprehend the complexity as well as possible drawbacks of the process of European news management, a news agenda analysis (NAA) of selected European mass media at the local/regional and national level and two field studies (in national newsrooms and in Brussels) were conducted by teams of researchers from eleven European countries (see Figure 1).

Scholarly discussions in the chapters included in this final report shed light on the most important findings from empirical studies revealing the main problems within the EU news production machinery both at the national as well as at the transnational level (Brussels). They answer the question of whether there is potential for one or several European public spheres to emerge and offer some insights into how to improve the development of European journalism in general and the process of EU news management in particular.

The eleven countries – Belgium, Estonia, Finland, France, Germany, Ireland, Italy, Lithuania, Norway, Romania, and the United Kingdom – that took part in the AIM project represent different journalism cultures, ranging from large to small, old to new EU member states.

It is very important to stress that our research aimed especially at analysing and identifying journalistic news management mechanisms and did not have the goal of studying any other forms of strategic EU communication and information management, such as planned and coordinated communication as performed by large international PR companies. Neither was it our objective to study the influence of lobby groups or European audiences.

As a next step following theoretical deliberations, the news output of mainstream media – the national news agendas – was assessed to comprehend the complexity of European news items as reported by the media in the eleven countries via a content analysis over a three-week period in March 2005. A common comparative methodology was applied and adapted to each national context ensuring the comparability of the results obtained across national news agendas. At later stages of the project, around three hundred interviews were conducted with journalists

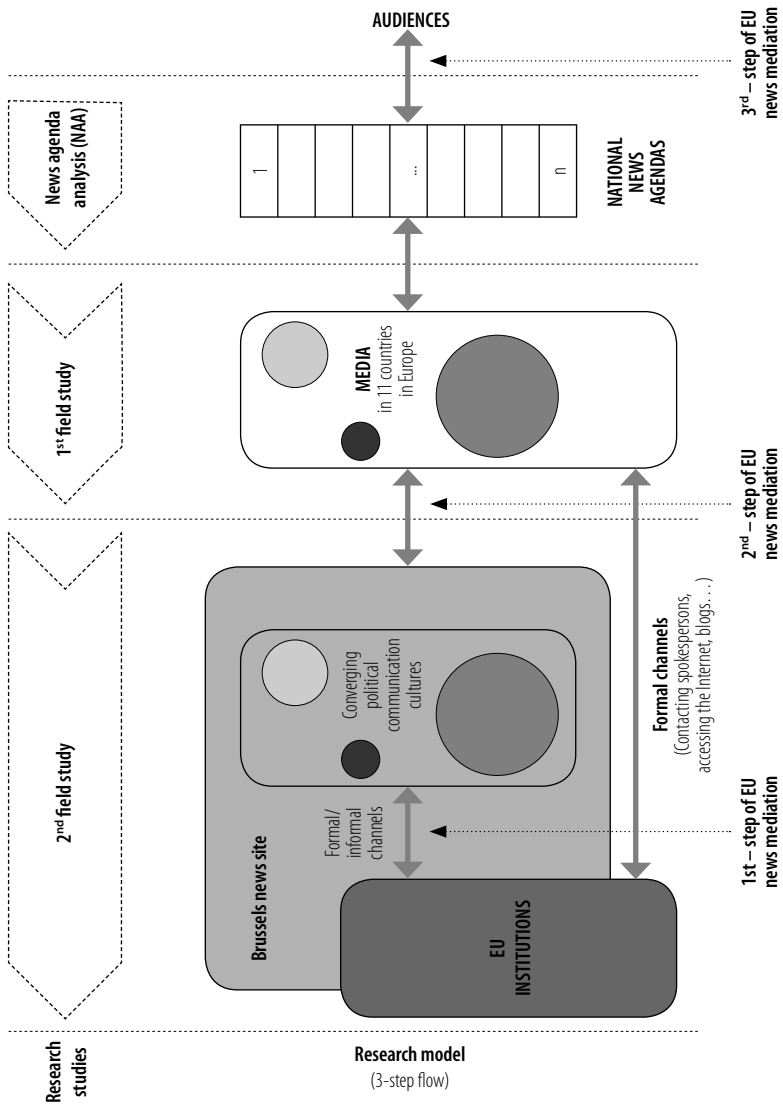


Figure 1. AIM project research design (three kinds of research studies on practical EU news management – NAA, 1st and 2nd field study – as well as three levels of European news mediation are shown in the diagram). The first field study covers interviews with journalists in the home newsroom while the second field study comprises interviews with Brussels correspondents and EU Commission spokespersons.

