

6 Can political journalism exist at the EU level?

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Obscure decisions taken by unknown politicians or technocrats in a political and institutional system nobody can understand might be a good way to summarise the impression that EU public affairs frequently give. Some writers criticise the EU's lack of a co-ordinated communications strategy for this state of affairs (Meyer 1999). A more common complaint focuses on the EU's so-called 'democratic deficit', with most writers insisting on the legal and procedural aspects of this legitimisation problem: the unelected Commissioners, the weakness of Parliament and the complicated decision-making process.¹ From this point of view, legitimacy would be solely a technical problem, adequately resolved by institutional reform. However, the question of legitimisation might be rather more complex. The issue of the 'democratic deficit' has probably been badly presented since very few studies have questioned the representations given of the original political system: its processes, issues and actors. Indeed, most of the time, European decisions seem to come out of nowhere because the political process they have been through has a very low public profile.

Yet, there are about 800 people in Brussels whose job it is to scrutinise the EU, to interpret it and to make their findings public: 800 journalists who know perfectly well the political dimension of any decision. They are the filter through which institutions that have no natural audiences – except geographically, culturally and politically divided publics – are given publicity. Yet even though it is one of the biggest press corps in the world and despite the increasingly crucial role it plays for EU citizens, it remains an anonymous body which has been studied very little (Morgan 1995; Schickel 1995). This is somewhat surprising, since a study of EU correspondents is a unique occasion to compare journalists from different countries in a context which is not comparable with the work of traditional foreign correspondents. In our opinion, the study of this journalistic community, and especially its ability to politicise EU news, is of crucial importance (Radiolau 1976; Funstall 1970). Until the EU political system has been given social visibility, it will probably remain a 'cold monster' in the opinion of European citizens.

In general terms, three main attitudes toward the politicisation of EU news can be observed among EU correspondents. These can also be regarded as three conflicting or competing definitions of the job of an EU correspondent. The first, which we call 'institutional journalism', produces coverage more concerned with 'policies' than 'politics': a technical and expert-like coverage of European current affairs. As this chapter shows, an older generation of French journalists exemplify this approach. In contrast, a newer generation of French journalists have developed a definition of their role which is closer to the most legitimate forms of journalism – investigative reporting and political journalism. Finally, and this approach is particularly relevant to the British correspondents, coverage of EU matters may be framed through the prism of national political debates. In this case the politicisation of events is related to the national issue agenda and the resultant coverage does not treat the EU as an independent political system.

This chapter is divided into two main sections. In depicting the 'small world' of Brussels journalism, the first section argues that the organisation, rules and rituals of the press corps strongly influence the way in which EU matters are covered in national media. The second section focuses on three approaches to the politicisation of EU news, using French and British journalistic practice to exemplify the argument's central analytic points.

The microcosm and the way it works

The group of about 800 official EU journalists constitutes a particular microcosm: a specific and limited social group with its own history, practices and customs. In studying media coverage of the EU we need to understand how this community of journalists functions. Given that the vast majority of these journalists are working abroad, they organise themselves in a very specific manner which is quite unlike that of any national press corps.

A small world

The rhythm of an EU press correspondent's life is governed by visits to unchanging places and events in which they experience a real feeling of community that gives the press corps the appearance of a 'travelling cocktail' going from lobby to lobby. The most ritualised moment is the Commission's daily press briefing. This encounter between the central institution of the EU and the journalists demonstrates a powerful paradox: while journalists are given very little new information at these events, most of them are anxious to attend what appears to be more of a social ritual than a press conference. Nevertheless, these rituals are very important for the press corps in Brussels because it is through them that they are socially incorporated into the institutional and political system of the EU. Indeed,

after a few years, these journalists become members of what can be called the 'first public of Europe'. By this term we mean an over-informed social group which is aware of every single (political) fact that happens in the EU political world. Yet while they all know what is going on behind the scenes, as well as being familiar with the official discourse, very few will openly discuss this political reality.

