

4: Context, News Values and Relationships with Sources – Three Factors Determining Professional Practices of Media Reporting on European Matters

Paolo Mancini, Sigurd Allern, Olivier Baisnée, Auksė Balčytienė, Oliver Hahn, Mirela Lazar, Mart Raudsaar

1. Introduction

The aim of this chapter is to examine different journalism and political communication cultures from the point of view of European reporting, and to discuss their implications for political communication at the EU level. While this chapter focuses on commonalities as well as differences that can be detected in different journalism cultures, it also highlights aspects that pertain to particularities of political EU reporting across Europe. A principal question asked in this paper is how journalists interact with EU institutions, and what their relationship with the political actors as sources of information for European news coverage is. In this respect, the Brussels communication environment is an interesting research case as it creates unique conditions for different journalistic and political communication cultures to meet. Thus, this analysis explores Brussels' political communication context, indicates its particularities and the challenges foreign correspondents have to face and adjust to, and seeks to shed light on emerging practices of professionalised political communication at the EU level.

Before delving into the analysis of political communication practices as observed in Brussels, this chapter draws particular attention to the Brussels news site. Namely, it assesses the effects that the Brussels news environment has on different journalism cultures and vice versa – how the latter influence the communication culture in Brussels. It also pays attention to the news values and newsworthiness criteria that come into play when creating a European agenda in national newsrooms (Section 3). Subse-

quently, it looks into the particularities of national settings (as politico-economic pre-conditions) effecting the relationship between journalists and their political sources (Section 4).

2. Brussels' journalistic microcosm

Brussels offers both a *complex and comfortable* working environment for journalists. There is an abundance of official information that reaches journalists through numerous sources. In addition, different communication channels are available which do not require correspondents to be physically present at different political events (e.g., the Midday Briefings organised by the EU Commission), because they can follow these on the Internet-TV from their offices. Also, the EU institutions' staff – the spokespersons of the EU Commission – is described by foreign correspondents as having specific competences.

2.1. The Brussels news site – A friendly working environment

The rhythm of an EU correspondent's life in Brussels is governed by visits to unchanging places and events in which correspondents experience a real feeling of community. The Brussels press corps is often described using very expressive images and metaphors, all recalling its collective dimension: British journalists describe it as 'clubby', resembling the kind of situation one could find in a UK public school (Golding & Barnard 2007); Germans see it as a "family" (Leppik et al. 2007: 58); for Spanish journalists, "Brussels is like an Erasmus trip or a Big Brother while working" (Del Río 2007: 134); and for Italians it is like a 'holiday village' – all journalists are away from home in a city that is not really Brussels but the capital of Europe since Brussels journalists live rather cut off from the Belgian population of the city. In this respect and in many others, Brussels differs from other capitals:

Brussels is like a holiday village. Here all the correspondents are away from home, they live in a small environment, in a small town, which is not very interesting as a town in itself. So, those who live around the European Institutions live in a microcosm that is completely separated from the rest of the town, something that doesn't happen in Moscow or Paris. (Cornia et al. 2007: 90)

Put in a nutshell, if these journalists appear like “lone wolves” (Allern 2007: 113), they tend to behave like a sheep herd, acting and moving in a very collective way. One must indeed never forget that these journalists are expatriates and often alone to cover EU current affairs entirely. Journalism being a collective task, the Brussels press corps offers an alternative to the lack of professional relationships. All journalists (with some exceptions) have their offices in the same area, the one surrounding the European quarter of Brussels, which gives the institutional quarter (delimited by the buildings of the EU Parliament, the EU Council, and the EU Commission) the appearance of a newsroom. This urban area that might appear like a single institution overlaps with the journalists’ working area. This is even more so since most lobbies have settled within these few square kilometres.

This journalistic urban concentration is reinforced by the fact that some journalists share offices with their colleagues. One building (the *Résidence Palace*) even accommodates hundreds of them, which enables them to meet, and seems to stimulate socialisation and exchange¹. More generally, journalists coming from the same country will regularly have meals or drinks together. This physical proximity is not anecdotic since it seems that it has practical consequences. A Finnish correspondent even said that his physical proximity to colleagues coming from other Nordic countries was the main reason for their cooperation and not the cultural and geographical proximity of their home countries (Heikkilä 2007).

This ‘newsroom’ even has its meeting room in a way. Since most correspondents will join the Midday Briefing and use this time and place to talk (mainly on a national basis) to colleagues. Since there is no ‘Press Club’ in Brussels, this ‘rendez-vous’ (as it is called by the EU Commission) represents a practical alternative for correspondents. This moment (which has other functions, too) is an occasion for journalists to exchange views on what has just been said, to reach an informal agreement on what the stories of interest of the day are, and even to share information. As a German correspondent said, “The actual briefing takes place after the briefing” (Leppik et al. 2007: 59). Many correspondents emphasised that the information provided was not of great use. Yet the Midday Briefing remains the beating heart of EU news since the EU Commission is the only institution to provide a daily press conference, the brief-

¹ The office of a French journalist working for a private radio station, for instance, is situated near the office of *La Repubblica* or *La Vanguardia* and other European media, which encourages the exchange of information.

ing gives journalists the impression that, by attending it, they get a common and minimal basis for their further work:

A lot of people go there to see their friends [...]. It's useful to gather everyone in one place because you pick up the mood. They produce press briefings so you can see what everyone wrote the day before or that morning. But often the actual content is not the primary purpose of being there. (Golding & Barnard 2007: 144)

Indeed, one of the specifics of Brussels is to offer a rather *friendly* environment. The level of competition among journalists appears much lower at the transnational (Brussels) than at the national level. To use Tunstall's (1971) famous description of journalists as 'competitor-colleagues', it seems that in Brussels the colleague side takes over the competitor's one. As an Italian journalist said, the Brussels environment differs from the one in Rome where:

[...] there are eighty journalists working on the same thing, here there are eighty things for the same journalist. It is impossible to cover everything and that is why collaboration becomes necessary. If I were not in time for a Minister's briefing, I could ask any colleague about the Minister's statements and I am sure that my colleague would answer me. (Cornia et al. 2007: 90)

The loneliness of these journalists facing an intense political activity makes the risk of a *ratage* (France), of *prendere un buco* (Italy) (i.e., missing an information which will appear in most of the other papers) higher. The enormous amount of information they have to deal with results in a situation where cooperation is, most of the time, preferred to competition. However, this mutual system of help is simply a practical arrangement in view of the situation journalists are facing (the enormous amount of information available, its complexity). According to some Finnish journalists:

[...] there is some sort of feeling of togetherness among this group [Finnish correspondents]. Of course, it helps your work. It's useful that you can check details with each other, but it doesn't go further than that. [...] It [journalistic work] is the same here as at home. Everyone still has to write their piece autonomously. (Heikkilä 2007: 25)

Yet, as it appears from the depiction of the Norwegian situation, cooperation might be easier when journalists work for the same type of media but come from different countries and markets. The Spanish example is interesting in this regard as competi-

tion seems more intense among printed media. However, this kind of competition is not linked to the national market but to the Brussels' one² (all these newspapers being printed and available in Brussels). The Romanian situation offers another counterpoint to this cooperative view. Maybe due to the fact that the EU was at the top of the national agenda when the country was about to become an EU member, competition appeared rather fierce within this national group of correspondents, "Everybody tries to be the first to send the information to his/her newsroom and, if possible, to be the only one who has that information. The competition is too tough for me to say that we are working close and cooperating well" (Ionescu & Lazar 2007: 123).

In the end, the high degree of cooperation among correspondents from the same country relates to the low priority given to EU news in most national journalistic fields. In such a situation, most exclusives or scoops³ that correspondents publish will not be considered and noticed as such at home. As the Romanian counter example clearly shows, when the EU is at the top of the agenda, competition increases.