working in national newsrooms, and with correspondents and spokespersons working in Brussels in order to try to understand what kind of EU news sources journalists use when reporting on European matters, how relationships between journalists and political sources are handled, and who makes the decisions regarding which EU issues to prioritise in European reporting. The project has focussed its interest on the communication of the EU Commission as the focal point of information for journalists.

It is important to notice that the project had a practical and at the same time a tangible goal. As journalism, communications, social and political sciences scholars, we were particularly interested in the *qualitative aspects of news management* as related to effects on journalism. We also hoped to advance studies of comparative media research and analysis which nowadays are gaining increasingly more importance, but also become a complex methodological task (because of the diversity within journalism cultures studied). As said before, we concentrated on *media performance* (its logic and news production machinery) and were particularly interested in understanding the role of the media in the emergence of one or several European public spheres. Thus, the results reported in this final report are mainly academic reflections based on state-of-the-art discussions in different disciplines and on our empirical data; they are, however, no practical policy advice.

To some extent, results of our study confirm *converging* strategies in EU news production and presentation in mass media in Europe. Even though the respective national audiences demand news items that are focused and relevant (thus fitting the respective national political agenda), all news formats similarly show tendencies towards more popularised, more human-interest focused, and more sensational reporting. This may have serious implications for the emergence of one or several European public spheres. In addition, besides many similarities in routines of news production and similarities in news presentation formats, the project also identified many serious drawbacks in the mechanisms of EU news management (as will be discussed in Chapters 1 and 4). The project found out that structural problems exist in the second step of the EU news flow, namely, when EU news is collected and interpreted in Brussels. As will be demonstrated, it is not the sheer amount (the quantity) of EU information produced at the supranational level that creates problems for the media. Rather, it is the quality of the news management process that creates the biggest problem and prevents journalists from accomplishing their professional

role. Indeed, serious obstacles exist at the Brussels level, thus the concept of *adequacy* in news management would imply understanding the goal-oriented behaviour in the tripartite relationships between different partners in EU communication such as the EU institutions, the media, and national audiences (see Figure 2).

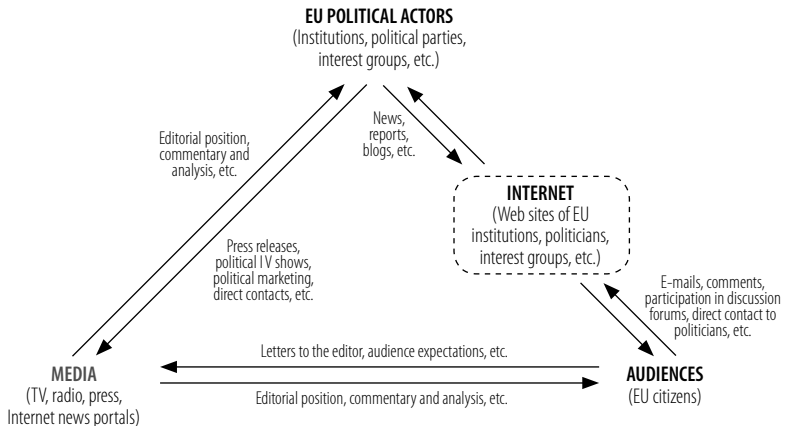


Figure 2. Different partners in EU communication and means of influencing their behaviour (adapted from Balčytienė & Vincūnienė 2006b).

In this report, all the major research issues, such as EU news management processes, national journalism cultures determining these processes (what and how European news gets onto the national agenda), and the impact of the media on a European public sphere or spheres are reviewed from several interrelated perspectives (news management logic at home and in Brussels, major drawbacks of this process, journalism traditions, political communication cultures, and issues that refer to applications within the area of practical journalism, such as possible guidelines for the reporting of Europe, methodologies in journalism training, and mediating factors in the Internet sector, etc.).

