

European Journalism. Professional Practices and Challenges¹

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Abstract: *The article focuses on the development of the local European journalism – which aims to link European citizens to EU institutions and to Brussels’ decisions. First, the paper provides a background with general considerations on European media communication strategies and on media coverage of EU matters – European news production and frames, the media use in the European Union as revealed by the most recent Eurobarometer on this topic and so on. Furthermore, the paper explores the official online communication platform of the European institutions – europa.eu/news-room/. Finally, the last part of the analysis investigates the local professional journalists’ practices when it comes to covering EU matters, verifying the professional media practices regarding the local European journalism.*

Keywords: *media communication, profesional journalism practice, local European journalism.*

Introduction

The European Union’s communication system has been impressively developed especially during the latest years, due to both the online, and the Euro-skepticism expressed by its citizens. Basically, European institutions have become the most

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productive media communicator worldwide. Nevertheless, communication has remained too much of a 'Brussels affair' according to the *White Paper on a European Communication Policy*, 2006 (<http://europa.eu/>, accessed March 2013).

Furthermore, the *White Paper* highlights that the national, regional and local dimension should also be addressed when covering European topics. And, consequently, EU citizens would be able to understand how their community is connected to the decisions from "far-away" Brussels.

According to official communication strategies, one of Brussels' communication objectives has been to develop *a local European journalism*, in order to strengthen the debate on EU topics. The present study will focus on the relation between the development of the EU media communication tools and the rise of European Journalism, since while Brussels was building these sophisticated services, media around the world was facing the financial crisis, the digital technologies and the online.

Therefore, which is the relation between the communication strategy of the EU and local or national professional media? Are European citizens better informed regarding EU matters thanks to the new communication policy which is more citizen-focused? Would the digital technologies provide a more suitable mechanism for sending out the European media message to a European audience? Have significant changes in the local European journalism practice been made since the introduction of the advanced digital technologies?

Methods

For the beginning, the paper provides general theoretical considerations and information provided from different surveys previously conducted on European communication. Further, an analysis of the official communication online platform of the European Union (<http://europa.eu/newsroom/>) has been done. The study also includes a short questionnaire (conducted by e-mail or by phone) applied to seven local Romanian journalists, identifying professional media practices in relation with European journalism.

General Considerations

The European professional communication system has been changing rapidly during the last years due to both new trends in traditional journalism, media consumption behavior, and also due to the euro-skepticism wave highly expressed through the French and Dutch rejection of the proposed European Union constitution. Consequently, the European Union was forced to develop diverse communication tools that became generally available, addressing wide segments of European audiences.

The EU media communication services provide live web TV coverage, audio, video and photo reliable archives, permanent updated press releases and much

more, all for free. The main communication tools that the European Union is using in order to disseminate European information are the projects developed within the *Audio-Visual Services of the DG Communication of the European Commission*, alongside with other European media projects financially (co)supported by the EC.

A Study of the Representations of European Citizenship and its Public Communication by the European Commission (1951-2012) (Pukallus, 2012), established that “from the beginning of the European integration process, the Community realized the value of public communication in trying to achieve a solidary European civil society marked by a unity of interests and civil dispositions within its own plurality; and second, that throughout the European civil integration process the Commission has used three different styles of public communication to help the emergence of such a European civil society”.

The three styles of public communication identified by the author of the mentioned research are:

1. the factual style of public communication – used to inform European citizens about the Community, its policy priorities, achievements and sometimes failures;
2. the affective style of public communication - to appeal to European citizens' emotions with the aim of fostering a feeling of belonging to the Community;
3. and the deliberative-rational style of public communication - to communicatively engage with European citizens in an informed debate and a rational dialogue.

According to a study regarding the *European journalism and the communication environment in Brussels*, based on the research carried out with the Adequate Information Management in Europe (AIM) Project (Ionescu, 2006), press correspondents believe in the development of a *common European journalism, based on the convergence of different national professional cultures*. All the interviewed correspondents based in Brussels, in the mentioned research, understand their role and responsibilities in shaping a European identity, even if they share different opinions regarding the elements that should build this identity.

