

## The power of Euromyths shows that there needs to be a more substantial effort to change the debate on the EU.

Blog Admin

*From bans on oddly shaped bananas, to children blowing up balloons, so-called ‘Euromyths’ have become a pervasive part of the UK media’s reporting of EU policies. **Simon Usherwood** takes an in-depth look at the place of Euromyths in the public debate on the EU, finding that they are much harder to stop than to start. While it is important to debunk these myths, what is really needed is a substantive effort to generate a more mature and thoughtful debate on European integration.*



For many members of the public, much of their knowledge of the European Union comes from the ‘...and finally’ stories that pop up in the media. This is the territory of ‘[children not being allowed to blow up balloons](#)’, ‘[bans on claims that water can prevent dehydration](#)’ and the ‘[end of the prawn cocktail crisp](#)’. Such tales provide much amusement to those who see them, confirming suspicions about ‘Europe’ and its lack of focus on the important things in life. A wry smile – or a loud tut – and on we go, to the next story.

Euromyths hold a particular place in the UK’s public debate on the EU. On the one hand, they are derided by public officials as silly distractions, but on the other, they consume much time and effort. The most notable of these efforts – such as the Commission’s UK Representation [blog](#) or the efforts of former and current MEPs ([Richard Corbett](#) and [Andrew Duff](#)) involve considerable amounts of work, just to rebut what are typically errors or misunderstandings.

The power of Euromyths is clear: they offer a simple and (apparently) telling insight into the world of ‘Brussels’: a world that is neither well understood nor much cared-about. Thus an amendment in an EP committee becomes ‘the EU decides’ or an option in a Commission white paper turns into ‘Europe tells us.’ As much as most people care about the EU (and not much, at least in the [British case](#)), this fills their needs and serves their interest. Likewise, a Brussels press corps which is [shrinking](#) and in need of a story that will grab their editor’s attention, is more likely to go for something a bit off-the-wall, rather than the second reading of a dry (if consequential) directive.



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But Euromyths also serve Eurosceptics well too. The sheer volume and variety of them provides a permanent foundation of material with which to work: the almost instantaneous translation from blog or newspaper article into politicians’ debates or asides in the television studios provides a strong and credible case of ‘no smoke without fire.’ Simply put, Euromyths are much harder to stop than to start. If we take the archetypal [bendy banana](#), we can still find [discussions](#) on the matter 10 years after it started, while I can simultaneously assume that most readers of this post will be at least aware of the

original story. For all the discussions about [what is and isn't a Euromyth](#) (or 'guide to the best Euromyths' in the BBC's telling phrase), and conflation with genuine proposals that jar with popular sentiment (e.g. the ['can we call it chocolate?'](#) legislation and court cases), this basic fact remains at the heart of the matter. Unless and until it is more fully acknowledged, the EU will continue to lose this particular fight.

With a media that is structured to be unwilling to engage with EU issues in general and which consequently stripped back its ability to produce in-depth analytical journalism, and a public that is typically indifferent, the EU's agency to set news agendas is very limited. This is true whether we talk of any one of the individual institutions, or of the Union as a whole: witness the very short (and deeply conflicted) media shelf-life of the [Nobel Peace Prize](#) last year). The classic Sun maxim of '[amaze, amuse or anger](#)' as drivers of content simply does not fit with the nature of EU decision-making. The logical retort, that the EU should not be like that, is true, but unhelpful. For all that representative democracy requires a media to connect citizens and leaders, there is no obvious turning-back to the deferential style of decades past, especially in the age of the internet.

Debunking Euromyths is a start, but it can never be a complete solution, since it is both reactive and incomplete. Like its cousin –'[health and safety gone mad](#)' – the effect is toxic and risks overshadowing the very large majority of proposals that are well-grounded and considered. The media does offer the opportunity to challenge and test over-zealous public policy, but when the exception is taken as the rule, then there needs to be a more substantial effort to change the debate.

At the root of the problem is an unwillingness and an inability to have a mature and thoughtful debate on the nature and role of European integration, either within or across member states. Unless and until that happens, Euromyths will continue to be not only a source of light amusement for the reader, but also their guiding star.

*This post is part of a collaboration between [British Politics and Policy](#), [EUROPP](#) and [Ballots & Bullets](#), which aims to examine the nature of euroscepticism in the UK and abroad from a wide range of perspectives. [Read more posts from this series.](#)*



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*Note: This article gives the views of the author, and not the position of EUROPP – European Politics and Policy, nor of the London School of Economics*

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