In a more general way, the Brussels news place offers quite an exceptional situation for journalists since it virtually creates a 'newsroom' which accommodates viewpoints from all member states and even the entire world. According to some correspondents (Finns, Germans), this facilitates a much broader understanding of the issues at hand, as a Finnish journalist stated:

It is true that we socialise with our peers and people who have some connection to the EU. We don't spend time with uneducated immigrants, that's right! [laughs]. But I don't think that my circle of friends was any more diverse back home. In any case, international colleagues are really important for me. [...] I find it a disturbing idea that we would only care for what is at stake for Finland. I'm always interested in where other member states stand [on a given issue] and colleagues are really helpful in providing that. (Heikkilä 2007: 25)

Colleagues from other countries thus appear as sources of information on national situations and problems that one might not be aware of. Some correspondents or groups of correspondents from other countries might even appear as 'authorities' on the EU. Coming from old member states they represent, for newcomers (both states

² Spanish newspapers are well-known among correspondents and officials for offering efficient coverage of the EU. As such they are rather widely read in Brussels.

³ Most correspondents acknowledge that there are many in Brussels.

and journalists), the experts who know what it is all about (for example, the Lithuanian correspondents referred to the French and British journalists as such experts).

This specific situation, which EU correspondents tend to enjoy, might be one of the reasons for the fears some newsrooms mentioned that the former might 'go native' and lose their audience out of sight. Their direct and constant contact with the EU at work, plus their daily interactions with other national viewpoints produce a perspective that might diverge from those their superiors have 'at home'.

2.2. Familiarising oneself with rules, norms, and hierarchies of the press corps: Understanding an internal organisation structure

In spite of many opportunities for journalism cultures to meet and merge, the first principle that rules the correspondents' networks and groupings in Brussels is their *nationality*. Irish journalists, while not naming the countries involved, underlined that some national groups of journalists tend to organise themselves into 'cliques'. Romanian correspondents agreed and gave the example of the press room of the EU Commission:

Here is a kind of geography of the pressroom at the European Commission and even at other EU institutions. At the Commission, the German press stays in a corner of the room, the French are on the left hand side in the middle, the British press stays in the middle up front. The journalists are organising themselves in national groups, looking for the same kind of topics and checking information within the national group. (Ionescu & Lazar 2007: 123)

A Norwegian correspondent mentioned the example of the German correspondents as being the most nationally organised group:

The Germans you will always see as a group here in Brussels. As people they are nice, however, at the same time they are proud and arrogant journalists with an inner, iron discipline, not least those from the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*. They all meet well prepared, are eager to act correctly and are afraid of asking any 'silly' or carelessly formulated question. (Allern 2007: 114)

Indeed, these nationally-based groupings reinforce the way the EU news beat is organised. National representations organise national briefings, privilege 'their' jour-

nalists when announcing a minister press conference, etc. Even EU Commissioners tend to privilege or at least give special attention to correspondents from their home country.

The second organisational principle of the press corps can be described as linked with the *status* of the media journalists represent. Journalists make it more or less explicit⁴ but we might as well speak of the geopolitics of the press corps. Internal hierarchies broadly reproduce those of the political balance of power within the EU. Indeed, there exists opposition between new and old member states, big and small states, EU member states and non-member states. The status of the media reinforces or, on the contrary, diminishes the ability of a correspondent to enjoy access to top EU officials:

The Commission does not favour anyone, but if you raise a hand and say that you represent Reuters or any big French or Italian newspaper – or now also a big Polish newspaper – then your chances to present your question are greater. This is not personal, it depends on the publication. Of course, there is the personal aspect too – some journalists are more outstanding than others. (Tamppuu & Pullerits 2007: 16)

Some media tend to be privileged by the EU institutions which even organise special briefings for them. In this context, the *Financial Times* is, unsurprisingly, the most often cited as being the prime EU media. That sometimes implies a critical view of the closeness of the newspaper to the EU Commission, referring to it as the 'mouth-piece' or 'garbage can' of the EU Commission.

An additional element defining the specific position of an individual EU correspondent is his/her *seniority*. Some correspondents (from France, Finland or Italy) have been in Brussels for 20 years or more⁵. The time spent in Brussels provides invaluable resources (time being the only thing that cannot be compensated for); everybody (peers and officials alike) knows them and they know everybody; they have an intimate knowledge of EU matters, know the jargon, etc. As such, colleagues listen to them, and when they raise their hand in a press room, their question will be selected. Romanian correspondents, for example, named their colleague from

⁴ Correspondents from smaller countries are clearer about this aspect since they suffer from being at the bottom of this unofficial hierarchy.

⁵ Some current French correspondents arrived in the mid 1970s.

the BBC World Service as being the 'authoritative' voice since she arrived in Brussels years before them and knows the accession topic very well. Yet seniority also fuels criticism when it is considered a reason for over-specialisation and incestuous relationships to EU officials:

What surprised me globally is the fact that, in terms of news, Brussels appeared to me as a place closed upon itself [...] I mean that the journalists are just Brusselian journalists, specialised in Brusselian stuff, that have, in general, no other experience than working in Brussels which mean that they tend to think that journalism is what they have been doing since they're in Brussels. Though they became some kind of experts covering EU news as experts, and they have this quasi incestuous or, at least, closed upon itself relationship with information providers. (Baisnée et al. 2007: 40)

It also appears that in this context where all correspondents are equal but some are more equal than others, journalists coming from smaller countries have developed strategies that could be called the 'Coalition of the Weak' in order to have access to information. Norwegian correspondents underlined that journalists would group themselves according to the type of media they belong to. Journalists from the Nordic countries would use such strategies to obtain an interview knowing that EU leaders would be more interested in communicating with the entire Nordic business community rather than with a single (small) country. A correspondent for a Norwegian news agency stated (Allern 2007: 117), "We join forces with other small, national news agencies to counteract the dominance of Reuters and AFP. We exchange information and sources. Then it is possible to ask: what about your country, your minister? We are not competitors." The same appears to be true for correspondents from the Baltic countries.

2.3. Professional socialisation as political socialisation: The process of getting to know the EU institutions

The press corps is also a regulatory system where journalists experience a political reality most of them discover for the first time upon their arrival in Brussels. With a striking regularity, most correspondents, no matter which country they come from, mention a period of six months to two years that appears to be necessary to get a grip on EU news. As a British journalist stated, "It's incredibly complicated how it operates

here. It's really difficult to understand it. Supposedly there is only one person in Brussels who actually understands how it all works!" (Golding & Barnard 2007: 144).

Previous knowledge of the EU's functioning appears to be of little help and most of the knowledge necessary is acquired once on the spot. As a Finnish correspondent said:

When I went to my first midday briefing, I understood what they said, but I didn't know what was it all about. I didn't know what the Commission's proposition was based on, how the political process had gone so far and where it would lead. Why is the Commission doing what it's doing? I was also unfamiliar with abbreviations they used, which made it even more difficult for me to understand. (Heikkilä 2007: 24)

Unlike what is often said, the EU does not suffer from a lack of transparency. None of the correspondents mentioned that it was hard to get information. On the contrary, most underlined that the main problem was the amount of it, to find the proper way to decipher it, to know which information is important and which is not. Often alone to deal with this information flood, they have to find practical arrangements to find their way through it. Irish correspondents made the point that, even if most news is irrelevant to their audiences, they have to know it. Developing a broad and general understanding of current EU policy and legislation appears of crucial importance, "The essence of this job is that you have to disregard a lot of stuff, but you have to know it. You have to be aware of all the strands of policymaking, even though they mightn't crystallize into a story at the end of the day" (Corcoran & Fahy 2007: 78).

The fact that journalists have to deal with long-term processes is part of the problem. Some journalists might even leave Brussels before some developments they have been scrutinising become legislation. As a Norwegian correspondent put it, "To describe the development of processes inside the EU is like describing paint drying" (Allern 2007: 113).

