MEDIA COMMUNICATION IN THE EUROPEAN UNION: HOW DO MEDIA COVER EU? A COMPARISON ANALYSIS OF GERMANY, CROATIA, BELGIUM AND GREECE

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines the extent to which media and journalists cover European Union issues, both quantitatively and qualitatively. Are the media undermining the EU by the way they report it? How has journalism responded to the transformation of politics resulting from European integration? In order to answer these research questions, we carried out a survey across four European countries – Germany, Croatia, Belgium, and Greece – searching for elements of convergence and divergence in the coverage of European news. Subsequently, we attempted a comparison of the amount of news produced by the European Union with the corresponding quantity of news produced in the chosen countries. The results show that there is a gap between the news that is produced by the European Union, compared to what is broadcasted at a national level, but also that there is a great difference between how each country chooses to cover issues of European interest.

Keywords: Communication, European Union, Journalism, Media Communication.

I. INTRODUCTION

The European Union is going through one of the most difficult times in its history. Fluid and volatile world balances, the economic crisis, the out-of-control migration and refugee flows, terrorism, but also the recent developments with Brexit, are just a few of the reasons why European and international factors believe that the union is in danger. These problems are added to the existing forms of crisis that jeopardize the European integration project (Vasilopoulos, 2017, p. 20). In spite of the potential problems, the European Union withstands and resists and is even able to activate all existing mechanisms in order to survive and grow further. In this survival struggle, media can be major supporters, adherents, and defenders, but also opponents, competitors or challengers.

Another great challenge that the European Union is facing has to do with the sensitive issue of democracy. Humanity today is going through a crisis that is heterogeneous. It is a crisis of social and political, a crisis of institutions and values, but also a crisis that is directly related to the representative democratic constitution. What is needed as never before is education and especially political education. Missira (2018, p. 19), well explains that a citizen needs to be educated in order to become a key factor in the establishment of a stable and strong democracy in Europe. This fact, according to Missira (2018, pp. 20-24), will enable the citizens to play a decisive role in the existence of democracy, while also developing the desire to monitor, participate actively in political processes and, as a result, contribute to the cohesion and empowerment of the union. European Union has organized informative action programs and training activities to achieve the involvement of citizens in the public European sphere. However, the union has no sole responsibility for educating citizens. Media have a huge share of responsibility in this regard.

Media can also be considered as a mediator between democracy and the public sphere. The role of the public sphere has increasingly come to the fore in studies concerning the state of democracy in Europe.

II. REPORTING EU: THE CHALLENGE

Europe and the European Union are themselves perplexing, multi-meaning and at times puzzling concepts. When it comes to media coverage, things become more pretentious. Media play a very important role through the reporting and representation of European culture and political issues. Comparisons of news coverage across different national media systems has been a useful process for ascertaining common news agendas, information sources, and journalism practices, particularly in an increasingly globalized news
environment (Kevin, 1997). Comparative studies serve to highlight the similarities and differences between editorial policies but also the issues and concerns that are unique in every culture (Fiddick, 1990). In this sense, our study aims to shed some light on the way different countries approach and present the European issues, but also on the impact of European news on national media and whether this news might be considered national or transnational, depending on specific characteristics such as proximity, significance and promptitude.

Covering EU can really be a great challenge and in this section of our study we will examine some of these aspects, based on the bibliography offered. Of course, we should start by saying that a challenge is not synonym with a negative aspect. As Heikki and Kunelius (2008) set it:

*The European Union represents an emerging transnational political system for mainstream professional journalism. As a developing and enlarging system of power, expertise and a field of negotiation for compromises it provides a new horizon for journalism and journalists who have been strongly shaped by national discourses about politics, democracy and the public sphere (2008, p. 1).*

This new horizon that is mentioned here from Heikki and Kunelius (2008), can be explored in conditions of education and constant coaching.