Every day, at a few minutes before noon, between 200 and 300 journalists flock to the Commission's presidency building. Most of them arrive at the Brycdel on foot from nearby offices. Their destination? The ritual *rendez-vous de midi* to which they are invited by the Commission's spokesman. With their official credentials in hand (which they will not even be asked to present if they are considered 'regulars'), they reach the underground press centre where they meet their colleagues over a drink in the nearby lobby bar. At precisely 12 o'clock, press information in the form of Commissioners' speeches and various documents from Commission services (such as reports, economic data and surveys) are arranged on display stands. While the most scrupulous will get all the papers, the more relaxed will grab only the ones that seem interesting to them. At this moment, the quickest off the mark are the agency journalists who, while still queuing, will phone through the most urgent news to their offices – for example, on merger authorisations.

The formal press conference takes place after the correspondents have obtained their documents. It is then that they enter the press room: a semicircle with barely room for 200 people. This crowd is remarkable in that a third of EU journalists spend at least an hour of their precious time attending a press conference at which they will learn scarcely anything that they do not already know. In fact, the press conference merely consists of a presentation of the current subjects and the latest developments concerning particular problems. The whole is presented in a very civilised way by the spokespersons who tend to soften all problems and disguise conflicts.

The most striking point about this somewhat sanitised presentation is that most of the journalists are aware of the conflicts and problems that the spokespersons refuse to talk about. Indeed, they have their own sources: their 'off the record' declarations collected from civil servants and sometimes directly from the spokesperson, which enable them to know what is going on behind the scenes. Most of the time at these press briefings, information comes from the room, not from the speaker. It is often the questions asked, rather than the answers given, that underline the problems that a particular decision might imply for the various countries involved. Given that these journalists cannot be aware of all the national particularities and situations concerning the numerous subjects dealt with by the Commission, the press conference enables them to anticipate the debates that certain questions will raise.

A fascinating feature of this *rendez-vous de midi* (the name itself is significant) is the regularity with which the journalists and the European

Commission spokespersons attend. When asked about their activities, journalists spontaneously mention this ritual moment as the fixed point of their working day. They have even adopted a religious vocabulary: the spokespersons are referred to as 'high priests' saying a 'mass', while 'our daily bread' is used to qualify the documents given to the journalists. Some of them even doubt the meeting's professional interest: 'the press room to me, it's a place where I have fun. No, it's absolutely not a working tool... the press room never provided me with information' (interview with a French broadsheet journalist).

In fact, it is above all a social event: an occasion to meet colleagues in a relaxed atmosphere, to discuss daily matters of interest and to encounter spokespersons in an informal way in order to get off the record reactions or information. The most important feature of the 'briefing' is certainly not the press conference itself, but the daily meeting it generates among all the journalists. Deprived of editorial offices and of their habitual colleagues, they recreate (in the same way as they do in the press centres provided by all the European institutions) a professional environment through which they can break out of their isolation. In the Commission's press bar, as in the Council's, they can share views and sometimes information and contacts. Thus they can compensate for the fact that they are often the only representatives of their national media.

It looks like a mass. These people are isolated. They work all day long in their office. For some of them at home, in their flat... it's quite a useful contact.

(Interview with a French press agency journalist)

This ritualised encounter is, therefore, extremely important to the internal functioning of the microcosm: it is the place where affinities and feelings of animosity are most obvious and where the existence of distinct journalistic cultures is most apparent (in the way questions are asked, for example). However, it is also a way for newcomers to find out the opinions of their more experienced colleagues: it reduces the uncertainty concerning the interpretation of information. When we use the term 'ritualised encounter' we mean that this daily *rendez-vous* has quite an invariable structure: every day new subjects appear in the press conference but the interaction between the institution and 'us' journalists remains broadly the same, hence, conferring on it the dimension of a ritual.