The technicality of EU news might also provoke critical comments by journalists. Some consider that Brussels speak is also a power instrument enabling the EU, but also those surrounding the institutions (including the journalists), to keep people away from what is going on there:

I understood quite early that these technicality and opacity are in fact artificially maintained. In the Middle Age, the catholic church was defending the

Latin and its liturgy, and its reading of the Biblical texts were made in Latin so that the general public could not understand it, so as to maintain its mastering of events and of the general public. Latin for the catholic church was a power instrument over populations that could not speak Latin. I feel like the eurocrats, journalists and diplomats, technocrats, members of the Commission tend to use the Brussels' idiom as a power instrument and to maintain it, a power instrument over the populations that do not master this Brussels' idiom. (Baisnée et al. 2007: 41)

In some countries, there is a feeling among correspondents of belonging to those who 'know' and 'understand' the importance of the EU while those 'back home' remain desperately 'narrow-minded' and 'national'.

Socialisation can also play the role of an 'entrance ticket' journalists have to buy in order to be accepted by the others as one of them. This is particularly true of countries that send their correspondents to stay in Brussels for a long time. A French journalist working for a private television channel mentioned that he 'entered' the French community as he was beginning to feel at ease and to decipher the codes of the Brussels universe. He said that he did not receive any help in this deciphering process. He had the impression that this 'small journalistic aristocracy', which was accustomed to join forces in favour of the European cause, was on good terms with EU officials and had difficulties in imagining that some 'novice' journalists could arrive and take their place. One Spanish correspondent, even if things seem to have changed, described a similar impression. Arriving in this news place where correspondents were experienced impressed her.

Estonian correspondents underlined that the role of peer help was crucial at the beginning of their stay in Brussels. As a new member state they could not rely on experienced Estonian correspondents⁶ and had to seek the help of their Baltic and Finnish colleagues, "It took me three months to become acquainted with the basic rules in the pressrooms, to get to know people. It was easier to do so with the help of some good colleagues from neighbouring countries" (Tammpuu & Pullerits 2007: 16).

⁶ The first Estonian was sent to Brussels in 1994.

2.4. Synthesis: Unifying elements of Brussels' communication culture

In conclusion, the Brussels news environment seems to be well-structured; there is an abundance of information and official as well as confidential sources and channels available for communication. The transnational character of the Brussels 'newsroom' creates many opportunities for journalists to meet and communication cultures and practices to merge. In spite of this well-developed internal organisational logic, this transnational communication environment has a number of limitations. First, it takes a lot of time and resources for journalists to become familiar with political issues, the language of Brussels, and the EU's institutional mechanisms. Second, the Brussels environment requires journalists to adjust to particularities of the transnational framework of EU reporting, to familiarise themselves with a new political communication culture (to understand the hierarchies of sources and to experience different statuses of treatment), and to develop networks and relationships with fellow colleagues.

No matter what journalistic culture a correspondent represents or what his/her way to come to Brussels (as a logical career move, a short/long-term assignment, family-related or for personal reasons), the transnational news environment introduces journalists to a number of distinct practices and networks that are totally new to those accustomed to national arrangements only. Following the discussion above, we can identify typical elements describing Brussels' communication environment. These are:

- a) The vast amount of political topics and sources. A large part of getting to know the Brussels news beat involves getting to grips with the EU institutions themselves and becoming familiar with European topics. For many journalists, the biggest problem associated with journalistic work in Brussels does not concern the access to or the availability of information but is rather related to the interpretation and analysis of such information and the ability to see and identify priorities.
- b) European institutions/Brussels jargon (which is difficult to comprehend and to interpret). This is a problem especially for new journalists who work in Brussels on a short-term basis (from new EU member states) or on short assignments.
- c) Networks of sources. Establishing personal contacts with adequate sources of information is one more challenge that journalists who start working in Brussels often face. Because the EU is so complex and involves so many topics and ac-

tors, it is vital for journalists to establish personal contacts with spokespersons, civil servants, diplomats, politicians, members of the European Parliament, and lobbyists in order to keep track of all the issues and to get a comprehensive idea of what is going on in the EU.

- d) Different practices regulating interaction between sources and journalists. Over time, journalists learn the differences between official and unofficial channels of access to information as well as between official and confidential sources. Switching between official and unofficial information represents a sort of informal code of communication shared by the news organisations and the European institutions. Any violation of these rules does not involve any formal sanctions but meets the general disapproval expressed by other correspondents and political actors.
- e) Cooperative nature of the transnational 'newsroom'. In Brussels, cooperation with other journalists is an inseparable aspect of professional socialisation culture. Frequent interactions reduce a journalist's personal workload as well as the stress caused by the glut of official sources or events to cover. Journalists are collaborators, not competitors since they represent different media and communicate to different national audiences; relations between correspondents become competitive only when there is a scoop.
- f) Stratification of journalists according to size of state, status, media type, etc. There exists a relatively explicit hierarchy among journalists in the Brussels press corps. These positions are largely determined by the position of the relevant member state in the EU (e.g., bigger versus smaller countries). Also some media are obviously privileged over others. The top positions in the hierarchy are held by journalists working for major European news channels and the quality press (the French *Le Monde*, the *Financial Times*, the German ARD, the BBC, Reuters, etc.). Juicy political stuff is normally leaked to the *Financial Times* or other prestigious news outlets and published by them the next morning. Spokespersons also give significant attention to these media because of their outstanding position and authority. Powerful media outlets from the new member states such as *Diena* in Latvia or the Polish quality daily *Gazeta Wyborcza* are also privileged by spokespersons. Correspondents also frequently use these media as a source of news. Reading the press of larger member states is considered to give an even better picture of the EU than the events and processes taking place in Brussels.

In facing these challenges, journalists go through a certain *learning-by-doing period*. Eventually, they develop many common elements in their communicative practices.

Their daily routines become fairly identical (in the morning, correspondents normally scan some international morning papers, listen to the BBC's international news service, check online newsletters, go through invitations to organised political events such as the Midday Briefings, and then communicate with their news editor at home about the priorities of the day); the sources journalists access are also fairly similar. Not all journalists, however, exploit these with the same intensity. For German journalists using NGOs, interests and lobby groups is a natural thing, while, for example, Finnish journalists are not so enthusiastic about it and claim that relying on information from lobby groups is not part of the Finnish journalistic culture. In contrast, many German interviewees stated that lobbyists are experts in their field and can provide correspondents with a large amount of useful background information.

3. When news values come into play: Setting the European agenda

In general terms, news can be described as occurrences, initiatives, and events that news media and journalists find interesting enough to describe, interpret, frame, and report. News represents a social construction of reality, an interpretation of our surroundings (Schulz 1976, Tuchman 1978, Schudson 1991).

The newsworthiness ascribed to European affairs (especially to EU issues) depends on the interplay between many factors, some of them economic and market-oriented, some political and cultural.

Among the cultural factors there are news values or news selection criteria which can be defined as norms and conventions journalists, editors, and correspondents use as a basis for news selection and news framing. Concepts like relevance, proximity, sensation, and conflicts are often mentioned by journalists covering any news beat, including the Brussels news beat. Events are, in all types of journalism, easier to report and therefore more newsworthy than institutional processes.

However, the practical interpretation of such general journalistic guidelines is strongly influenced by several other factors such as market orientation, media type, economic resources and constraints, commercial competition, political orientation, and cultural traditions. In other words, the structure and the 'news mix' of media outlets influence if – and if, how – EU news fits in. For example, the EU topics relevant

for the Brussels edition of the *Financial Times* will seldom or never be highlighted in a typical local newspaper in any of the EU member states. Also, some news organisations are sympathetic to the EU integration process, like *Le Monde* (France), *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* (Germany) or *La Repubblica* (Italy), while others, like some of the leading UK media, are more sceptical or even hostile.

Political leanings can influence news priorities and not least how news is framed. The audience orientation of popular mass circulation papers like *Bild Zeitung* (Germany) or the *Sun* (UK) are considerably different from the European elite papers. The visual imperatives concerning news stories are much stronger in television channels than in other news media.