Another challenging, but not necessarily negative, aspect of EU covering is related to the fact that there is a plethora of studies of the development of modern integration, but with a severe limitation. It is noticeable that there is a lack of European studies with a strong cultural dimension and also a gap in the studies that focus on a combination of approaches from the humanities and the social sciences (Bondebjerg & Madsen, 2008). There is also a long tradition for studies of national media, but studies of the role and impact of globalization and Europeanization on the national states are far less developed and most often in the form of important but restricted empirical comparative studies with an internalization view (Kevin, 2003). Research into a dimension of diversity in EU is very limited. How does it affect the journalistic and media covering of EU? According to Semetko et al. (2000), “we are not aware of studies that have specifically examined the role and impact of European integration on domestic political news coverage”. Journalists are informed and educated not merely and exclusively by the official EU sources but also by the academic side. When this academic side is limited and one-dimensional, journalists act similarly.

More often the problems in media covering the EU are related to the direction and intendancy. Is it European or is it National? According to Statham (2008), “the media tends to follow the political system over Europe. They represent much more than the dominant political debate, and this is how journalists understand their role. Journalists see European news as potential stories but use it to expand their role as political actors”. National approach seems to win. Other studies argue the same, such as the one of Semetko et al. (2000) which claims that:

*We know little about political communication and news organizations from a comparative perspective and even less about how news differs cross-nationally in terms of the reporting of domestic and European political affairs. We have very limited knowledge about how citizens in different European countries react to news about European affairs and processes of integration (2000, p. 121).*

**III. THE IMPORTANCE OF GOOD EU COVERAGE**

Journalism is like a window to the world, or it should be as such one. Journalists operate in human societies; thus, they affect but also are affected by the existing technological, social, economic, political, cultural and legal frameworks and contexts in a globalized world. These complexities and interlocking relationships underpin not just the nature of journalism but also how it is practiced (Obijiofor & Hanusch, 2011). In recent years, many scholars have expressed dissatisfaction with the current performance of journalists and media organizations in capturing diverse issues of global concern (Cottle, 2009). The same applies for the issue of reporting the EU, that journalists are managing to perform. EU, as an alive and constantly transformed organization, as we mentioned before, is deeply affected by the approach of the professionals. EU’s image and reflection can be influenced by whatever is written or said about it.

Research evidence suggests that news agenda are dominated by domestic news events, a focus on popular personalities, soft news and entertainment–driven content, concentration on regional news, as well as diminished attention to international news in general (Sutcliffe, 2009; Altmeppen, 2010; Joyce, 2010). Studies conducted to explore journalistic professional routines, prove that there is a tendency for covering internal news to the detriment of external ones.

Journalists’ and media’s responsibility on creating stable and timeless ligaments with institutions, is vital. As Postman (1985, p. 14) claims “We don’t see reality the way it is, but the way our languages are. Our languages are the media. The media are our metaphors. Our metaphors create the content of our culture”. The similarities and differences in reporting EU can therefore affect the degree of sympathy or dislike for Europe by all citizens.
This opinion is also supported by Poulakidakos and Veneti (2018), as they claim that “opinion expression is central to social interactions on social media: certain attributes of a post for instance, can encourage or discourage further participation and expressions of opinion”.

The journalistic approach and media coverage can greatly influence citizens' desire to participate. Participate in what? Participation and democracy are interrelated concepts. In essence, democratic legitimacy itself derives from participation in political events. One keyway in which democracy promotes legitimacy is through consensus, which is based on the choice and the right of citizens to participate in their own affairs. In this way, citizens are encouraged to participate and consider themselves players in the political game that operates on democratic terms (Heywood, 2014, p. 106). In this way democracy is strengthened and the level of citizen satisfaction rises.

In order to interpret the changes occurring in the profession of journalism as a key factor in reporting the EU, we need to consider how this profession is socially constructed, and how these socially shared meanings emerge from the relationships between journalists and EU. Far from being static, these meanings and relationships are continuously reshaped and negotiated by new factors (Arvidsson, 2006). One model that has been offered and largely used in Europe is that that has been formulated by Hallin and Mancini (Hallin & Mancini, 2004; Mancini, 2005). In their recent analysis, these two scholars identified several typologies of journalism, based on the relationship between media and political systems. Their analysis has posited the fundamental question of whether or not one or more European model of journalism exists. In this study, we will have the opportunity to take samples for our research from countries that belong to the Mediterranean or Polarized Pluralist Model but also to the North/Central European or Democratic Corporatist Model (Hallin & Mancini, 2004, pp. 89-145).