All chapters of this final report are written as autonomous scholarly articles or review essays, each focusing on particular aspects of European reporting (such as routines and mechanisms as performed by conventional journalism, contextual implications on what is reported, national journalism cultures or the impact of the media on the EPS) and the role of journalism. Each article simultaneously considers several highly interrelated topics, for instance, differences in professional journalism practices in

Europe and the impact of mainstream journalism on the emergence of one or several European public spheres. The central idea of this arrangement is that the re-viewing of similar material (e.g., characteristics of Brussels as a news site and its effect on journalistic routines) at different times and in rearranged contexts (e.g., from the perspective of changes within journalism culture in Brussels), for different purposes and from different conceptual perspectives is essential for attaining a complex understanding of the numerous factors coming into play in one situation (EU news management in Europe concerning EU decision-making). Such approach may create the impression of crisscrossing different issues from different points of view. The major argument for such an arrangement is that the complexity of one issue would not be fully understood in one context and if assessed from one angle only. Rather, considering different points of view is important to explore the complexity of the EU news-making machinery.

To summarise the results of the AIM project, we will elaborate on the following theses:

European reporting – as foreign reporting – occurs according to the logic of a three-step flow of information (Chapters 1, 2 and 3)

In national media studies, the principle of a two-step flow is usually applied indicating that people make up their minds about the importance and meaningfulness of public messages delivered through mass media by using opinion leaders. As described above, European issues communication can be interpreted as a news flow over three steps (see Figure 1) or as concentric circles with the one in the centre representing the EU institutions and news planning and management as happening there, the second step/circle involves news selection and interpretation by Brussels correspondents and information mediation between Brussels correspondents and the national newsrooms in different countries, and the third step or circle deals with EU news reporting and mediation to national audiences.

This three-step flow is very common in foreign news coverage, where the foreign correspondent can be seen as a 'field manager' of the medium he works for (Gysin 2000: 75). Other publications on foreign coverage see foreign editors as key figures, or to put it more precisely – as the main gatekeepers of foreign news reporting (Marten 1989: 84, Lönnendonker, Nitz & Stamm 2006: 25). Similar to general foreign reporting, EU coverage constitutes a hybrid arrangement where foreign correspondents

have to simultaneously work in national and transnational frameworks, generating their own news reporting routines: cooperation between EU correspondents and national newsrooms also has a different character in this setting.

The three-step-flow process of EU news-generation creates specific problems for each actor in this relationship, namely, the EU institutions, the media, and audiences. Originally generated at the institutional level, EU news items reach far beyond their place of origin in Brussels, passing through the press corps to be digested by national audiences through national media. As reported elsewhere, although the EU institutions are at the heart of the EU news management process, they might not know precisely if, how and which information are spread by the media (AIM Research Consortium 2007).

Brussels is a unique news site challenging domestic and foreign coverage cultures (Chapters 1 and 4)

As Chapter 1 will elaborate, the interviewed Brussels correspondents experience Brussels as offering unique working conditions. The particular news production logic is described as offering journalists a wide array of sources, making available different channels to receive information. For journalists, Brussels is both an easy and a complex working environment. It is easy because many documents, comments, facts, data, and channels of information are available there. It is complex because of tiny details and nuances of information management – certain norms, rules, structures, and hierarchies of news sources (i.e., the privileged international media). All journalists working in Brussels have diversified interests as well as expectations depending on the country they come from and the media they work for. These different political communication traditions with regard to current EU affairs are one of the main difficulties that both Brussels correspondents and EU Commission spokespersons have to deal with (see Chapter 4). It seems that the special drawback of Brussels as a news site is not the availability of information through official as well as confidential sources and channels, but often the comprehension, analysis, and domestication of the material gathered.