Some journalists have pointed out that the atmosphere inside the official Brussels press corps has changed and they highlight the fact that the growing number of journalists tend to establish more formal and professional relationships. At the same time, others underline the shock they felt when discovering this microcosm and the rules that govern it. The most striking factor seems to be the interpenetration of the journalistic circle by other social actors such as the civil servants, politicians and lobbyists

who populate Brussels. When mentioning his very first days in the Belgian capital, this journalist speaks of:

the absolute horror: a technocratic world that was obeying incomprehensible rules for the outsider . . . a world where I would say journalists, civil servants and diplomats were sleeping together. There was no distance at all, no objectivity. A European militants' world of people persuaded that they are working for the good of humanity. In short, I couldn't distinguish between who was a journalist, who was a civil servant and who was a diplomat. It's a bit strange, isn't it?

(Interview with a French broadsheet journalist)

Thus, these journalists form part of a wider microcosm that includes all those with a professional occupation linked to the EU. This 'European people' (Shore 2000), as we might call them, is perhaps this political Europe's only public: constantly looking for news, rumours and gossip.

Journalists often mention this phenomenon of a closed environment because this 'European people' lives shut off from the rest of the world in very specific districts. What is more, they frequent the same places which they alone are able to afford. This promiscuity has an enormous effect on the journalistic work of people who are in Brussels for more than twenty years and who become prominent personalities of this small European world.

All these people live within an area of about two square kilometres. . . . they send their children to the same schools, obviously go to the same expensive restaurants because only the expatriates and the civil servants can afford them. So they meet in the same bars, in the same schools, in the same stores. . . . So it's very difficult not to get into this network. You meet a young civil servant: he's pleasant, he's your age and little by little he moves up the hierarchy. . . .

(Interview with a French broadsheet journalist)

It is surprising to see how the geography of the European institutions significantly diminishes the journalists' working perimeter: Breydel (home of the European Commission Presidency), Justus Lipsius (European Council) and the European Parliament are just a few hundred metres from each other. Within this triangle (or close by), one can find numerous bars and restaurants and most of the correspondents' offices (de la Gacivrière 1992). Consequently, these people are in constant contact with each other: at work, in bars, in restaurants, in the street and inside the buildings of the European institutions. This enables the establishment of a real *esprit de corps*.

This rather friendly and fraternal atmosphere is further strengthened by a low degree of rivalry among journalists – very few scoops appear at the

EU level that are considered as such by the national editorial offices. Barely concerned with competing against each other, journalists can more easily develop collaborative relationships: when several events take place at the same time, they share information and, sometimes, the workload. Whenever someone has an exclusive the others are not embarrassed because they do not have to justify themselves to their editorial offices.²

Training and socialisation

The microcosm represents more than these rituals and places. It is also a regulatory system where journalists gain experience of a political reality that most of them discovered only on arrival in Brussels. Besides the lack of information concerning what European political life entails, the EU suffers from a deficit of recognisable political imagery which, practically speaking, prevents an effective widespread understanding of European politics and current affairs. In fact, there are very few symbolic 'common places' and no immediately recognisable reference points, both of which would facilitate coverage of the EU's activities.

During their first weeks in Brussels, most journalists confess that they believed they had 'landed on the planet Mars' since the 'Euro-speak', the technicalities and the complexity of EU processes corresponded little with what they were previously accustomed to. Nevertheless, daily contact with the European political and institutional system has meant that these EU correspondents, and all those whose professional activity is linked to Europe, have since gained an intimate knowledge of its processes, the political staff, the places and the issues.

The technicalities and political complexities mentioned above appear to be a popular point of contention. In fact, most of the journalists interviewed spontaneously mentioned how tough it was at first to understand the decision-making processes. Indeed, most affirmed that they needed a one-year period in order to adapt themselves. One particular press agency journalist recalls the 'humility' one needs when beginning as an EU correspondent, even after a long and prestigious career as a foreign correspondent, such as he had enjoyed. The intricacies of the work and the institutions with which these journalists deal are such that journalists must completely rethink their methods.

