

# THE MEDIA AND THE EU: "FOREIGN AFFAIRS"?

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EuroCité, Europartenaaires and *Notre Europe - Jacques Delors Institute* organised the second seminar in a cycle on the European public space entitled "Heading Towards the European Elections" on the topic of "the Media and Europe" in Paris on 25 April.

The session was introduced by Jean-Noël JEANNENEY, the president of Europartenaaires and a communications and media historian, who discussed the issues that the session would be addressing.

Then followed a debate chaired by Yves BERTONCINI, the director of *Notre Europe - Jacques Delors Institute*, with:

- Véronique AUGER: a journalist, she has presented "Avenue de l'Europe", a programme devoted to the countries of the European Union broadcast after the 19/20 news on *France 3*, since September 2006;
- Thomas HANKE: a German journalist, he has been the Paris correspondent for *Handelsblatt* since 2012;
- Isabelle VEYRAT-MASSON: director of research at the CNRS and a media historian and sociologist, she currently directs the "Communication et Politique" Laboratory.

Conclusive remarks by Nicolas LERON, the president of EuroCité, wound up the conference-debate.



## 1. Europe's presence as a theme in the media today

Isabelle VEYRAT-MASSON opened the session with an attempt to map out the field for the debate.

The very notion of a European public space necessarily implies that the media be able to take part in the public debate in order to contribute to providing Europe's citizens with the information they need if they are to participate in a as enlightened manner as possible in the major decisions affecting Europe's development.

We are currently living through a difficult phase in the implementation of this agenda on account of Europe's situation, in which the spotlight is consistently shone on negative information caused by the crisis, and of course that fosters an unfavourable bias.

In quantitative terms, coverage of European issues has generally grown with the crisis, but it varies widely according to the medium involved. Thus while the printed press and the radio address European issues with a certain consistency, television (which continues to be the dominant medium) devotes very little time to Europe.

This point of view was qualified by Véronique AUGER, who pointed out that in the current dynamic the opposite is actually the case, inasmuch as we are witnessing a certain stagnation in the printed press and on the radio, while television is attempting to build European themes into its traditional programmes.

We also need to make the distinction between the time and space devoted to the Union's institutions and that devoted to its various member states.

In this latter connection, panellists unanimously agreed that the press is devoting more time to the various member states' domestic policies but that the institutions continue to receive little coverage.

Thomas HANKE pointed out that such an approach may in fact foster the growth of elements of disagreement between the countries and thus have a negative effect.

Media sociology shows that the fact that journalists tend to come from the more culturally aware socio-professional categories fosters a general consensus in favour of promoting Europe, a convergence which reflects the opinions of Europe's elites.

In addition to this, there is an easily accessible corpus of documentation and of centres for the dissemination of Europe-related information which make it simple for the people of Europe to seek out information for themselves.

Yet despite what appear on the face of it to be favourable circumstances, Isabelle VEYRAT-MASSON pointed out that Europe is at the same time complex, distant, formal and slow, while the media are on the lookout for simple, close and controversial issues.

Thus there is a structural gap between the European process and its portrayal in the media, which must prompt to emphasise the quality of the information intended for the general public.

That quality demands that we both optimise the structure and improve the content of the material offered to the media.

Thus the solution consists, on the one hand, in exploring the nature of the media and the way they are organised, and on the other, in working on shaping the information itself and the way it is put across, because as Isabelle VEYRAT-MASSON said in conclusion, "informing does not mean persuading".



## 2. Enduring hurdles stand in the way of the positive treatment of Europe-related news in the media

Isabelle VEYRAT-MASSON pointed to the structural difficulties of European information, which needs to resolve the inconsistency between journalists' specialisation on the Union's functioning and the broad range of potential themes. A choice has to be made between broad appeal and narrower specialisation in the treatment of any message.

Véronique AUGER subscribed to that view. She stressed that the same difficulty exists in practical terms when training journalists, but also when editorial offices need to decide on their organisation and staffing.