There are several specific problem areas in EU news management processes (Chapter 3)

Our study identified a number of problematic areas in the mechanisms of EU news management. These derive from information overload, its complexity, lack of transparency, as well as other issues. As Chapter 3 will show, this can sometimes result in

an insurmountable loss of overview and a lack of clear priorities in the general news flows that Brussels correspondents have to deal with. Thus, a central problem area is that of finding, selecting and interpreting news. Confronted with the challenge to identify news, journalists in Brussels also have a high degree of autonomy in deciding what to select and what to offer to national newsrooms (like other foreign correspondents, they are considered professional experts in EU news production processes), which again creates stress (see Chapter 1).

From the point of view of journalists, the major drawback, however, is that the general role of being a watchdog of politics and political institutions is institutionally hampered within the European context. It seems that a central problem of European information is linked to the extent and willingness of the EU institutions to accept political controversies as a matter of course and, therefore, a matter of public discourse. The contribution of journalism to enhancing transparency and openness could be remarkably increased if journalists were to gain access to more profound insights into the very mechanisms and procedures of decision-making, i.e., background information.

According to the findings of our study, there seem to exist two realities (even worlds) in Brussels that have difficulties to come together, presumably because of clashes between the goals of journalists and those of their sources (see Figure 2). As one can see, this comes from objective arrangements and the logic of how EU institutions work. For example, the EU Commission does not assume the role of a clear strategic player, instead it prefers to be seen as neutral (following its one-voice policy), abstain from polemics, and avoid national views and debates. Journalists, in contrast, are looking for conflicting views and details of political decision-making processes. Journalists favour unsolicited and unhampered access to all available material and want to rely on their own interpretations.

There is, however, no simple solution to the problem of misunderstanding, complexity, and differences in goal-oriented behaviour in this situation. The bureaucratic language which is difficult to understand is a logical outcome of the consensus-finding processes at the political level of the EU. As the study found out, for example, the spokespersons of the EU Commission often have to use complicated and technical phrases in order to identify, disclose and report accurate technical details, facts, and issues showing the level of agreement arrived at in the decision-making process. In

communication with the media, finding a balance between using correct terminology, on the one hand, and trying to express and explain things in a simple way, on the other hand, often becomes a challenging task for the spokespersons. In general, many reasons come into play here: the structural organisation of the EU Commission and the policy of speaking with one voice, long decision-making processes and a lack of transparency, as well as limited human resources for communication with the media.

Our study gives evidence of an enormous and expanding set of strategies as well as channels used for modern political issue management and EU coverage in Brussels from both perspectives – that of the media and that of EU sources (Chapters 1 and 4)

The communication environment in Brussels is a complex setting with a large number of events and issues, as well as a great variety of actors and institutions participating in the decision-making processes. As indicated above, this creates a challenging working environment for journalists. In order to grasp the full spectrum and different shades of political communication culture and issue management in Brussels and gather adequate information, journalists have to establish close partnerships with numerous sources (fellow journalists, EU institutional sources, NGOs, lobbyists, national representations). In this complex process of multiple information exchange, both political sources and journalists influence the media's output to a certain extent. Indeed, in this study news management practices are examined from two angles – the journalists' perspective and that of their sources. Journalists need background information that news sources can offer. That's why they forge close partnerships and acquire information in off-the-record and confidential situations. At the same time, EU political and economic sources need the visibility of their performance that the media create at the national level.

Our study proves that the nature of national EU coverage is largely dependent on local politico-economic preconditions for particular journalism cultures. In some national contexts, the relationship between politicians and journalists covering politics is based on close partnerships and cooperation rather than rivalry, while elsewhere the media critically report on politics and play a watchdog role. In other political communication cultures, this relationship is constructed on mutual understanding and respect of each other's (politics' and the media's) goals whereas in new democracies the media are characterised by practicing a consumerist approach towards their audiences while at the same time favouring the hidden agendas of politicians.

In spite of different frameworks observed in political communication practices in Brussels, in general, the journalist-source relationship appears to be built on professionalism. The notion of a professionalism-based journalist-source relationship can be supported by several tendencies prevalent in Brussels: greater source accessibility and the availability of different actors to comment on political issues lead to autonomy in both the political and the journalistic field. The same applies to the tendency to build the news around facts, documents, and data. From the Brussels perspective, at least two additional important issues have to be mentioned: the arrival of new countries with different journalism cultures (especially the Nordic countries with a journalistic culture which puts strong emphasis on respect, social responsibility, and media accountability) has affected how communication is organised. Additionally, there is an increase in the number of spokespersons with a professional background in journalism or communications which positively affects both written and oral communication with journalists.