IV. HOW MEDIA COVERAGE EFFECTS EU?

Eurosceptism is considered to be the new, dangerous threat for unity but also existence of the Union. As Kaldor and Selchow (2012) claim, “there is a real risk that if Europe remains invisible, perceptions of the European Union will be captured by populist parties, who already stress their euro-scepticism”. The absence of detailed research on the media's position on Europe is puzzling, as the media is often accused of being the basis of today's Euro sceptic public opinion (Adam et al., 2019).

The news media is a major forum for the discursive legitimation of the EU (Hurrelmann et al., 2013) and this is obvious especially when elections take place. For example, as Spanje and Vreese claim (2014), the outcome of the 2009 EP elections was influenced by how the media covered EU-related news during the campaign. As a result, the more parties diverge on EU issues in a country, the higher voters’ probability to vote for Eurosceptic parties, taking into account their vote intention at the outset of the campaign.

Another aspect of European Union that is greatly influenced is that of visibility. EU is indeed here, dealing with a multitude of extremely important issues, solving problems and caring for a future that for most citizens is distant and unexplored. However, who is noticing all this effort? Is EU’s practices visible and appreciated? How does the approach and the tone of the coverage affect the EU? As Frangonikolopoulos and Poulakidakos (2019) claim:

More news about the EU increases knowledge on the EU among the population, and this combined with a greater visibility of European wide issues and pro-EU actors, tends to influence support for EU membership and a positive appraisal of the European Union, while negative tone in the news about the EU has been found to be related to negative public evaluations of the EU (2019, p. 1).

We could all assume that EU alone sets the agenda of what will be discussed and decided in Brussels. This is not absolutely true. Media and journalists play a vital determinant role on this matter. As resulted, this relationship is bi-directional. On one hand, EU sets the agenda for whatever is going to take place inside Europe, but on the other hand, whatever is taking place in Europe, and especially whatever is promoted by media and journalists, can do nothing but become part of this agenda.

V. DIFFICULTIES AND LIMITATIONS IN REPORTING THE EU

Reporting EU is not an easy task at all. Some of the difficulties have to do with the respond that EU news have on the public. The problem of interesting a wide public is many facets. Most of the European news are taken as boring by the citizens. Journalists then, have to find ways to arouse the interest, to make this news look appealing and to woo the readers into the stories told. This is quite hard because most of the news are largely devoid of the dramas, confrontations, and rows that dissociate the public (Lloyd & Marconi, 2014, p. 3). Even when some news is really in strong relationship with the citizens and have straight impact on their life, the technical details and the inaccessible environment of EU appear this news as lackadaisical.
From the view of the journalists themselves, according to Firmstone (2004, p. 42), the key difficulties in reporting EU issues according are: (1) availability of news space in the media outlet the journalist is working for, (2) the pressure of deadlines, and (3) the necessity to capture audience attention. Even these well–experienced journalists cannot always find a reason to promote the EU news high in their agenda. Additionally, grasping the complexity of an EU story without getting lost in technicalities is challenging (Lloyd & Marconi, 2014, p. 43). The fact that the journalists must pretend or even try to be somehow scientists like lawyers, analysts, economists and accountants has a deep effect on the courage that they loose and the effort they must put on, first to understand the deeper meanings and then to present and explain to the citizens.

Compared to other news topics, European issues and European actors get little or no coverage in European news media—even when there is a European Parliament election going on (de Vreese, 2007, p. 128). This failure is compounded by the fact that there is a deficit of pan-European news outlets, and those that do exist either raise little interest from audiences (Machill, 1998; Russ-Mohl, 2003, p. 204), or are primarily aimed at elite audiences rather than ordinary citizens (AIM Research Consortium, 2007; Kevin & Schlesinger, 2000; Raeymaeckers, 2007) or have very localised content or content aimed at specific groups (Chalaby, 2002). Furthermore, the political positions of the national media strongly influence the way they describe and present any major issues of diversity in European Union, such as the representation of refugees in crisis situations (Gioltzidou & Gioltzidou, 2023).