Most European media have a national, regional or local market base. The majority of news organisations in Europe belong to the last category, and normally give little or no priority to international news, including the EU. In most cases, the media paying attention to European affairs have a national or regional audience, and the majority of correspondents in Brussels belong to these media types. We can distinguish between 'omnibus' news media (such as national or regional newspapers and public service television) and more specialised media, such as the financial newspapers. National news agencies present a special case, providing institutional news to other media in their home country and reporting without the limits of space we find in newspapers or broadcasting news programmes. As an example, the Finnish news agency *STT* aims at providing a full review of institutional news to its clients, i.e., other news media, which means that other possible topics easily fall out of its scope (Heikkilä 2007).

A few newspapers, news agencies, online news services, and television channels serving a transnational market are the exception to this national and regional orientation.

Similar to other topics, news stories about the EU compete for space and time with other types of news (Tamppuu & Pullerits 2007). Most Brussels correspondents have to 'sell' their proposals for news stories to their editors at the home office. How easy or difficult this is depends on many factors, including the structure and type of media outlet. Only a few European newspapers have a 'Europe' section; most news organisations do not. A news outlet running a 24-hour service has more room for

all types of news than news outlets produced once a day – or a prime time news television news cast. Some days are quieter than others in terms of spectacular news events; in the latter case, news might be given room that on more busy days would remain unreported.

The interpretation of different news values must be seen against this background. Decisions to cover specific topics and present them as news are the product of various factors, not least the assumed interests of the news media's own audience.

3.1. National relevance and audience interests: Core selection criteria

National relevance, especially with regard to the implications of EU regulations and EU decisions regarding national politics, the economy, and the life of citizens, represents the most important and common selection criterion for journalists covering the EU. Correspondents as well as their editors know that geographical and cultural proximity will increase the audience's interest in a news story.

Leppik et al. (2007) sum up that the news criterion mentioned most frequently by German correspondents was reference to and for Germany and for the life of the German people. Other national AIM reports based on interviews with correspondents from other European countries draw the same conclusion, "What the Italian media cover, among the European institutions' activities, are those facts having an impact on Italian political debate and those producing consequences for Italian people's lives" (Cornia et al. 2007: 92). The more meaningful the topic is to the Lithuanian audience, the greater the possibility that the news will be selected (Balčytienė et al. 2007). "If the subject addresses Romania it is guaranteed to be broadcast," says a Romanian journalist (Ionescu & Lazar 2007: 125). The prestigious French newspaper *Le Monde*, known to cover the institutional aspects of the EU more regularly than most European newspapers, applies two main selection criteria regarding an event's newsworthiness. "Common to all investigated media outlets: how spectacular an event is and how much it relates to the national context," write Baisnée et al. (2007: 47). Even in Belgium, the host country of most EU institutions, the EU is mostly covered from a national angle, conclude De Bens et al. (2006). EU politicians seem to recognise this because during the summits the political leaders arrange the most important press conferences on a national basis, mainly for 'their own' media.

The concept of 'national interest' was raised by British correspondents in two different ways. Golding & Barnard (2007: 146) point out:

First that the media tend to only report stories in which Britain has strategic interests or there is a clear 'British angle'; second, that EU stories should be reported by the media in such a way as to demonstrate their relevance to the British public, to 'humanise' the processes of European institutions.

An Irish journalist exhibits the same way of thinking with these words, "I have to, in effect, get Ireland into the first two paragraphs, that's my rule of thumb" (Corcoran & Fahy 2007: 79).

It is, of course, possible to find news about the EU as a political entity without any national frame of reference, especially in some of the newspapers read by elite groups, in some public broadcasts, and provided by some news agencies.⁷ The public debates about the new EU Constitution and Turkey's accession to the EU are well-known examples. However, geographical, political and cultural proximity seems to represent a standard 'market contract' between most news organisations and their audiences. This coincides with several other studies showing that journalism at a European level is structured within national practices (Slaatta 1999; Baisnée 2002; Kevin 2003).

How audience interests, beside the necessity of a national framing, are interpreted will differ among news outlets representing different types of media. In popular news media, an important selection criterion is the question if the news affects people's daily lives or their interests as consumers. Frequent examples in the interview studies with correspondents in Brussels include the reduction of international roaming charges and initiatives for a common EU driving license. For media like the financial newspapers who address more specialised audiences, news selection can involve more professional interests, such as trade tariffs or the Euro zone.

The news media covering the EU also represent different national journalistic cultures. This provides room for more specific news criteria and priorities. One example

⁷ A journalist from the national news agency Belga said that "we always try to look at the EU from a Belgian perspective" (De Bens et al. 2006: 15). However, he added that as a press agency, they consider it a task to also cover news that have no direct and clear implications for Belgium.

is the 'Brussels-bashing' of eurosceptical popular tabloids in the UK, which in many ways set the agenda in the British media, and even influence the political media climate in Ireland (Golding & Bernard 2007, Corcoran & Fahy 2007). Media coverage of European issues in Spain is, on the other hand, often used to play out political battles between media outlets representing different political traditions (Del Río 2007). In Italy, the politico-ideological value of events or controversies is an important factor concerning news priorities and news framing (Cornia & Marini 2006).

3.2. Conflicts and crises: Another driving force

Another news selection criterion common to all types of news journalism is the priority given to conflicts and crises.

Harmony is not regarded as news. News with a conflict frame is more interesting to report than consensus. In the EU institutions, bargains behind closed doors are typical, and politicians and top bureaucrats try to avoid too many open public conflicts. The result is that in many cases the newsworthiness of such political processes is reduced. "Here 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," states an Italian broadcast journalist (Cornia et al. 2007: 94).

As Galtung and Ruge (1965) stated in their early study of international news, a general tendency in news media is to give priority to recent events.

Long-term processes are difficult to make newsworthy for audiences. Even when a Brussels correspondent understands and thinks that a European decision or policy area is of importance to people's lives, the long period of implementation will be an argument against publication. News related to institutional, political processes is also difficult to report. A Norwegian newspaper correspondent says, "Regional politics is important for the EU, but at the news desks at home they yawn when the topic is mentioned" (Allern 2007: 116).

The audience orientation of audiovisual media, including public service television channels, also means that institutional EU news seldom meet the demands for living pictures apart from 'dull talking heads' and state leaders moving in and out of cars.

The alternatives, i.e., to produce news reportages in milieus outside Brussels involving other types of sources, are in many cases regarded as too costly both in terms of time and money.

As a result, news from the EU seldom gets on the agenda in national television newscasts around Europe. A report about EU coverage in the Spanish media provides the following assessment, "Spanish television stations place an enormous importance on images, sometimes even more than facts" (Del Río 2007: 138). Conflicts and crises that can be linked to well-known state leaders seem to be the exception because they provide an opportunity to visualise the news through the personalisation of the story.

However, it would be one-sided to regard the news media's weight on conflicts and crises purely as an example of 'tabloid news values', typical of the popular, commercial press and commercial television. In some cases such news criteria mean that important political questions and developments are reported and discussed all over Europe. An illustrative example is the heated debate about and the rejection of the new Constitution in the French and Dutch referendum, respectively. These conflict-ridden campaigns were covered widely in the European media and therefore possible to discuss on a transnational level.

3.3. Synthesis

A common result (emerging from previous research studies as well as confirmed by the AIM project) confirms the fact that on a pan-European scale, national practices of EU news management are prevailing. In other words, there is no European public sphere (EPS). Instead of one overwhelming European media space, distinctive national public spheres (NPS) slightly overlap. Notwithstanding the fact that national public spheres continue to be Europeanised (by the media paying more attention to EU issues, by journalists introducing more angles of reporting on European matters) due to national preconditions of EU news management, a shared EU agenda as a prerequisite for a common European public sphere has not yet emerged. One can claim that there exist a few quite successful pan-European media institutions (Euronews and the Arte television channels) that could sustain a common European public sphere, but some precaution is needed to avoid premature optimism.