Diverging and converging practices in the development of European journalism in Brussels (Chapters 1 and 4)

Even though Brussels correspondents have common interests, use common sources, and even apply common practices, they remain national journalists working for domestic media organisations operating under different political, economic and cultural conditions. Therefore, each Brussels correspondent can be treated as a projection of a national reality in a foreign territory. Since their national political, economic and cultural contexts differ significantly from one another, foreign correspondents working in Brussels, while covering common current affairs and often using the same sources, have to deal with different expectations from their home editorial offices. This is a strong indicator of *divergence* among journalistic working procedures in trying to domesticate EU news to fit national political agendas. Solving the conflicts between what is happening 'here' (in Brussels) and what is expected 'there' (in their home country) is a central aspect of the job of EU correspondents and, thus, of EU news production logic.

As Chapters 1 and 4 will illustrate, the transnational context of Brussels creates numerous opportunities for different journalism cultures to merge and homogenise. These practices actually play a role. While working in Brussels, journalists from all over Europe have numerous opportunities to *socialise* (journalists meet in formal as well as in informal situations) and also to *cooperate* (journalists consider themselves

as partners rather than rivals which is mainly due to the fact that they work for different audiences). This creates chances for a *homogenisation* of journalism practices. Coming from different political communication cultures, journalists are forced to adopt common behaviours, procedures, and routines of addressing news sources and identifying necessary background material. However, at the same time, they experience certain hierarchies of sources, namely, the elite international media being the most legitimised and professionally recognised in Brussels disseminating their professional model all around forcing other journalists to acknowledge their practices and superiority.

Although the Brussels news site is one of the manifestations of *convergence* of different journalism cultures, *divergence* in journalism practices is observed, too. Moreover, it occurs as evidenced by different indicators, in addition to the already mentioned national frameworks of reporting. There are a number of differences in terms of the system of the EU and the different characteristics and attitudes of its member countries (large vs. small and old vs. new EU member states), as well as in terms of the internal organisation and structure of national news media markets (e.g., differences in EU reporting between popular and quality newspapers, public service broadcasting and commercial stations). Within the project there has been a strong focus on the interrelation of news management defined by the direct links between editorial home offices and news operations in Brussels. Additional smaller studies concentrating on questions of practical journalism (training, Internet mediation, priority routines of reporting European issues) have focused on perspectives on general journalism, largely defined by news agency material, its selection and handling outside the direct information processes inspired by action in Brussels (see Chapter 6: 'Reviewing how Europe is Reported: Implications for Training, Online Communicating and Defining Rules of European Journalism'). Tests and samples conducted as part of these studies have shown an enormous lack of knowledge and skills concerning European affairs among journalists outside the news machinery determined by operators in Brussels. In view of the scale of these problems, the research results remind us of the necessity of innovative approaches within the journalism communities and the media industry in Europe.

In spite of the divergences observed in Brussels, a certain *internationalisation of communication culture* has been detected. This culture is both national and transnational at the same time. As will be demonstrated, contradictions arise between journalists'

national sense of belonging, on the one hand, and the supranational topics they are asked to cover and the transnational environment within which they operate, on the other. Because of these mismatching requirements, news gathering in Brussels appears to be a difficult and complicated process rife with *new* (addressing structural changes in the national media such as commercialisation, image-oriented politics) and *old* (performing the role of a watchdog over politics) problems of professional journalism.