Alongside, when discussing the media audiences and consumption of European matters, press correspondents mention the challenge imposed by the audience's poor level of knowledge on European Union.

Recent studies on *European journalism* mention that “journalism over Europe is emerging as a common transnational experience”; however “the EU news appears restricted to the elite readerships of press” (Bee; Bozzini, 2010). According to Bee and Bozzini, the European news production could be described using the below scheme:

- 1st step: European institutions provide information to foreign press correspondents in Brussels

- 2nd step: the foreign press correspondents in Brussels select and edit news and feed media at home
- 3rd step: the national media inform the citizens of the European countries.

But, in the new media landscape, dominated by the online, is this scheme still functional?

Furthermore, scholars have designed possible news frames for covering European matters. Professor Claes H. de Vreese from the Amsterdam School of Communications developed the following five news frames (the study “Communicating Europe”, <http://fpc.org.uk/fsblob/89.pdf> accessed March 2013):

1. The **conflict frame** emphasizes conflict between individuals, groups, institutions or countries. Research has observed that political debate between elites is often reduced to conflict in the news.
2. The **human interest frame** brings a human face, an individual’s story, or an emotional angle to the presentation of an event, issue or problem. This frame personalizes and “emotionalizes” news.
3. The **responsibility frame** presents an issue or problem in such a way as to attribute responsibility for causing or solving the issue to either the government or to an individual or group.
4. The **morality frame** interprets an event or issue in the context of religious tenets or moral prescriptions. For example, such stories may contain moral messages, judgments, and offer social prescriptions about majority behavior.
5. The **economic consequences frame** presents an event, problem or issue in terms of the economic consequences it will have on an individual, group, institution, region or country.

The most recent Eurobarometer regarding *the media use in the European Union* (http://ec.europa.eu/public_opinion/archives/eb/eb78/eb78_media_en.pdf, accessed March 2013), released in autumn 2012, shows that a clear majority of Europeans continue to believe that they are ill-informed about European matters; while three-quarters of Europeans believe that citizens in their country are not well-informed about European issues; and 68% consider that they are personally ill-informed.

According to a socio-demographic analysis from the same EB, television is the main source of information on European political matters for all categories of Europeans.

Although a clear majority of citizens consider that they are ill-informed about EU, Europeans continue to believe that their national media give sufficient coverage to it, reveals the mentioned Eurobarometer.

EU Newsroom, the official news website of the EU institutions

The official news platform of the European Union's institutions is titled the *EU Newsroom* - http://europa.eu/newsroom/index_en.htm.

Europa.eu is the largest website in the world, and the *EU Newsroom* is the most complex online press room, in terms of the provided content, the communication services available for professional media, the human resources involved and so on. According to the site presentation, it provides online access to official press material released by all the EU institutions, alongside with useful information for journalists. Since the website collects the latest news and press content from all EU institutions, agencies and bodies, EU Newsroom functions as a *single entry point to all EU news*.

Considering the quantity of information, the format of the news website looks simple and the homepage introduces the main services:

- *the highlights* – the section includes the latest stories structured by topic and by month; a highlight could be an official document, photo or video content; examples of materials for this section: *The Council agrees on reform of the common agriculture policy, Commission sets out next steps towards a deep and genuine Economic and Monetary Union, Leaders endorse EU's economic priorities for 2013, Social investment: Commission urges Member States to focus on growth and social cohesion* and so on.
- *the special coverage* – this is an in-depth material which provides background information on different main European issues; the section may provide statistics, surveys, links to websites and more; examples of materials: *EU Enlargement – State of play, The economic crisis – The EU's response, Europe 2020 – Europe's growth strategy, Multiannual financial framework 2014-2020* and so on.
- *the latest press releases and statements* – the section is permanently updated, according to the release of new press material by the European institutions; because of the large number of press materials, a practical browser filters the searched information by topic, by sources, within the current day, within the last seven or thirty days; the number of press releases or official statements may reach up to twenty per day or even more in periods with overloaded agendas; examples of such materials: *Press release - State pensions must guarantee decent living standards for all, insist MEPs - Committee on Employment and Social Affairs, Press release - EU-Turkey relations: MEPs call for renewed engagement from both sides - Committee on Foreign Affairs, Speech: Presentation of the European Neighbourhood Policy package, Statement by President Barroso following the final session of the European Council.*
- *the calendar* – provides structured information about forthcoming events, pointing practical details about the topic, the organizer, the location and the date of the scheduled action; in addition, the calendar also briefly indicates the news, the short background and websites related to the event, information