According to the results of the AIM project, national media favour their own (national, regional or local) logic. From the perspective of national media systems, the EU story has to be meaningful to a domestic audience. The local audience of EU news meets two types of actors: domestic actors (either prominent actors or representatives of interest groups among the auditorium) and foreign actors, actors 'out there', either being supranational European institutions or foreign counterparts to domestic actors. Indeed, the media follow the national political agenda extremely carefully, that is to say, they strongly rely on domestic actors. In other words, when background information and news frames are provided by national political actors, little space is left for international/foreign views to appear.

Another observation in line with the idea that national preconditions should not be neglected is confirmed by the European institutions in the new EU communication policy. The EU institutions depend on double-mediation. Similarly, they are dependent on the involvement and voices of national domestic actors. In other words, the great amount of news beat generated by the EU institutions is carefully scrutinised and selected by national media systems according to the national preconditions of news management and national notions of newsworthiness. The dependence of the European institutions on prominent national sources has been made clear by several AIM reports pertaining to the first field study.

Heikkilä and Kunelius (2006b: 41) state, "News journalism is culturally deep-rooted in a particular mental, geographic and political environment it is part of. In Finland the most important cultural trait is obviously that of the nation and the state".

Moreover, one should keep in mind that according to the theory of newsworthiness (Galtung & Ruge 1965), foreign sources representing 'prominent' EU countries are favoured because they are more easily covered by neighbouring or even geographically more distant national public spheres.

4. Four types of politico-economic preconditions for European reporting

On the one hand, it is reasonable to assume that after some period of adaptation (which normally takes between six months and two years), novice EU reporters have been amalgamated into the common news practices of the Brussels press corps.

On the other hand, however, EU reporters have to meet the expectations of their domestic news desk which may vary widely among EU member states (for example, depending on the issues on the national political agenda, but also determined by national or regional market orientation, media type, commercial competition, political orientation, and cultural traditions).

Does the newspaper have a 'Europe' section? If not, EU news will have to compete with other world or business news for column space. All of these factors influence the style and frequency of EU news in the British media, as EU news faces the constraints of established concepts of what is newsworthy and what is not. (Golding & Barnard 2007: 146)

This overall set of media types and political and cultural backgrounds could be referred to as *contextual preconditions* for EU news management shaping national practices of reporting on European matters.

The media institutions of a particular country exhibit a higher or lower degree of reciprocal dependency on political and economic institutions. Therefore, it seems to be fruitful to scrutinise relations between journalists and journalistic (political and economic) sources in a broader context. The AIM project has facilitated the attempt to compare these in order to characterise their differences. As noted above, fundamental differences between national public spheres would be characterised by two continuums which have significant influence on national journalistic practices.

One continuum would be 'political' with one extreme being 'pluralist' (everything is decided via negotiations, maximum public participation, a high degree of political transparency) and another 'clientelist' (most decisions are made by interest groups, having competing agendas, lower public participation). The other continuum would be 'economic' with one extreme being 'regulative' (including protective economic systems and in regard to the media industry, media subsidies and media self-regulation) and another being 'liberal' (*laissez faire* economic policy, minimum media regulation) (see Figure 1). In regard to the media's self-perception in this context, the media should act as a socially responsible institution in one case, and perform the role of a watchdog in another.

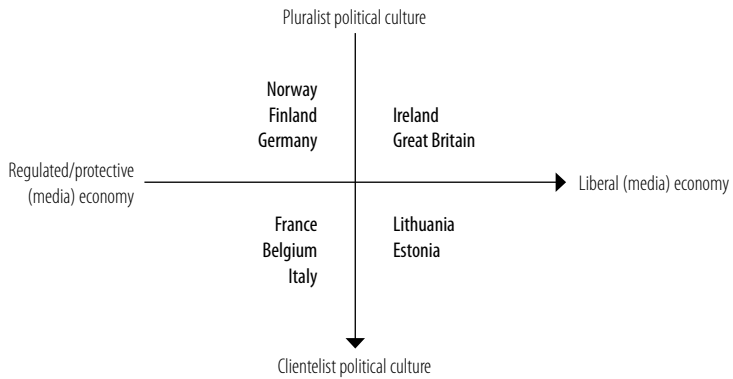


Figure 1. The 11 countries participating in the AIM project characterised by their political culture and dominating economic ideology. Arrows indicate ongoing global trends. Regulations pertaining to media economy manifest both state intervention and the sophistication of the media's self-regulation.

These patterns are important to take into consideration since the mass media always reflect typical patterns of interpersonal communication within a specific culture (Schröder 1993, 1994). In return, the pattern of political practices or journalistic culture has an impact on journalists' approach towards political issues and the pattern of a country's dominating economic ideology may affect the way the media industry functions.

The national politico-economic preconditions of all 11 AIM participants, having delivered the first field report, could be mapped on the scheme of these crossed continuums. These preconditions may accelerate or reduce the circulation of particular journalistic practices of EU coverage.

In their work, several researchers have indicated the increasing commercialisation of political communication, especially during electoral campaigns, inspired by commercial marketing rules previously deployed by the private sector only (Pfetsch & Schmitt-Beck 1993; Negrine 1996). Some authors are using even the term 'political marketing' (Maarek 1995), when citizens are rather considered as clients to be attracted instead of traditional citizens to be included in the political debate (Blumler & Gurevitch 1995).

The results of the AIM project have revealed the same tendency of a growing market-oriented (or audience-as-client-oriented) approach among national journalistic cultures combined with the liberalisation of the media market. Most of Europe's new democracies have chosen very liberal economic models (e.g., no laws against media concentration, low taxes, minimum protective tariffs), while simultaneously possessing an interest-group-based political culture (e.g., the emergence of a 'backdoor policy').

The shift towards liberalised preconditions (increase in media commercialisation and concentration) can be detected both in former socialist countries and long-established democracies:

There exists a general agreement that commercialisation of the media has made an impact on the type of journalism that is being produced. Consumerism is cultivated, while civic values tend to be not represented. The media owners are concerned with rapid financial gains and 'new criteria' seem to replace all other: as fast as possible, as much as possible, and as funny as possible. (Balčytienė et al. 2005: 8)

[The] regulatory framework has been transformed with the passage of the 2003 Communication Act. Its intention is to produce a new statutory framework better geared to dealing with increasingly convergent and complex communication sector and, most importantly, to promote competition within it. This latter objective will be achieved by the adoption of a „lighter touch“ to media regulation, in particular through the relaxation of existing rules restricting the concentration of media ownership. (Golding et al. 2005: 11)

Next, let us pay more detailed attention to the following four sets of national politico-economic preconditions: pluralist-regulative, pluralist-liberal, clientelist-regulative, and clientelist-liberal.

Pluralist-regulative preconditions

The first group of countries obviously comprises Norway, Finland, and Germany. These countries have a highly pluralist political culture, affecting directly the way how journalistic reality should be constructed:

Finland is a multiparty democracy. Since the 1930s all the cabinets have been based on coalitions, which means that political discourse has emphasized consensus-seeking rather than sharpening political differences. [...] For journalism, the stable political culture has provided a relatively benign counterpart. Political agendas have been formulated by the leading political parties and the necessary negotiations between interested parties have taken place more or less publicly. The relationship between politicians and journalists covering politics have been based on cooperation rather than antagonism. (Heikkilä & Kunelius 2005: 5)

The same can be said about the situation in Norway and Germany. For instance, Norway has recently seen the minority government of PM Kjell Magne Bondevik, tolerated by bigger parties, and Germany is governed by a grand coalition, the result of a historical compromise (it may also be worth remembering that Germany is a federal state).

The next group includes such European countries as Sweden, Iceland, and Denmark. Their journalistic cultures are heavily influenced by Anglo-American traditions (influencing their media genres and formats, the level of commercialism) but according to the Finnish report, Finnish journalism is flavoured with a great dose of Nordic welfare state ethos and the broad idea of public service journalism.