The harshness of the situation, the existence of this microcosm where everybody knows each other and where there is very little competition, partly explains the phenomenon of mutual aid and the welcome given to newcomers. As one journalist puts it:

When I first arrived here, I was an absolute layperson on these subjects but, in fact, things soon went well. I met some journalists who helped me, who showed me the way, who explained how things work. . . . As the Brussels world is rather small, when you know two or three people, you

soon know ten then twenty then fifty. So finally, from this point of view, it went well.

(Interview with a French regional newspaper journalist)

This mutual aid and friendliness are clearly visible. As we have already said, the absence of an editorial office is compensated for by help from colleagues from other newspapers. Indeed, the Brussels 'old boy network' is extremely active: it possesses a kind of moral authority on the younger members since its members have an intricate knowledge of the issues and workings of 'the European machine'. Additionally, they are Brussels' 'best address books' and can therefore help the newcomers establish a network of acquaintances.

Moreover, once the training period has ended, the posting appears much more rewarding than other 'foreign' journalist posts. Press agency journalists often recall how much the EU post is different from a traditional foreign correspondent's post where access to sources is much tougher; most of the work is limited to following the national press and where there is little direct contact with current affairs. Thus, several journalists evoke a certain fascination with the EU system and a growing satisfaction which results from an impression that in Brussels they are finally 'at the very heart of things'.

Indeed, unlike most citizens, the journalists whose job it is to cover current affairs within the EU follow a kind of self-imposed political 'crash-course' in order to grasp the workings of the European political system. Of course, they confess that initially they had only a very superficial knowledge. However, given their obligation to write articles, they are rapidly forced to become familiar with the specific EU political processes, issues and institutions. They develop a kind of formula which enables them to decode European issues and, once they have gained the necessary experience, they can even anticipate events rather than merely react to them. While for most Europeans decisions seem to crop up from nowhere or from 'Brussels', once their training period has ended, these journalists are able to understand what is at stake as well as spot all the actors and problems involved:

When a directive comes out, we know perfectly well the reasons for its ambition or on the contrary for its modesty and almost all the obstacles it will have to go through and we could almost anticipate the end result: that Italy will remove that because . . . That the French will moan about it because of the sovereignty thing, that the Germans . . . the trade unions and the Danish . . . will respond in a particular way . . .

(Interview with a French economic broadsheet journalist)

Therefore, the press corps has become a privileged observer of the EU. Little by little, its members have come to know intimately this political and

institutional system which was as unfamiliar to them as to the lay European citizen. In this respect, one can describe these journalists as the first, and perhaps the only, European public, whose members have acquired a set of perceptions and a political understanding about the workings of the EU system which most European citizens do not possess.

Probably, the most striking example of the nature of the European Union's only public is provided by some opinion polls concerning European Commissioners. When, for example, the French monthly magazine *L'Expansion* decided to try to evaluate the Commissioners' popularity as they would for any other national political figure, there was much debate about the constituency they should survey. Besides the obvious problems of cost and organisation, the main obstacle to such surveys is the fact that, with few exceptions, the political figures in question are for the most part complete strangers to most Europeans. When asked about members of the European Commission, citizens would probably not have been able to pass judgement on individuals whose names they do not even know. EU correspondents were therefore asked to answer the questionnaires in order to establish a 'hit parade' of Commissioners.

It is the means used to collect the results for these opinion polls rather than the results themselves that is most revealing, because it clearly demonstrates the official role of the press as Europe's only real public. This public is in fact made up of people who are bombarded with news and comments about the EU in a way which the average citizen is not. One could even say that the press pool – this microcosm from which individual Commissioners try to obtain assent through regular meetings – is the sole representation of a European public opinion. Indeed, through the questions the journalists are asked, the Commissioners are able to understand how different nations react to individual issues. What can be taken for granted in France may be slightly more difficult to introduce in Germany or in another country. Thus, the press corp's reaction gives a hypothetical idea of how an actual European public opinion, with its various national tendencies and problems, might function.