which could serve as rapid resources for journalists; again, the data within this section may be sorted by date, by organizer, by topic and by type of event.

- *the audiovisual section – video, photo and audio content, sorted by topic and by source* (The European Commission Audiovisual Services or the EuparlTV); the audiovisual services provide professional news coverage that could be used either as a source for producing an independent story, or as package ready to be rebroadcasted in various programs around European or international media stations.

Since the update is permanent, the AV section produces and delivers a unique archive on the history of the EU, starting with European audiovisual material dating from the 1940s – the main events of the last half century of European history, according to their statement. Europe by Satellite covers live the most important European events, and the service is available in natural sound and in up to twenty EU languages. All these news material is free of charge for professional media covering EU topics and for education purposes, which makes it easier for local journalists around European member states to cover European issues.

Local European Journalism

A number of seven Romanian journalists were interviewed within our research in order to verify what the local media approach is when it comes to European journalism – identifying the professional practices when covering European topics.

The sample includes experienced journalists (with an average professional media experience of more than fifteen years) and younger journalists (with an average of around three years) well trained in different programs focusing on EU matters. The journalists are affiliated to local or regional, public or private TV and radio stations, print and online media, in Cluj-Napoca. The socio-demographic profile of the respondents indicates that they all hold university diplomas (BA, MA or PHD). Their educational backgrounds include journalism and communication, law, sociology, psychology and political sciences. Some have also participated at various media training programs related to European matters.

The questions addressed are referring to: *agenda setting in terms of introducing European issues to the audiences; the feed-back regarding the coverage of European matters; standard sources used by journalists and their news desks when covering EU and the use of the EUROPA NEWSROOM (the EU institutions' official platform of communication) by professional journalists on a daily basis.*

European issues on the media agenda

Regarding the European issues introduced on the news desks agenda, the local TV director mentions that they do not have a constant frequency; they are introduced on the agenda according to European events that have a local impact, such

as the European elections, the debates on Schengen, the pan-European horse-meat scandal etc. The local online journalist shares an opposite opinion: he considers that almost 100% from the topics that he covers are European issues, therefore written and targeted for a local or, equally, a European audience.

The local radio journalist explains that he develops European stories once per week; the criteria relate to the idea of proximity – any European topic is interesting enough to worth being covered. Generally, local journalists mentioned European topics like the tax systems of the Member States of the European Union, populist Governance in Europe; European Council meetings; Common Agricultural Policy, debate on European legislation or on European funds, debate on the economic crisis in Europe; debate about the Schengen zone, the European budget and others.

As an observation, according to all interviewed local journalists, the decision of introducing European matters on the news desks' agenda is related to the idea of significance and impact upon targeted audiences.

Feedback on media coverage of European matters

Furthermore, we tried to identify the type of feedback (measured in media consumption in the current case study) in relation with *local European journalism*. The local print journalist explains that regrettably, when it comes to young readers, the interest is very low; however, there is a constant interest in topics on labor market and free movement from readers aged between 25-30.

The local TV director mentions that the audiences' interest vary from very low in relation with the "theoretical topics" (such as the functioning of the European institutions, the future of EU etc), that have a weak impact upon the local communities (targeted by the TV station that the journalist manages); to very high when it comes to European issues with a possible effect upon the community (such as the entrance of Romania in the Schengen area; the EURO coin etc).