The Finnish, Norwegian and German media all have secured their independence from political actors, although some papers (especially in Norway) may have a political affiliation. The media systems of these countries defend their independent position against any kind of governmental attempt to 'manage' news (Allern & Linge 2006).

At the same time, the media market of these three countries is rather regulated both by legislation and press subsidies (in the case of Norway). Another tool of regulation is journalistic self-regulation which is highly advanced in all three countries. The distinction between public and private figures is clear and interests of privacy are well-protected.

In conclusion, this group can be characterised by such key words as: public service journalism, a high degree of journalistic self-regulation, concern for objectivity and respect. Journalists belonging to pluralist-regulative contexts are unhappy if

information is delivered off-the-record and the speaker has 'no face'. They need to personally approach their sources for the benefit of their national audiences and, therefore, they often turn to the national representations to get their quotes there.

Pluralist-liberal preconditions

This group includes Great Britain and Ireland. Similar to the Nordic countries, the British BBC's public broadcasting service is an important cornerstone of the media machinery but not the most dominant:

The hyper-competitiveness and the growing market presence of private media corporations that are lightly regulated and appreciably more oriented to profit than public service have generated concerns about their detrimental impact on the range and quality of media content. Complaints have increased about the dumbing down of media standards in the UK, driven by a deepening and excessive ratings consciousness. (Golding et al. 2005: 3)

Until the 1970s, UK journalists were more willing to refer to the political values of their sources in their reporting and they were motivated to seek together with politicians solutions to conflicts that occurred. According to the UK report, this is not valid anymore. Ironically, one possible explanation might be the ongoing liberalisation of Great Britain's media market. This process started in the 1980s during Margaret Thatcher's terms in office and has continued until today. For instance, the new British Communication Act (2003) has introduced a 'lighter touch' on media regulation.

The result has been media concentration and the appearance of media tycoons (such as Rupert Murdoch), infotainment, and a greater number of tabloid media than in the Nordic countries. Media tycoons may defend their 'empires' fiercely, and obviously the political establishment is not willing to resist their interests in terms of tighter media regulation.

Another result of these tendencies has been the political alienation of the audience, also known as 'the spiral of cynicism'. The government may feel the need to mediate the message with the help of spin-doctors like Alistair Campbell, while this has caused even more adversarial attitudes among journalists.

According to the EPSO (responsible for recruitment at EU offices), British journalists are among the less multilingual habitants of the European Union. If one takes into consideration the old rivalry with France, who dominated EU structures before the UK's accession in 1973, and the British media's generally hostile attitude towards politicians (especially towards bureaucrats, jeopardising the historical British lifestyle), one can understand the low and adversarial coverage of EU issues by UK media. International news is generally limited in the UK media, which are considerably more parochial than their major European comparators, though certainly less so than major US media. In 2001, only 8.7% of all news stories throughout the campaign touched on European issues, despite expectations that the relationship between the UK and Europe would be a major campaigning issue (Deacon et al. 2001, Edwards et al. 1999).

Unlike in the clientelist-liberal context, the pluralist-liberal context in the UK has strong historical roots with regard to public debate (e.g., parliamentary debates), even though (or maybe precisely because) the Anglo-American electoral system favours a two-party-system where the 'winner takes all'. Opposition rights are well-protected and debates are preferred, as can also be seen in the court system where the jury system prevails.

In conclusion, this group can be characterised by the following key words: a more liberal media market than in Europe in general, minimum state intervention, critical reporting on politics (the media as a watchdog), a desire for an objective balance, and a higher degree of tabloidisation.

Clientelist-liberal preconditions

This group includes the new democracies of Europe (and the new members of the EU). As for present and previous AIM participants, Estonia, Lithuania, and Romania are included in this group.

These former planned economies have introduced a more or less liberal *laissez-faire* approach with a low level of media regulation (no laws against media concentration) and weaker media accountability compared to 'older members' of the EU.

The journalistic culture of these countries is shaped by the liberal model (typical for the pluralist-liberal context). However, weaker historical journalistic traditions

and weaker self-regulation have caused significant differences to the purely liberal model:

The five decades of Soviet occupation had seriously distorted journalistic culture in Estonia from two opposite sides: according to the official model of Soviet journalist, media had to play the role of „weapon of ideological struggle“. According to the oppositional „cultural resistance“ model, journalists had to maintain national values and resist to official ideology, using „hidden language“ [...] After gaining independence from political control, Estonian media have shifted towards complete mercerisation. (Lauristin et al. 2005: 4)

There are two more important notions describing the clientelist-liberal context: weaker journalistic trade unions and stronger clientelist politics compared to Great Britain, for example. Stronger clientelist policy means the acceptance of a publicly hidden agenda in political practice and a tendency of political parties to act like clans instead of defenders of public interests.

Unlike in Italy or France, media declare themselves independent and politically not attached. Indeed, the media monitor very carefully the national political life in these countries and are even more adversarial towards (all) political figures than in the UK in some respect. A lack of public debate and lower social responsibility by public actors make this clientelist-liberal context antagonistic to the pluralist-regulative context, typical for the Nordic countries.

In conclusion, this group can be characterised by key words such as economically very liberal, with slightly regulated media, masculine competition, and a consumerist approach (including a mercantile attitude towards the EU which was, for instance, characteristic of the Estonian agenda of the EU Parliament campaign in 2004).

Clientelist-regulative preconditions

This group includes at least two 'founding fathers' of the EU – France and Italy. In some respect, Belgium could be added and definitely Spain, Portugal, and Greece as countries pursuing a polarised pluralist model of journalistic culture.

These countries (especially France) have historically supported strong protective measures against competitors outside the EU. This group can be characterised by strong state intervention in media systems (not in Belgium in general, but the French tradition has affected media practices applied by EU institutions located in Brussels). There have been press subsidies in France and Italy.

The chairman of 'Europe 1' was sacked in 1968 as the government considered that the coverage of the [student] demonstrations by its station had been over friendly. The situation of the television was even worse, as the French cabinet has probably been the only one among Western democracies to appoint a 'minister of information'. (Baisnée et al. 2005: 9)

Another interesting notion is that if the great American and British 'press barons' were interested in profit, their French colleagues are obsessed with acquiring power. Nowadays politicians' control of the French media has diminished but they still influence the local media industry due to the legal framework (e.g., deciding the amount and frequency of commercials on public and private channels).

According to the Italian report, in the clientelist-regulative context the production of news can be characterised as the process of negotiation. Sorrentino argues that the information coming from a given source is not just communicated, but it is rather the result of a negotiation where the source participates actively in the creation of the news item (Cornia et al. 2005: 2).

Moreover, objectivity in the Anglo-American sense is not considered a fundamental principle of Italian journalism. Many newspapers are more or less politically positioned or affiliated with political parties, expressing similar ideologies (also in other Mediterranean countries). However, this should not necessarily be considered as a sign of the media's obedience – it is only a partisan journalistic culture with no clear separation between news and opinion/commentary.

In conclusion, this group can be characterised by the following key words: partisan journalism, negotiation culture, rather regulative media legislation.

Indeed, if we consider the European public sphere as the cumulative sum of diverse national public spheres, a single top-down communicative approach is unrealistic.

National public spheres have different traditions of structure and ways of an ongoing political debate.

5. Communicative patterns observed across political communication cultures in Brussels

Political communication takes place in communication systems when political messages are reproduced by the media. News management from the perspective of political actors is related to political public relations, such as selecting a special time for information announcements, spinning, and other aspects of communication with journalists. From the media's perspective, news management is related to giving publicity to political messages according to the rules of a particular news organisation.

The norms governing interactions between journalists and political spokespersons are significant in order to describe political communication culture.

In this context, it is important to question where these norms are rooted: Are they rooted in media logic or political logic?