Having learnt how the EU works, these journalists can develop analytic skills which enable them to write political stories about current affairs. However, most written articles on the subject fail to depict a decision's political implications in spite of the specificity which the EU institutional system represents. In fact, the only conflicts that are given time and space are those involving member states, as is the case for any form of inter-governmental bargaining. While EU correspondents are very well aware of the intense political life in Brussels, this particular European dimension is hardly ever explored, which results in a reinforcement of the public belief – one shared by national editors-in-chief – that Europe is excessively technocratic. There is a distinct difference between what these journalists know about any decision or fact and what they actually write about it.

Three approaches to the politicisation of EU news

Although the Brussels press corps can be largely depicted as a microcosm, this does not mean that a kind of 'Eurojournalism' with its own homogeneous practices and production has emerged. In fact, national boundaries have not disappeared – as one British journalist puts it, 'there are fifteen microcosms' in the press room.³ There are principles of organisation which are specific to any group of national journalists. One cannot, therefore, understand the EU news produced in any member country without bearing in mind the kind of relationships that exist among the different national groups of journalists. Indeed, apart from the language barrier, national professional and political cultures still determine EU coverage, while each national press continues to organise itself according to its own principles, which in turn produces a particular method of reporting 'Europe'.

On their arrival in Brussels journalists must learn to deal not only with existing patterns of coverage and the development of the institutions' communication strategies, but also with their editorial offices' expectations and their own conception of their work as journalists. It is possible to distinguish between at least three forms of journalism in Brussels which represent the different attitudes to the politicisation of EU news: institutional, investigative/political and domestic/political journalism. This section examines these three approaches, using French and British practices as exemplars.

Different organisational patterns

As far as the French and British press are concerned, two main organisational differences need to be emphasised from the beginning: turnover policy and the influence of the nationally based editorial offices. Both of these have consequences for the coverage produced and especially for the correspondents' room for manoeuvre when deciding what events are relevant for their media.

Let us first look at turnover policy. The primary factor that one must take into account when analysing the way the British journalist group organises itself and the place it occupies in the press corps is the time these journalists spend in Brussels. While French newsmen and women have generally been EU correspondents for quite a long time – even the youngest – British journalists spend barely more than four or five years posted in Belgium. Indeed, their newspapers consider that too long a stay could undermine their readiness to be critical and that they might, as Mrs Thatcher used to say about British officials in Brussels, 'go native'.⁴

This turnover policy has two major consequences: it prevents British journalists from gaining prominent positions among the microcosm's

members and stops them from making the most of their socialisation period since they are likely to leave Brussels just as they have learnt the technicalities of the EU system. The British press is quite prestigious and well known in Brussels, particularly the *Financial Times*.⁵ Individual British journalists, however, remain quite anonymous. As a result, the British press corps has long had a weak influence on the organisation of the EU institutions' communication policy. For example, up until 1995, even though there were about three times as many British journalists as French, the official languages of the Commission's press briefing was French. Given that they are required to give up the EU job after such a short period, British journalists are unable to become experts on EU matters to the same degree as some French journalists are. This phenomenon makes it more difficult for them to apply political journalism to the EU, since, as we have seen, the socialisation period is essential to journalists who plan to write news stories explaining what is really at stake, the balance of power that exists and the actors involved in the policy-making process.

A second difference between French and British journalism in Brussels concerns the kind of relationship that exists between the correspondents and their editorial offices. While French journalists are quite free to evaluate the 'newsworthiness' of information and to define their own position, their British counterparts seem to have a much stronger link with their London offices. EU correspondents become experts who are in a strong position to determine what is at stake. Since editors have very little interest in (and knowledge about) EU news, they can hardly contest the choices made by the journalists. Yet British newspapers paint a very different picture since EU news is not only considered relevant solely for those who already have the detailed knowledge of an expert, but is also deeply embedded in national politics. As one journalist put it 'I am an extension of Westminster or rather Westminster is an extension of me' (interview with a British press agency journalist). This concept of a post which is geographically located abroad but which is not a traditional foreign correspondent's job is widely shared among the French as well as the British. However, in the latter case, it has a different significance: while EU news almost exclusively goes to the 'foreign news' pages in France, British correspondents very often have their articles published in the 'Home news' section. Fundamentally, and above and beyond this revealing insight into the organisation of British newspapers, EU news in the UK is most of the time framed through the prism of domestic politics. Two factors have to be taken into account here. The first concerns the kind of domestic issue that the EU represents. Second, one has to consider the degree of politicisation of newspapers and especially whether European issues occupy a dominant place or not in their news coverage.