The online journalist considers the feedback to be a very good one, since whenever he writes on a more particular European issue; the number of his readers is above the average. The radio and TV journalist mentions that there is an increasing interest, especially in topics like European funds, migration, and xenophobia and so on. Nevertheless, many of the interviewed journalists say that their news desks do not have proper measurements of media consumption.

Sources for covering EU used by the professional local media

Official websites of European and Romanian institutions are the most often used sources that journalists mentioned when developing EU matters. The majority mentioned the online platforms of the European Parliament, European Commission and other European institutions, alongside with the press agencies media reports (the ones that have press correspondents based in Brussels and in Strasbourg).

Information transmitted by MEPs by Facebook or by Twitter is added by the local print journalist; while the online journalist also refers to the LIVE streaming.

Usually, for audio-visual programs, Brussels' or Strasbourg' official statements and press releases are completed by experts in the field (scholars) and with official sources such as Romanian MEPs, national or local authorities.

Finally, we checked if local journalists use the EUROPA Newsroom' communication services, <http://europa.eu/newsroom/> when covering European matters. Answers indicate that the platform is being less used compared to the previous mentioned sources. The interviewed local radio journalists mentioned that very often they use it for the audio files archives for European topics.

Results

At the moment, some local journalists refer to *European journalism* as being a niche; on the contrary, others consider that *the entire media content is European, ever since Romania became a member state*.

Nevertheless, during recent years, local European journalism had the chance to develop also as a result of the complex communication services of the European institutions (due to the reasons mentioned in the beginning of the paper). Almost each interviewed local journalist mentioned the use of an official website, online platforms, social networks, audio-visual service, when covering EU matters.

One obvious remark is that the recent strategy of the DG Communication – gathering the latest news and press material from the EU institutions, agencies and bodies in one place, therefore providing a single entry point to all EU news, europa.eu – was indeed necessary and useful for professional media.

According to the interviewed local journalists, European journalism is still not enough “locally” approached – the most often mentioned sources, when it comes to covering European matters, are Brussels's official ones. However, journalists mention that there is an increasing interest in European matters, especially in topics like European funds or migration.

As a general observation, according to all interviewed local journalists, the editorial decision of covering European matters is directly related to the idea of significance and impact upon targeted audiences. Furthermore, another question may be formulated – considering the fact that Romania is a new member state of the European Union, are some of the media consumers and, to some extent, maybe even some journalists, experienced or trained enough regarding the European matters, in order to understand the permanent link between the decision taken in Brussels and the day-to-day life?

Conclusion and Discussions

The paper mainly explored how is *European journalism* functioning at the moment on the local professional media market. For the beginning, general considerations

regarding *European journalism* were provided. Also, the paper mentions the Eurobarometer number 78 - regarding *the media use in the European Union*. Alongside, the article analyzed the main communication services of the European institutions – gathered on the most complex communication platform (<http://europa.eu/newsroom/>). Finally, the paper investigated how local journalists cover *Europe*.

So, eventually, how will European journalism become more ...local and therefore more citizen-oriented? Would it be necessary that the initiative comes again from Brussels? Or, on the contrary, the needed change must be indeed local. Who will assume the role to *explain*, if necessary, to the audience and to the media, the permanent link that exists between Brussels and all European citizens? Because, as it has been previously said, *we don't have to necessarily love European Union, but we must understand it!*

Further research topics may be formulated taking into consideration challenges like the “*online revolution*” – news-media management, news-media consumption, news-media practices; they have all been influenced by the digital technology. Also, there is a 24-hour professional communication program of press offices and press officers, imposed by the online media; and, of course, there is *the financial crisis* – that had and still has a strong impact upon media institutions around the world, Europe included; many national media institutions were forced to draw back their correspondents and shut down their desks from Brussels.

As a general conclusion, (*local*) *European journalism* has encouraging premises to significantly develop – Brussels understands its significance (and it financially (co) supports media projects), EU citizens need it (Eurobarometers indicate that European citizens declare that they are ill-informed regarding EU matters), while local journalists are noticing an increasing interest (of the audiences) in European matters.

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