Mainstream journalism has an important, but at the same time a quite limited role to play in the construction of one or several European public spheres (Chapters 2, 4, 5 and 6)

One of many findings of our study is that a 'European agenda', in the sense of one to three top priority news items reported within all member states of the European Union on a daily basis, does not exist. Exceptions are rare. Only in case of extraordinary events does European news get into the media across Europe. As the authors of Chapters 2 and 4 point out, it appears that the EU becomes interesting for the assumed audiences only under particular conditions when the so-called 'EU newsworthiness criteria' are met, namely, when emerging news fits general stereotypes of doubtful attitudes vis-à-vis the EU as a democratic system, when regular meetings (such as summits) take place, or when critical moments (such as a war, terrorist attacks, bird flu, etc.) occur. At present, the existing European agenda is an interlinked system of national news agendas with some rather accidental overlapping 'here' and 'there'.

However, comprehensive EU reporting does not help people to pinpoint, for example, actors, places or other particular moments important to the public in order to discover the so-called 'real Europe' that would enhance the emergence of one or several European public spheres (from the EU Commission's perspective). This implies that the European public sphere must mean much more than a quantitative increase in EU political or economic issues in the news media. To be recognised as being truly European, journalism must also include qualitative elements such as the richness of themes, interesting stories, and analytical reporting as well as images that are not directly related to facts coming from the political or administrative agendas of the EU.

With regard to the particularities of national arrangements, the authors also identify three types of media discourses (see Chapter 2), namely a classical professional,

a secular, and a cosmopolitan discourse. They also see potential for a fourth discourse that would involve media aiming at covering the EU from a transnational perspective, thus addressing questions of the legitimacy of the EU institutions and EU policies without reducing them to the national context. This fourth path referred to as the 'cosmopopular' perspective was only thinly represented in our research in national newsrooms. The idea of bottom-up deliberations cutting across national identities and connecting them to transnational elite deliberations seems to be a far-fetched option for journalists.

Chapter 2 will also illustrate that in the policy documents of the European Commission, opportunities for bringing people closer to the EU are widely debated; in this context, strong emphasis is put on better information and transparency, which could create a sense of mutual belonging. This, however, demonstrates a misunderstanding of how communication and identities seem to have worked and will work in the future. A sense of belonging is certainly more closely related to the *cultural and ritual side of communication*, that is, critical analysis and scrutiny, rather than to information transmission, which can currently be observed at the EU institutional level. It seems that the notion of the 'public sphere' becomes part of a legitimating strategy of a particular political structure, turning it into a kind of PR-concept. In this sense, the EU has 'instrumentalised' the notion of the European public sphere.

In a similar way, Chapter 5 stresses that emphasis needs to be put on the concept of a *European social imaginary*, which could be seen in the trend of a gradual 'Europeanisation' of national public spheres where European issues and actors are increasingly approached and evaluated from a *common European* perspective rather than from a national one. According to this view, the emergence of a European public sphere is seemingly dependent on the development of a shared sense of 'European-ness' and recognition of common interests in a transnational and European context. This would provide a framework for a public debate connecting different national publics.

From what has been discussed so far, it emerges that European journalism is mainly represented by Brussels correspondents serving primarily national publics. In this sense, the 'Europeanisation' of journalism does not mean giving up the national framing of the news because the audiences of foreign correspondents are still nationally located and rooted (see Chapter 6). Due to the existence of certain norms, practices,

and rules, the professional routines of the Brussels press corps have somehow been transnationalised, homogenised, and have converged. A further question discussed in this chapter is how such a *transnationalisation of journalist practices* comes to affect the coverage of European affairs in national media. Journalists do not recognise the existence of a common form of European journalism – correspondents from all countries participating in the AIM project unanimously stressed that newsworthiness and relevance of an EU issue depend mostly on the presence of similar issues in the national political debate. For journalists, audiences continue to be seen as nationally located and rooted. Consequently, European journalism can also be understood in negative terms – as a homogenised journalism culture emerging as a consequence of the closeness of the media to EU politics and its particular involvement with EU issues.

These first reflections on the AIM project findings are still open to interpretation and meant as an invitation to other research teams in Europe working in the same field of study to present their questions, stir up constructive debate, and provide insights from other perspectives and disciplines.

The AIM project understands its *modus operandi* as an open platform within this particular arena of European research. The feedback that this type of report will generate is not only envisaged to come from scholarly sectors, but also from journalists themselves, from politicians and from communicators with different backgrounds in the field of European politics.