Thus, the fundamental differences between different countries can be described across three lines which are important in order to characterise differences among communication practices in Brussels. One line describes the relationship between journalists and their sources which is organised either through official or unofficial channels; the second one describes dominant journalistic norms of EU reporting (being observer/transmitter of information or semi-political actor); and the third line shows which framework (transnational or national) dominates when reporting from Brussels (see Table 1).

As mentioned above, the complexity of the working environment in Brussels makes it very difficult to characterise the typical patterns of reporting and the professional identity of a correspondent.

In their everyday working routines, most correspondents switch between different modes of reporting. They access both formal sources (attending press conferences, reading online reports, meeting spokespersons, following international news media)

Research issues	Research questions
Sources	What kind of sources (official or confidential) and channels (formal vs. informal) of cooperation do these actors (journalists and political news sources) use? What aspects of news management are observed in reporting on European matters from Brussels?
Professional model	What is the role of a Brussels correspondent? What are the norms and expectations that determine the interactions between journalists and political actors? Are they partners/collaborators, or are the media performing an observer/neutral mediator function? In what occasions (if ever) do the media perform a watchdog function? In what situations do the functions and relationships between the press and politics change? Whose logic dominates in the press-politics relationship?
Orientation	How do Brussels correspondents cope with working in both national and international frameworks? What are the main communication particularities in Brussels? Which political communication culture prevails in Brussels?

Table 1. Research themes and questions.

and informal sources (meeting other journalists and gathering information from confidential sources in unofficial situations), and in their routines they alternate between referring to official and unofficial sources.

It seems that journalists from small countries (mainly the Nordic countries) as well as from young member states experience more challenges in developing personal relations with important sources. In addition, the hierarchy of privileged media becomes even more obvious in exceptional situations, i.e., when an anonymous source wants to leak secret information:

The important leaks are directed at the most influential news organisations at the European level (The *Financial Times*, Reuters and perhaps the *International Herald Tribune*) or the most prominent news media of the large member states (for instance, *Le Monde* or *FAZ*). The interviewees were convinced that the leaking system is in the interest of the EU institutions because other news media would find it difficult not to pick up a piece of news published in the major news media outlets. (Heikkilä 2007: 31)

There were clear differences reported in the journalists' perceptions of their professional performance in partnerships with their political sources in terms of playing the role of *mediator* or *collaborator*. One more dualism in professional behaviour is the fact that Brussels correspondents simultaneously belong to a *national* and an *international* framework. On the one hand, they have to carefully follow the national political agenda which may lead them to interpret EU politics and policies exclusively from a national perspective. On the other hand, they must be aware of the EU

agenda, although in the long run following the international line excessively closely may turn out problematic as journalists may become too uncritical of the EU.

In spite of many similarities observed in journalists' performance in Brussels, two different frameworks can be identified as describing the press-politics relationship.

One is based on the model where a journalist becomes a very close partner/collaborator or even a *semi-political actor*; the other role entails the journalist as a *mediator*. On the one hand, when the partnership between a journalist and his/her source is built on a partnership relationship, informal meetings and background talks are identified as the most important features to frame political messages. It appears that this relationship is the most promising way of connecting political and media logic. On the other hand, reliance on professional journalistic norms (when journalists are characterised as neutral observers) creates greater autonomy on both sides. In other words, when journalistic norms prevail, political actors have to adapt their messages to media logic, thus offering communication which is more *professionalised* in terms of the availability of information, etc.

Although journalists switch roles (depending, for instance, on the type of source they are using), the German case would be described as the closest example of a 'semi-political' type of relationship. According to our study, German correspondents and their sources are very close indeed; both journalists and their sources are extremely interested in developing and maintaining strong, stable and harmonious relationships.

Two limitations are observed here. First, mutual trust and intimacy between a journalist and a source open the door to manipulation. Second, the proximity between journalists and EU actors could lead to the danger of going native, i.e., of appearing and becoming too uncritical of the EU. Some countries such as Norway seek to solve this dilemma by introducing a rotation system. In other countries, especially in small and new EU member states where knowledge of the Brussels environment is still not sufficient enough, there is no such practice of rotation among foreign correspondents.

In fact, depending on the kind of source a journalist is using, his/her professional behaviour may change:

In Brussels, however, the patterns of circulating off the record information are so strongly rooted in the daily routines of the EU institutions and journalists

that leaks constitute merely a small part of off the record practices. This seems to be the case for Finnish correspondents for whom the most widely used form of off the record information is, in fact, the weekly briefings organised by the national EU representation in Brussels. These briefings provide a full review of the topics to be tackled in the EU institutions for the subsequent week, and the interviewees regard these briefings as a valuable source of background information. If national representatives wish to share exclusive revelations with a journalist, the briefings are not the primary location for this. Here the national briefing is conducted as off the record because the briefings are based on confidentiality. National representatives informing journalists tend to talk off the record only. (Heikkilä 2007: 30)

Moreover, our study has revealed that official events (Midday Briefings, press conferences) are usually not the places where news is being politically managed. Much more influential news management takes place during exchanges when off-the-record information communication is organised (with confidential sources, via informal channels).

In spite of different frameworks (switching between official and unofficial information, trying to match the EU agenda with national expectations at home) observed in political communication practices, in general, the journalist-source relationship in Brussels appears to be built on professionalism.

Greater source accessibility, availability of different actors to comment on political issues (via formal and informal channels), institutionalised relationships, etc., lead to autonomy in both the political and the journalistic field. In contrast, in some home offices, for example, in Italy or Lithuania, source and journalist very often share common interests (thus journalists can easily access heads of state and government or other political leaders as a primary source), so their relationship often leads to partisanship and clientelism. For those journalists Brussels offers a new communication culture. In the EU institutions, much of the work is done by press representatives; in addition, in Brussels it is impossible to do a spontaneous interview, instead, much has to be planned beforehand.

Another aspect of emerging European (professionalised) journalistic routines is the tendency to build the news around facts, documents, and data.

Most journalists (especially Germans, Italians, and Lithuanians) acknowledge that EU sources are a model of accuracy and transparency. In Italy, for example, the journalistic culture tends to favour intangible components such as opinion and gossip so that the news are basically built around statements. Only British journalists are sceptical about EU communication practices. Their view is that the EU Commission rarely generates real news stories. Consequently, the EU Commission and its communication are considered not very impressive. The views of Irish correspondents on EU communication strategies and the overall performance of spokespersons are mixed: a major pressure shared by all interviewees reporting on the EU was information overload.

To conclude, the predominance of the official dimension within Brussels work routines (apparent in communication with sources as well as in the essential role of documents delivered by the EU institutions) highlights a sort of internationalisation of communication practices, which become less dependent on national contexts.

However, as noted above, this de-contextualised practice may also have a side effect: as EU political communication is detached from the national political agenda, journalists tend to focus on technical and factual details instead, which naturally are less appealing to national audiences:

In Brussels, there is no such thing as the constant political struggle between the government and the opposition. Instead, there are a lot of complex issues and actors involved in policy-making. Thus, it is difficult to personalise topics or to focus on political conflicts; instead they [journalists] focus more on technical and factual aspects. (Leppik et al. 2007: 61)

Generally, correspondents accuse the Commission of presenting issues without emphasising their political dimension. A journalist working for a broadsheet thinks the Commission neutralises the ideological divergences. When journalists mention the Commission's political dimension, they underline the fact that it tries to sell political choices as technically obvious facts. (Baisnée et al. 2007: 43)

Moreover, Brussels becomes the place where reporters learn new professional routines and develop new practices. "The premise that the Brussels news scene must be appropriated through learning-by-doing is well in line with how correspondents are supposed to work, and with what they find professionally viable" (Heikkilä 2007: 25).

For small countries to follow the political agenda of bigger countries seems to be an important professional requirement. For example, correspondents from small countries (Finland, Lithuania, Estonia, Norway) feel that it is important to focus on national political agendas in the most prominent member states, that is, Germany, France, and the UK.

