

Why does the (UK) media ignore Europe?

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A lot of ballots?

“You can’t have a healthy democracy without a healthy news media” is one of the cliches trotted out by those seeking subsidies for struggling media companies during the present crisis in journalism. And when you see the job being done by the Telegraph on MP’s expenses you have to admit that good journalism can help expose political failings.

But generally, how well does the British media do in facilitating open and sensible debate about the big (and sometimes boring) political issues. How about European affairs for example? After all, we are only days away from a continent-wide election and yet it has barely surfaced in the UK media.

In this guest blog, LSE Media and Communications Lecturer and former political communications advisor, [Bart Cammaerts](#), takes the UK press to task for its failure to explain or debate European affairs properly and unpacks the reasons and consequences of our media’s disregard for EU politics.

ELECTION? WHAT ELECTION?

Dr Bart Cammarts

It would be kicking in an open door to state that the media and communication tools have always been crucial facets in mature democracies in many ways. Scholars attribute a pivotal role to the media on several fronts: informing citizens about the world, about politics, about politicians; holding our ruling elites accountable and being a critical watchdog; but also providing a forum for debate and the confrontation of ideas and ideologies about how to organise and regulate society, the economy and as recent events have shown the practice of politics itself. Furthermore, from a more participatory perspective, pushed by blogging and the internet, we also expect our media to facilitate citizen participation and give more space to non-elite voices.

The importance of these distinct, but I would argue at the same time complementary, roles the media should fulfill becomes even more succinct at times of elections, considered by many the high mass of democracy. To be clear here I don’t agree with such an elitist view. However, the next moment of glory for the amorphous sounding ‘electorate’ is less than a week away. In recent weeks it occurred to me that the upcoming elections were almost



Euro campaign

totally absent from the UK media discourse and debates. Having checked several media in other European countries, such as Belgium, the Netherlands, France and Spain, the campaigns there are in full swing with extra space in newspapers dedicated to the EU elections, a special banner on the front page of the websites of public broadcasters and newspapers, special daily election shows on television with features and live debates between leaders of the different parties, etc.

Invisible election

Given the political roles that we expect our media to live up to, I have found it particularly frustrating and disturbing to see, read, hear, hardly anything about the European, or for that matter the local, elections in the UK media. To put it bluntly, there was more attention in the UK media for the recent US elections than for the upcoming EU elections. It seems as if the media, but also the political machineries that are behind political campaigns are holding their guns and it is highly questionable whether any shot will be fired at all. The reason? As always there are many, but let me briefly develop three here.

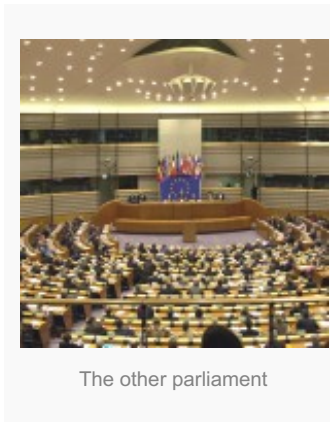
First, one cannot but refer here to the Chinese drip-drip-drip-drip torture campaign of the Daily Telegraph, which has not only succeeded in completely paralysing the entire political class, but in an era of the spectacular it has also mesmerised all media outlets, print and broadcast alike, into feeding their audiences with the next episode of the expenses soap and outpouring of outrage. Why hasn't anybody thought of releasing all this material in one go from day one that the Telegraphs campaign started? That way the guillotines could have been rolled out and done their deserved work rather swiftly and efficiently, so that everybody else could have moved on to debating the issues that really matter to citizens in their everyday lives and make a difference for them in various ways depending on the choices that will be made, both on a European and local level of governance.

Scandal of scandals

I do acknowledge, of course, that the expenses scandals have exposed some fundamental flaws in the democratic make-up and structure of the UK, as well as its entrenched class-structure and that this merits radical debate and fresh thinking for new democratic solutions, procedures and ethics. But I would like to argue at the same time that this should not be at the expense of making clear to citizens what the exact choices are with which they are faced in less than a week time, both in relation to Europe and the local.

The second reason why the European elections barely feature in public and media discourse at the moment is most probably due to the fraught relationship between the UK and 'the EU', both as an idea and as a complex of institutions. The two main parties are internally split over the relationship between the EU and the UK and a general tendency to avoid direct confrontation on Europe can be observed.

Brussels louts



Furthermore, because UK public opinion generally speaking dislikes 'Brussels' and is highly sensitive over matters of sovereignty, it does not pay off to expose internal division on Europe, certainly not in a time when the political class as a whole is perceived as deligitimised. The current state of affairs is, however, that that UK is bound by a succession of EU treaties to transpose legislation approved by the EU parliament into UK law, to name but one reason why Europe is important for the UK and merits a more thorough debate than it is getting now.

The third reason why the European elections in particular do not get much attention in the UK media at the moment is a bit more complex and yes I admit also more speculative. Because of the divisive nature of Europe and what it represents and because the main parties are focused on addressing the legitimacy crisis with which they are faced, the only parties that are really eager to campaign on Europe at the moment are the smaller parties, hoping to capitalise on the distrust of the main parties and aspiring to get an MEP seat.

Small is not beautiful

Apart from the Greens, many of these smaller parties are, to put it mildly, not very popular amongst many media. On the one hand the focus on the dogfight between New Labour and the Tories, with the LibDems as the third dog in the kennel, does not leave much room or space for smaller parties and alternative ideas in mainstream media. But on the other hand, a debate on Europe and European issues with parties such as the BNP and UKip inevitably invokes the ugly combination of populism and nationalism which if we are honest does not sit well in British mainstream (media) culture either.

What bothers me the most in all this, is that the process of electing our elites to be legitimate foremost requires a knowledgeable and informed citizenry, open access for all citizens to different political ideas and ideologies, the confrontation of clear choices between different (democratic) solutions to tackle the many societal and economic problems or issues with which we are faced. Choices that also have different implications in terms of who will benefit and who will lose out.

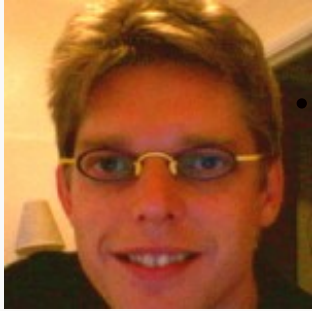
Media responsibility

Certainly, the media and increasingly also communication tools should not be seen as quick fixes to have these pre-

conditions for a legitimate election fulfilled, but we also have to acknowledge that mediation is increasingly essential to make our complex democracies function and for citizens to make sense of politics.

Besides this, in my letter-box in North-London I have up until now only received one amateurishly photocopied flyer by the Libdems lambasting New Labour and the Tories, but nothing from other parties and certainly nothing that relates to Europe. So what's left for citizens? The internet? Yes, if they do a considerable effort, but what about those citizens that do not have the time, skills or sick curiosity to go online and look for policies and positions of the different parties?

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– Belgian citizen and subsequently rather pro-Europe ;).

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