

Book Review: Reporting the EU: News, Media and the European Institutions by John Lloyd and Cristina Marconi

blogs.lse.ac.uk/lsereviewofbooks/2015/01/19/book-review-reporting-the-eu-news-media-and-the-european-institutions-by-john-lloyd-and-cristina-marconi/

19/01/2015

This book, based on extensive interviews with EU correspondents, editors, public relations and other EU executives, aims to reveal how the powerful group of institutions at the heart of the Union are covered – or not – by the news media. The authors provide a vivid picture of current debates, writes Ruth Garland.

Reporting the EU: News, Media and the European Institutions. John Lloyd and Cristina Marconi. IB Tauris. 2014.

Find this book: 

This pithy and timely book examines the history of the relationship between the EU's institutions and its Brussels-based press corps. The authors are insider/outsideers who have covered the Brussels beat themselves, understand the cultural aspects of the European project, and, through their own experiences and interviews last year with 32 leading journalists from 27 major newspapers and broadcasters, bring alive what it feels like to report the EU as it faces the ongoing crisis of the euro, and the increasingly centrifugal forces of Euro-scepticism.

The main character in this book, the EU, appears as a perplexing and almost unknowable construct which nonetheless influences the lives of the 500m people from 28 member states in ways that it is almost impossible for news media to explain, not least because the institution resists definition within accepted news values. It is characterised by faceless men arriving at and leaving grey buildings; taking its decisions slowly, through negotiation, and often behind closed doors; and is fundamentally “an elite endeavour” (p.69).

Although the British are seen as commanding the “heights of Euro scepticism”, they are not alone. *Bild*, the German newspaper which, at 3.2 million, has the largest circulation in Europe, also takes a “combative posture vis-à-vis the EU”(p4). Even the formerly pro-European Dirk Schuemer of the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, has become “keenly disillusioned”, telling the authors that: “The most important thing is the famous democratic deficit. There has been a sort of coup d'état at the centre...there is no parliamentary control – no voice of the people – even the senior bureaucrats agree with this. The situation is not hopeless, but it is desperate” (p.106).

The British media are credited with a more investigative approach than the ideologically committed journalists from some of the newspapers of southern Europe, who have traditionally seen their role as promoting the EU as *the* legitimate expression of the rights and aspirations of the people of Europe. In contrast, two thirds of the newspapers read in the UK are Euro-sceptic, and many do not keep staff in Brussels full time. Yet there is a paradox. Although the reporting of the UK tabloids is frequently criticised by both the press corps and EU officials for inaccuracy, distortion and hyperbole, the authors argue that “it does assist at times in pointing out the emperor's nakedness in a way in which more supportive, even relatively neutral reporting cannot”.

The chapter on the economic crisis of 2008-2010 presents a vivid picture from the point of view of the journalists trying to report it. The work was “arduous” and “exhausting”, and the story “fearsomely technical”, requiring generalists to quickly develop economic *nous*. To avoid market sensitivity, much decision-making took place overnight and at weekends, requiring journalists to be on duty round the clock for months. On a single night between May 9 and 10, 2010, as the €750bn fund was being created to prevent the Eurozone from collapse, “more taboos were broken than in 10 years of history”. This required a “daring imagination” from those reporting it (p.50).



Greece gets extra attention as it illustrates the many difficulties facing the news media. The economic crisis led to a crash in the resources devoted to news reporting, and a growing gulf between the perceptions of the Greek public, who saw the EU as the enemy, and the EU elites, who perceived the problem as more serious, even apocalyptic. As one Brussels-based Greek journalist put it: “This is not a normal society we are talking about, but a society on the way to destruction. We have a new class which is ‘lumpen-social’, but it is not something we can talk about” (p.57). Matina Stevis, now reporting for *Dow Jones/Wall Street Journal* explains how, when she visits Athens, she stays in a hotel rather than with her family in order to keep a distance.

Focused as this book is on the perceptions of a particular group of journalists, the authors are on less secure ground when it comes to assessing the link between reporting and public opinion. They claim that coverage “influences both politicians and the public in a very pronounced way” (p.65) without explaining this or citing evidence. They take the former *Daily Telegraph* columnist, now Mayor of London, Boris Johnson, at his own estimation when he claims that it was his widely circulated story “Delors Plan to Rule Europe” that encouraged the Danes to reject the Maastricht Treaty in July 1992. The *Independent’s* Sarah Helm describes how she came to see Boris as “a complete charlatan”. Rory Watson, of the *European*, said that “he made stories up” (p.88). The authors’ reference to Boris as “postmodern” and “fun” seems a bit beside the point.

The Brussels news corps know from experience that street protests, cliff-edge votes to sustain or reject centrist governments, and the rise of neo-fascist political parties play better with the media at home than the technicalities of bail-outs, and the streamlining of financial systems. In this sense, the days of straightforward reporting of EU decision-making appear to be over. After the 2009 Lisbon Treaty, power shifted from the EU Commission to the Council of Ministers and the European Parliament, where Eurosceptic MEPs now make up about one third. Coverage is likely to be less boring, certainly, but more informed? We’ll see.

Ruth Garland is a researcher and PhD student in Media & Communications at the London School of Economics, having returned to study after 25 years working in media relations in publishing, broadcasting, public health and local government. She is researching into government communications. [Read more reviews by Ruth.](#)

- Copyright 2013 LSE Review of Books