Keeping an eye on major players in the EU may have both positive and negative effects. On the one hand, getting news into international media appears to be a channel for spokespersons to reach wider audiences of journalists (not just the ones residing in Brussels). On the other hand, the media's euroscepticism in one country may directly impact EU reporting in another. For example, for Irish media, the impact of the UK media is an important external factor affecting EU news production. According to Irish correspondents, one reason for the difficulty in getting some stories printed or broadcast was the news culture of Irish papers which follow carefully UK media, thus, they are not exposed to EU news:

Like all Irish media, the paper is somewhat infected with cross contamination from Britain. Everybody sees Sky News. Everybody sees the kind of eurosceptic line that comes out of the British media so there is an instinct to ask if we should be following that line. And very often there, the stories are either wrong or are very specific to Britain. (Corcoran & Fahy 2007: 80)

However, it is difficult to claim that Brussels correspondents bring new practices learned in Brussels (accessing sources, keeping an eye on other countries) back home. There may be objective (the small number of Lithuanian journalists, the absence of a rotation system) or subjective reasons for it. As noted above, the Italian journalistic culture at home is totally different and thus, new practices are not adopted by Brussels correspondents as a complete substitute, but rather added to existing practices of Italian journalistic culture.

In spite of still existing obvious differences across different political communication cultures, there is an obvious shift towards the professionalisation of political communication in Brussels. As German correspondents confirmed:

The growth of the correspondents corps has led to the disintegration of the once 'cosy' community of EU officials, lobbyists and journalists. A couple of experienced Brussels correspondents noticed that communication has become more formal and leaks are less common. There are also some indicators of a

new generation of younger and more critical journalists gaining influence. With regard to the Commission, the more formal communication might also be due to the stricter communication policy that was set up under the Prodi commission, prohibiting 'ordinary' EU officials from giving information to the press. (Leppik et al. 2007: 71)

To conclude, journalists report news according to norms and professional codes that arise as part of the communication practice between the political institutions and the media.

This study has once again demonstrated that relationships between political opinion-makers and journalists are bound to particular national journalism cultures, which makes a transnational comparison difficult. A few results, however, are available for further investigation.

It has been observed that for some countries there is a shift from their national communication culture to the Brussels communication culture which can be called a kind of globalisation of communication culture – it becomes both national and transnational at the same time. This observation especially applies to small and new member states. Although changes in the structure of the Brussels press corps have gradually effected the overall communication culture in Brussels (with the increased accessibility of sources), Brussels' communication culture seems to have much less impact on news media operations at home (perhaps except in situations when Brussels correspondents are considered to be EU information experts, for example, in small states such as Lithuania or Estonia).

5. Conclusion

What we observed in Brussels is in many respects a metaphor of contemporary journalism and even in broader terms, we could say it is a metaphor of some of the most important trends in contemporary social change.

Indeed, news gathering in Brussels seems to be placed at the crossroads of two contradictory tendencies – localism and globalisation. As we know, this ambivalence represents one of the most striking challenges our society is facing today: we are

citizens of one nation, we are part of a local community, but our life is affected by actions, decisions, perceptions that do not have anything of a national and local nature. Arjun Appadurai has given an enlightening view of these contradictory forces shaping contemporary society.

Journalists working in Brussels face this ambivalence every day. They live abroad; they cover a supranational institution and the events concerning it. Every day they interact with colleagues from many different nations but they respond to their national audiences, news values, and editors. They are linked to working decisions that are mostly of a local nature and they have to constantly deal with constrictions, requests, and suggestions coming from two contradictory sources – one of a national character and the other of a supranational character. This is what clearly emerges from all the contributions to this chapter.

In particular, it seems that this contradiction between journalists' national belonging, on the one side, and the supranational topics they are asked to cover and the supranational environment within which they operate, on the other side, involves two main aspects: professional practices and news values.

When in Brussels, journalists obviously work in an international milieu. First of all, they face distinct news gathering rules, an organisation, and attitudes of their sources that can be radically different from what they are used to in their home country.

Smaller countries in particular and new accession countries are in this situation. But journalists from other countries may face this ambivalence, too.

As a matter of fact, the Brussels working environment seems to be structured and determined by countries that have a more important role within the European Union: these are the older (in terms of EU membership) and bigger countries (population-wise). Their professional models are mostly shaped following what can be termed the 'liberal model of journalism' which, in some cases, may be radically different from what many journalists perform in their home country.

At the same time, there are certain news organisations (such as large international media organisations, e.g., the *Financial Times*, *Le Monde*, as well as strong media players from the new EU countries) that play a more important role in the international

news flow. Journalists very frequently interact with these organisations whose professional models may turn out to be very different from those widely practiced in other countries. In both cases, in Brussels, journalists face strict professional rules regarding news gathering processes, interactions with news sources, and the availability of data and documents.

Indeed, for many professionals, Brussels becomes a *socialisation opportunity*.

Journalists from anywhere in Europe have an opportunity to compare their everyday procedures and routines with those of colleagues coming from other countries: they learn new skills, they have to deal with different organisations and structures, and they learn new discursive constructions. This is one of the reasons why many reporters consider working in Brussels as a very prestigious and sure advancement of their career.

The contradiction between localism and globalisation emerges also in connection with news values. Journalists have to cover events and decisions that, most of the time, are of a supranational nature but such news has to be of some interest to their national audiences.

In a way, we could say that this is the most striking contradiction that news gathering in Brussels faces.

Efforts by sources and journalists to give more importance to news related to the European Union struggle with what their editors believe can catch the interest of the different national audiences. Therefore, a news hierarchy is constructed that ranks news first that involves national interests and national political figures, what some journalists have explicitly defined as 'national interest'. Such news may not reflect the interests of the European Union as such.

But at the same time, Brussels is also a *place of cooperation*.

As in many other places and on various occasions where journalists work close to hundreds of other colleagues, daily working routines are shared by the group of professionals who have the opportunity to be there at the same time. At the end of the day, what journalists write is a product of this cooperative work. Very frequently,

they share the same sources; they compare their interpretations and evaluations of what has happened. Most of the time, cooperation involves professionals from the same country, but quite frequently journalists from different countries may also use the opportunity to compare and share their views. Cooperation is in some way 'forced' by the fact that journalists share the same places – they frequent the same restaurants and clubs, they live, as someone has said, 'in a holiday village' where they constantly live close to other colleagues. In the words of another reporter who was interviewed, journalists in Brussels 'behave like a sheep herd' – they move all together, they are fed together, and they discuss together what their sources state. "The actual briefing takes place after the briefing," as another journalist told us (Leppik et al. 2007: 59), that is, what seems more important in the news gathering process is the discussion that journalists have with their group of colleagues after a piece of news has been released. This is the moment when the frame of the news may definitely be set and then transferred to national audiences. In spite of the cooperative nature of working in Brussels, competition among journalists still exists as they are always trying to arrive first to transmit news to their own country.

In this way, national differences tend to diminish both because professionals refer to the same working criteria and because news items tend to be very similar in content and in framing.

Nevertheless, differences still exist not only because news is selected mainly on the basis of what has been called 'national interest' but also because news organisations differ among themselves with the 'popular press' applying its own news selection criteria which are very different from those of the elite press. Television organisations prefer news that allows an appealing visual kit while print media may be more interested in stories requiring commentary articles from intellectuals and experts. Local newspapers seem to have little interest in what happens in Brussels while national papers have a different visual angle.

As has been said above, when in Brussels, journalists may find their news sources organised in a way that is very different from what they know from home.

This observation needs to be elaborated. Indeed, all interviewed journalists pointed out the extreme accessibility of Brussels news sources and the large amount of available material.

Getting news is not difficult but very often this material is very complex and, what seems more important, the decision-making process (which takes place at the EU institutions) is very complicated and very long. Rarely does it meet the timing of newsworthiness. In other words, journalists have difficulties giving priority to news of some EU initiative knowing that it will be completed months later.

In this way, news gathering in Brussels appears to be a difficult and complicated process that struggles with new and old problems of professional journalism.