She also underscored the nature of recent European events, which can hardly be expected to attract favourable treatment.

Thus Europe's institutional functioning is not only too complex, it is also currently prey to an atmosphere of crisis and indecision, due to which it would be impossible for any reporting to cast the Union in a favourable light in the public eye.

She also highlighted the European institutions' faulty political communication which, she argued, lacks timing and fails to communicate their actions in good time.

Thomas HANKE noted that journalists have a tendency to address European issues solely in terms of the balance of power, of power games between countries, and at this juncture also of stereotyped images of the various nationalities. Thus the Greek crisis, for instance, has fuelled the re-emergence in various

member states of cliché views both of Germany and the northern countries, and of the Mediterranean countries. This approach therefore tends to sideline cooperation and negotiation mechanisms and, on a broader level, everything that does work properly in Europe, focusing instead on failure, bickering and controversy.

Isabelle VEYRAT-MASSON reminded that what is known as the "Community" approach has lost ground in political leaders' minds and that it cannot be given a fresh thrust by journalists because they simply report messages, with no power to impart a new meaning to them without running the risk of distorting the original information.

Finally, the panellists highlighted some of the specifically French difficulties in developing Europe-related news.

In the view of Véronique AUGER, the opinion of a majority of teachers and of a considerable number of journalists is that Europe is a kind of "Trojan Horse" for free-market policies. Thus players in the media and education system in France are particularly reluctant to talk about Europe.

The panellists also dwelt at some length on the fact that people in France tend to be less open to ideas and news from abroad, because they see France as a specific social and cultural model and they have always been reluctant to consider foreign models importable.



### 3. Exploring potential paths for the future

Responding to questions from the audience, the panellists also discussed ways of boosting the presence of Europe-related issues in the media. Their attention initially focused on what the media system offers and how it is organised.

The creation of European media such as the Arte and Euronews channels means that high-quality content can be offered but that it is too elitist, in the view of Véronique AUGER who would prefer to see Europe being built into more concrete, daily issues.

The panellists voiced the view that the creation of a channel on Europe would be inappropriate on account both of the current saturation of the television network and of the cost, particularly when one considers that public broadcasters tend to be facing cost-containing measures.

The Europeanisation of traditional content, the addition of a European slant or angle superimposed on more traditional programmes, and the attraction of new audiences at a lower social level appear to be the major axes of a renewed and more accessible approach to information on Europe.

The issue of speaking time for European parliamentarians was debated in the follow-up to a recent report by Terra Nova<sup>1</sup>.

Panellists reached the conclusion that it would be extremely difficult in practical terms to produce such a programme given that *France Télévisions'* brief already includes better coverage of European issues.

There, too, there are structural constraints on the development of a specific time slot for debates among Members of the European Parliament (MEPs). People only watch domestic political debates in the various member states if they involve leading or well-known figures which is rarely the case of MEPs. There is a risk of producing something so abstruse that it would totally fail to accomplish its task of familiarising the broader European audience with Europe-related issues.

Thomas HANKE voiced the view that, in European countries with a free press, a large part of the effort must come from the organisation of innovative programmes and content rather than from the terms of practice established by the public sector.

It is up to editorial offices to renew their working methods, for instance by inviting foreign journalists to publish their viewpoints on a country that is not theirs. It is also necessary to europeanise the training of journalists and to build internships in the European institutions or in foreign public-sector

institutions into their career paths; this, also in order to enable them to gain a fresh view of their own country.

Winding up the debate, Isabelle VEYRAT-MASSON noted that while there is still a large amount of room for improvement, we may hope that the media's existing Europe-oriented coverage can be bolstered by winning back the traditional media categories, which

involves transcending their current rooting exclusively in the national public space in order to rethink the dissemination of the message on the basis of an imperative providing for multiple potential reception.

The media will be able to offer real, accessible European content only if they envisage an ideal European end-receiver, be the viewer or reader.

1. Arthur Colin, "Débat politique européen : quel espace dans les médias européens ?", *Note, Terra Nova*, 17.04.2013.

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