According to Örnebring (2009), the failures of journalism in reporting Europe can broadly be classified into three categories;

First, the failure of representation. Media coverage of Europe fails to be comprehensive, informative and interesting. Representations of Europe are either non-existent, or misleading, too negative or incomplete. Second, comes the failure of production. Media production is organized in such a way that creates institutional as well as individual incentives either not to report European issues at all, or to report them in a simplified, sensationalist and overly negative manner. At last, we find the failure of participation. The end result of these failures of representation and production is that European citizens do not engage with European issues and European politics. The much sought-after “European public sphere” fails to materialize, which is viewed as negative for Europe and Europeans (2009, p. 1).

A group of scientists like Silke et al. (2019) created a typology of some main problems as regards EU covering by journalists. First, media across Europe voice mostly negative evaluations on concrete EU policies and authorities, whereas they defend the idea of EU integration. Second, position-taking is not limited to the editorial pages. Instead, our results point towards synchronization between newspapers’ editorials and their selection decisions within the news sections. Third, synchronization regarding the evaluation of EU authorities and the EU regime is limited to the selection of national voices. Finally, news media’s synchronized position-taking regarding EU integration is also reflected in the portrayal of a political community. Media that oppose EU integration in their editorials also strongly privilege national voices on a quantitative level in their news sections, and thus portray a self-sufficing national community.

Finally, some additional elements of a problematic coverage of EU might be the resource limitations for news gathering and research, journalists’ poor linkages to EU institutions, journalists’ poor language skills and knowledge, the obscure nature of European politics and its lack of news values, editors’ low prioritization of European stories, the overuse of ‘nationalized’ interpretative frameworks and the fact that news organizations are following their proprietor’s alleged political line over Europe (Örnebring, 2009; Schlesinger, 1998; Statham, 2008; 2007; Firmstone, 2004). Additionally, the different journalistic cultures influence the produced journalistic material. (Gioltzidou & Gioltzidou, 2022). In particular, the culture may influence the perspective of journalists, their way of working, and the final journalistic product. (Gioltzidou & Gioltzidou, 2022).

VI. EUROPEAN VS NATIONAL COVERAGE

Despite the increasing of EU integration, most media outlets are mainly organized domestically, reaching out to a national rather than a European audience. This is in harmony with Kevin (2003), Peter (2003) and Gleissner and De Vreese (2005), who claim that “journalists tend to produce news stories that must be meaningful to domestic audiences, leaving behind the European identity”.

One main characteristic of most journalists who cover the EU but also of most media organizations’ is that they produce coverage which is not aimed at Europeans, but at national citizens. Thus, the same item of news is presented in a completely different way across the 28 EU members, leaving no place for cohesion and unity, but rather enhancing the diametrically opposite approach. This aspect can have positive but also negative results on the EU. On the positive aspect Europe can be seen as a common space where differences can exist in a peaceful way and thus promote mutual understanding but also a degree of independence. On the negative aspect, the absolute national view of Europe, might intensify the sense of divergence and heterogeneity, thus it can discourage citizens from being informed about what is happening in the 28
members and focus solely on their own country. In this case, European Union's role is weakened, and it also appears to be outdated.

Foreign correspondents cover European events and issues that are determined by certain news factors including geographic proximity, cultural proximity or direct impact on their audience at home (Galtung & Ruge, 1965; Chang, 1987; Wu, 2003). Most journalist cover the EU with both eyes on the business of determining how far they act in or against the interests of the home country. The outcome is well described by Lloyd and Marconi (2014), “Europe becomes an adjunct to the nation and is simply another chamber in which the latter speaks to itself or a chamber which each nation can blame when something goes wrong”. Additionally, most media in our days concentrate more and more on parochial, regional interest.

In this context, one of the great challenges with regard to European reporting is how to adequately inform the public about what is happening not just inside their country but in all the 28 members of EU and at the same time to convince them that what is happening in another European country might affect them personally more than they think (Lloyd & Marconi, 2014).

