

A Shrinking Brussels Press Corps Could Put Investigative EU Journalism at Risk

blogs.lse.ac.uk/eurocrisispress/2013/11/19/a-shrinking-brussels-press-corps-could-put-investigative-eu-journalism-at-risk/

Eurocrisis in the
Press

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11/19/2013

Citizens rely on the news media for information about European politics. At the centre of the news media's role in EU integration stands one group of journalists: Brussels correspondents. However, research shows that many correspondents experience both economic as well as professional obstacles when reporting on Europe – if they don't get sent back home in the first place.

Most of us have little chance of experiencing European politics first-hand. We must thus rely on how the media report on Europe. This media coverage is shaped by journalists working in "Europe's capital", Brussels. The Brussels press corps is a close-knit group of correspondents, characterised by diverging journalistic traditions, languages, and journalistic skills. Brussels journalists are no "traditional" foreign correspondents as they do not report about "foreign affairs", but national issues – from an international location. Many EU citizens are not particularly interested in these European issues, which thwarts the work of Brussels journalists. I have examined the work of Brussels journalism and their relationship with citizens, policymakers, as well as other observers of public life.



My results have shown that, on a personal level, experience plays a role and the longer a journalist lives in Brussels, the more she or he associates with colleagues of other nationalities. However, "on the job", newer member states' correspondents can experience difficulties when working with journalists from other EU countries. A Latvian radio journalist told me that she could "not share the same experience with the journalists from Germany and England, our journalism tradition is quite new. It changed completely after Soviet times". A Hungarian journalist working for a national newspaper said that "the English, the French or the Dutch colleagues or newspapers get the information before [we] have access to it". Similarly, a Czech journalist added: "The *Financial Times* has 8 people in Brussels and I am alone. Do the maths!"

A correspondent's relationship with official sources is perhaps one of the most important aspects of journalistic work. Happily, most correspondents find that they have relatively easy access to information coming from EU institutions. Yet, they still often find themselves at a disadvantage due to "a status of insignificance within the European media market". This means that journalists from the newer member states sometimes feel overlooked in comparison to their colleagues from member states such as Germany or the UK. This is not only a problem of small countries: a Polish correspondent, working for a major newspaper, told me about a distinct hierarchy within the Brussels press-corps, and that in Brussels "some animals" were "more equal than others". He had observed that the press corps hierarchy consisted of three "leagues": A group of "heavy weights" from *Reuters*, *Financial Times*, *BBC* as well as major German, French and British publications – all of which were clearly favoured by EU staff when it came to access to exclusive information. These "big animals" were followed by a group composed of other journalists representing major national newspapers, which enjoyed less but still adequate attention. Lastly, he said, there was a "forgotten league" of local media, smaller publications (sometimes from small states) and freelancers.

Journalists thus often feel a certain resentment stemming from a perception of unfair treatment at the hands of the EU institutions in general and communication officials of the EC in particular. Interestingly, the *Financial Times* (*FT*) emerged as a common example against which many journalists directed their frustration. A Czech journalist told me

of a well-known “joke”, which states that “the *FT* computers are connected directly to the EU Commission”.

I also examined the relationship of post-communist Brussels journalists with their home offices and editors. Journalists working for public broadcasting companies and political newspapers are generally happy with the airtime and print space allocated to them. However, this was not the case for privately-owned audio-visual media. Some journalists remarked that the general knowledge on EU issues at their home offices was low, and paired with little effort to learn more. A Polish TV correspondent recounted the following story, when she proposed an interview with an EU Commissioner: “[S]ome guy from my TV station says: ‘OK, but who is this person? I don’t know him. Nobody knows him’. And I say: ‘This is important. How are people supposed to understand if they don’t see the people?’”.

Journalists from new member states often express the impression that their audiences at home are both uninterested and uninformed about the EU. Most journalists agree that their audiences’ disinterest stems from an inability to understand how events in Brussels could directly affect their lives. While this is likely to have changed in at least some member states during the last few years, one factor stands: Because journalists believe their audiences are not interested in their coverage, they often write each piece as if they were explaining concepts for the first time. A Latvian correspondent felt that, because “European questions are the last ones people want to hear today” it was her responsibility to “tell them as simple and interesting as possible” what the EU was about.

Many correspondents find explicative, objective and rapid information-gathering to be the most important ingredients of journalism in Brussels. It is not clear if this opinion represents the development of a specific ‘type’ of foreign correspondent, but it closely coincides with findings by other authors on the journalistic type of the ‘explaining ombudsman’ in Brussels: as a consequence of a [highly-complex subject matter and declining public support at home](#), journalists see it as their highest goal to *explain* the EU and make the EU decision-making process in Brussels better understood. Other forms of reporting such as investigative or critical reporting are not as popular, which might be connected to the fact that new member states’ correspondents feel at disadvantage in the news-gathering process compared to their colleagues from other big (and powerful) publications.

Brussels journalists play a vital role in EU integration, because they are situated at the pivot point of European politics: Brussels. No communication effort on the side of the EU can be successful without these journalists acting as its principal agents. My studies show that the work situation and professional network of correspondents in Brussels may have detrimental effects on their reporting of European issues. In Brussels, the importance of smaller and also poorer member states is reduced, which leaves journalists at a disadvantage when researching their stories. Moreover, little interest for EU affairs at home may put limitations on journalists’ news reporting, which might lead them to stress national angles over European ones. Brussels correspondents also display a certain level of cynicism regarding their audiences’ interest in EU news. The complex subject matter of EU affairs and press work leads journalists to adapt an explicative but also rather uncritical view towards EU news reporting. In conclusion, common perspectives are eschewed in favour of national interest and international and transnational dialogues are hindered by uncritical reporting – a fact that might aid an EU communication deficit.

This evidence must be interpreted in the light of a number of developments: the economic crisis has [reduced](#) the Brussels press corps, which probably increases the [pressure on those that remain](#). Several countries thus have too few correspondents in Brussels. The shrinking Brussels press corps can also be attributed to technological changes, such as an increased focus of EU communication on online channels. Maybe, so the argument, journalists need not be in Brussels to get the latest information on European politics? This stands in conflict with the idea that investigative journalism is able to observe and report within the sphere of “backstage politics” made in the cafés and corridors, thereby keeping political actors in check. Such in-depth reporting can only be accomplished on site.

This article is based on research published in [Lecheler \(2008\)](#), [Lecheler \(2009\)](#), [Lecheler \(2013\)](#) and [Lecheler & Hinrichsen \(2010\)](#).

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Note: This article gives the views of the author, and not the position of the Euro Crisis in the Press blog, nor of the London School of Economics.