

The BNP, the media and Belgium: ethical lessons from the Continent (guest blog)

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Throughout my career I have struggled to know how to handle the dilemma of reporting organised racism. I have a family background that makes me fear brushing extremism under the carpet. But I also know that the political racists need the oxygen of mainstream media attention to build their profile. My LSE colleague Bart Cammaerts has researched widely into political extremism and the media, but he also has personal experience of a country where racist politics is much more popular and embedded in the mainstream. What lessons can we learn from places like Belgium?

Mainstream Media and the Extreme Right. What to Do?

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[The current controversy surrounding the invitation of the BBC of a BNP representative to appear on their flagship show Question Time](#) deserves a more thorough debate than it is getting at the moment.

The central question of this debate should be how the media as an institution and journalists as media professionals deal with an extreme right, post-fascist party such as the BNP. In this regard, it might be fruitful to have a look across the channel, where extreme right parties have been a significant political force for decades now.

In Belgium for instance, Vlaams Blok, now called Vlaams Belang, has increased its share of the vote (and of representatives) every election from 1991 until 2007, reaching at its prime almost 25% of the popular vote in the North of Belgium and 33% in a medium-sized city like Antwerp.

Political Quarantine

The reaction of democratic political parties was to unequivocally and unanimously reject any co-operation with the extreme right, not even with the view of submitting amendments. All democratic parties signed a protocol to that effect. This came to be known as the 'cordon sanitaire', in effect placing the extreme right in a political quarantine.

Although at times under debate, the cordon sanitaire remains intact, 18 years after it was signed. The media's position towards the extreme right, however, was – to say the least – much more complicated and became ever more problematic the larger the extreme right became.

Despite calls from some, a 'cordon médiatique' never materialized and the mainstream media, commercial as well as public, increasingly provided a platform for the populist discourses of hate and division propagated by the extreme right.

Journalists Responsibilities

It is of course over-simplifying matters a bit, but there were (and still are) two main positions with regard to the media's treatment of the extreme right and they are to some extent linked to different paradigms in thinking about the role of journalists in a democracy.

The first school, very much embedded in the liberal tradition, claims objectivity and impartiality and argues that the extreme right should be treated as any other political party and therefore it deserves adequate attention and

exposure in the media in the same degree as any other party that holds more than 20% of the vote. Democracy is not served by excluding the voice of (a significant) part of the electorate from the public space and the common sense and critical watchdog role of the journalist counter-balances their extremism.

The second school finds its origins in social responsibility approaches and public journalism. They refute that the media can ever be objective and impartial and point to the social construction of news, discourses and frames, to the way protest is being covered or to the exclusion of other (left-wing) radical ideas from the mainstream. It is being foregrounded that the most important role of a journalist is to be a citizen first and foremost, rather than a neutral observer and to thus defend democracy against its enemies.

Legitimized Discourses

From this perspective, other rules should apply towards extreme right parties and their ideology. It is also often argued that sharing a platform with the extreme right partly legitimizes their discourses.

The liberal arguments won the fight in North Belgium and representatives of the extreme right started appearing regularly on the news, news shows, in election programmes, etc. Granting the extreme right a platform to disseminate their ideology proved to be a very slippery slope towards presenting them as legitimate political actors being good at their job of opposing the government. More and more representatives of the extreme right have gone through the same media training as democratic politicians and are quite savvy in grasping every opportunity to get their often vile messages across, in spite of über-critical interviewers.

In fact, representatives of extreme right parties often perform a sort of permanent underdog anti-politics that appeals to anti-establishment sentiments – an establishment to which the (liberally inclined) media elites are also considered part of.

Suppressed Voices

There are problems with both positions. The liberal answer ultimately often results in granting the extreme right an open platform, thereby normalizing and partly legitimizing racism and racist discourses in society in the process. Excluding them from (mainstream) public space, however, cultivates the underdog position in which the extreme right revels so comfortably and above all adds ammunition to the repeated claims of the extreme right that liberal democracy is inherently anti-democratic as it excludes and suppresses certain voices and ideas. Ideas on racial superiority, segregation and holocaust denial being prime examples of this for the extreme right.

In effect, the extreme right has for many years used the formal rules (and language) of democracy against democracy itself. Claiming the freedom of speech and expression with a view of silencing others.

I believe that extreme right parties should not be ignored altogether and the societal tensions and conflicts they are the symptom of, even less so. But the media should expose extreme right parties for what they really are and lay barren internal conflicts (just as with other parties) rather than give such parties and their representatives a platform to repeat their discourses of hate and exclusion.

Reporting The Right

Journalists should furthermore be very aware of the dangers of legitimizing extreme right discourses when reporting on the extreme right and when interviewing their representatives.

Pluralism should be radical in a democracy, but for vibrant multi-cultural and ethnical democracies to be able to survive, a common ground relating to basic values such as equality, respect, solidarity, difference, etc. is crucial as well. Popper's paradox of tolerance sums it up pretty neatly, up until what point can intolerance be tolerated before it destroys tolerance all together?

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