Journalists have to put European subjects on the agenda, they have to inform the European citizens about what is happening, they have to provide background information, they have to give broader context and meaning, they have to stimulate and facilitate public debate, they have to hold decision-makers accountable. All these essential tasks can only be performed by professional, independent and well-educated journalists (Horsti, 2016).

Previous research identified several aspects in relation to how the media represented the EU. The most significant concern is the visibility, including quantity of news on the EU (de Vreese & Boomgaarden, 2007; Gavin, 2000) and the type of coverage (Glessner & de Vreese, 2005). These are only a few of the many elements that identify whether media covering on a specific issue is compensatory and promising.

VII. METHODOLOGY

According to Kevin (1997, p. 4), “cross–comparisons of news agendas particularly regarding common issues and themes, as in the case with European political and cultural affairs, prove useful tools in assessing changes in the informational role of the media”. Based on this valuable outcome, our research aims, through a comparative analysis of four national media, to examine similarities and differences in the coverage of European issues, but also whether this coverage is good enough. For the purposes of this study, we examined four websites of national media in a period of 3 days, from October 4th, Friday, to October 6th, Sunday 2019. The selection of the analysis’ period was chosen on the basis of no extremely important event taking place those days in Europe; thus, we wanted to focus on media that present Europe's current events within a regular period. According to Gattermann and Vasilopoulou (2014), “scholars have, thus far, focused on general news coverage of EU affairs, EU election campaigns or the European Parliament etc.”, so in this study we made the preference to analyze EU’s visibility during a routine period and not on special campaigns (Boomgaarden et al., 2010; Gattermann, 2013).

The research was made by collecting data from the official website of the European Union. For our study, we collected data from all the institutions and bodies of the EU that had uploaded news during the selected period, covering a wide range of topics. These institutions and bodies are: European Commission, Eurostat, European Council, EIOPA (European Insurance and Occupational Pensions Authority), ESMA (Securities and Markets Authority), European Parliament and EUIPO (European Union Intellectual Property Office).

This research was based on the analysis of some elements that are widely considered to be of great importance as regards the quantity and quality of media coverage. These elements are the number of produced and coverage total items of news, the type of article, the number of words, the number of the included photos, the number of included videos, the quotes and finally the framing.

As for the countries surveyed, these were selected on the basis of how many years they have been members of the EU, as well as their economic and demographic characteristics. Also, the countries should belong to the Mediterranean or Polarized Pluralist Model but also to the North/Central European or Democratic Corporatist Model (Hallin & Mancini, 2004, pp. 89-145). An attempt was made to include in this research countries with heterogeneous and different characteristics, so that the results would not be photographic and limited. Additionally, all four chosen countries are members of the European Broadcasting Union (EBU), which is the world’s leading alliance of public service media (PSM), with 116 member organizations in 56 countries and an additional 34 Associates in Asia, Africa, Australasia and the Americas. The reason why only EBU’s members were chosen, is because European Union and EBU have a special relationship and association. Specifically, on 20 June 2011 the Council of Europe and the European Broadcasting Union (EBU) signed a Memorandum of Understanding at the Deutsche Welle Global Media Forum in Bonn. The Memorandum of Understanding “defines shared objectives and values, in particular the promotion and protection of human rights, democracy, and the rule of law, and creates a
framework for strengthening and further developing the existing cooperation between the two organizations. In the media field, these objectives translate into action to promote media freedom and pluralism in order to preserve media’s vital role in democracy” (EBU, 2012). This special bond should be an extra reason for these four countries to encounter much more with the EU, but also to present more issues which are related to it. According to the criteria above, the four selected countries are Belgium, Germany, Croatia, Greece.

VIII. NEWS PRODUCED FROM EU VS EU NEWS COVERED BY COUNTRIES

The following analysis provide us some very important information as regards the media coverage from the four selected countries, but also the news that are produced and presented from the several institutions of the EU. First of all, by examining the institutions and organizations of the EU we can say that EU news is produced by a multitude of sources, thus covering a wide variety of different topics (Fig. 1). Data retrieved from the official website of European Union (www.europa.com), showed that dozens of items of news are uploaded every day, communicating in this way all the practices and actions of the organization.

Fig. 1. News releases by each of the EU sources (4th-6th October, 2019)

The processing of this data has shown that, although the news is presented directly through the newsroom of the official site, there is gab as regard the time the news is translated and presented through the local EU websites in the 28 countries. This fact might explain the delay that appears, as regards the time and amount of EU news that the four sample countries present through the national media. Additionally, the focus on data from the four chosen countries – Belgium, Germany, Croatia, Greece - show us the level and the quality of the European Union’s news coverage (Fig. 2).

Fig. 2. How many items of EU news are presented by each country, from the total produced news?

Concerning the coverage of the national media, one thing we can understand is that there is a great gap between the produced news from the EU and the presented news from the, both with qualitative and quantitative criteria. There is a great amount of news that appear in the official web side of the EU, but are not presented at all, by the countries we examined.
Since the number of published articles does not perfectly capture the extent of coverage of each topic, the word was preferred as the unit of measurement (Fig. 3). In detail, Croatia and Greece seems to be in the worst positions in terms of quantity and frequency in covering EU news. Especially, Croatia devotes the least space to EU-related issues, with Greece following by a narrow margin. On the other hand, Germany appears to be more consistent in reporting EU both qualitative and quantitative.

Another important element that we obtain is that there is a clear preference, both from the EU and the national media, for covering EU matters through reportage, while interviews and opinion articles are extremely limited (Fig. 4). This might be explained by the fact that presenting and explaining difficult and complicated European issues is not easy for the journalists and time is very limited for them to understand, decode and present to the audience the EU messages (Lloyd, 2014).

The use of multimedia makes the understanding of the news easier, while at the same time gives them emphasis. As Lewis argued (1984, p. 4) “information transmission is more rapid when pictures and video are used because the printed word becomes meaningful to the reader”. The results of the survey (Fig. 5) clearly show that in all countries the media attempt to emphasize the EU news by publishing at least one
picture at each article. However, the use of video is not that widespread, as only 50% of texts are accompanied by a related video. Regarding citizen statements, the results are encouraging as most articles host additional citizen quotes. This shows that the majority of reports are not simply copying EU Press Releases, but reporters are looking for additional information to enrich their evidence.

Regarding the high presented topics that EU’s official website promotes, we notice that little emphasis is given to scientific and humanitarian issues, while the preferred framing deals with political and financial issues (Fig. 6). On the other hand, countries emphasize political and geopolitical issues (Fig. 7). Belgium proves to be the exception in covering quite a few environmental matters.

IX. CONCLUSION

How do media cover EU? The results of this survey show that the level of coverage is not satisfying. The concepts and aspects of Europe and European Union are so complicated, that they increase the requirements of coverage from the national media. As European Union can be considered a work in progress, reporting EU has many challenges. One of the main challenges is the fact that most media that cover EU have a clear preference in presenting the news from a national perspective.

The results also show that there is a gap between the news that are produced by the European Union, compared to those that are broadcasted in a national level. The importance of good EU coverage is undoubtedly very large, and this responsibility is shared between the journalists who cover the EU but also the national media. The way this coverage is achieved affects the EU intensively, by influencing the attitude, disposition and trust of the citizens towards EU, and consequently determining the present and future of EU. Although the results of this study showed that there is a problem as regard the amount of news that is presented for EU, the problem is more qualitative and less quantitative. The specific examination of four European countries - Belgium, Germany, Croatia, and Greece – confirms this standpoint.
Steps of progress can be made on both sides. European Union should improve the way but also the viewpoint from which news is presented, give extra motivation for correspondents to have the desire to cover the EU but also promote a profile that persuades the citizens that whatever is taking place in the heart of EU, is also taking place in the heart of their homeland. Journalists and media on the other hand, should fulfill their objective in being unbiased and unprejudiced, covering the EU in the best way they can and providing all the needed information that can cultivate a relationship of trust and reliance between EU and its citizens. Ultimately, according to the European Union's official position, the union's purpose is still the same: to promote peace, establish a unified economic and monetary system, promote inclusion and combat discrimination, break down barriers to trade and borders, encourage technological and scientific developments, champion environmental protection, and, among others, promote goals like a competitive global market and social progress. This should be a clear dimension for media and journalists.

REFERENCES


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