Box 5.1 Differences between British and French members of the Brussels press corps

<i>France</i>	<i>Great Britain</i>
Long stay	Turnover policy
A group divided between 'institutional' and 'investigative' journalists	Prominent position of Geoffrey Meade
Weak influence of the editorial offices	Strong link with London (especially political editors)
Europhiles	Euro-sceptic bias

Institutional journalism

Historically speaking, EU coverage has been dominated by this traditional institutional journalism and it is only in the last few years that new insiders have begun to contest it. Institutional journalism refers to a journalist's professional habits where the main role is that of a 'clerk' documenting EU activities and giving a daily account of current events and issues. This type of coverage is more concerned with 'politics' than 'politic' and is best represented by newspapers such as *Le Monde*. This approach has long been found among French journalists – the turnover policy of British newspapers prevents such a phenomenon occurring – and indeed has long been the dominant definition of the EU correspondent's job. Representatives of this approach have become prominent personalities in both the press corps and the wider EU microcosm. In short, they have become 'institutions' in their own right, as well as part of the institutions they cover:

I realised in fact that these people who were here for thirty to forty years, who have been here since the beginning, were European campaigners. That is, they believed in the European idea. They have made Europe as much as the Eurocrats themselves. They have popularised the European idea, they have covered it from the beginning. It's their baby. These people aren't journalists in the original sense of the word. That is, they don't see things in a competitive way... They are used to seeing things as a family where everybody takes part in the construction of an ideal.

(Interview with a French broadsheet journalist)

Their technocratic coverage of EU news excises the very political nature of events, the power struggles and the clash of interests. Conflicts between the

various actors (top civil servants, politicians and lobbyists) never feature, even though, as Hooghe's study of the Commission's top officials clearly shows, political and ideological differences exist inside this institution (Hooghe 1999). Indeed, the only struggles represented are those which oppose member states as in any traditional form of intergovernmental bargaining. This form of European coverage dates back to the period when these journalists first arrived in Brussels (the late 1960s), when Europe's main concern was the Common Agricultural Policy which was of interest to only very few social groups – notably farmers who had gained expertise through their professional involvement. The journalists' self-identification with the European political project provides a further explanation of their reluctance to highlight the EU's controversial aspects.

As far as their sociological profile is concerned, these journalists are also often the veterans of the press corps and are seen as leading experts on European matters: the many years spent covering these institutions and the priceless contacts they obtained while they were junior journalists rubbing shoulders with future top officials have transformed them into the 'best address books in Brussels'. From the group's internal viewpoint, these veterans command respect because of their in-depth knowledge of European affairs and their analytic skills. However, they have also gained influence by helping young, newly arrived journalists, providing them with contacts and introducing them to 'the right people'. While none of them is a 'media star', they have benefited from symbolic rewards in the small world of Brussels: they are influential and looked upon as experts among journalists; they are prominent personalities in the microcosm and talk to officials and Commissioners on equal terms. Present in Brussels since the 1960s or 1970s, they started out as 'believers' who identified themselves with the European institutions and their political project. Thus, one of them can say that he 'considers himself as a fake Eurocrat without the salary' because the discourse and the aims of the Commission have become his own. This assimilation with the aims of the European institutions has been criticised by a new generation of journalists.

The problem is that, very often these people, the journalists, 'think the right way' because their desire is to be integrated into the machine instead of scrutinising it, criticising it, analysing it, dissecting it. Their dream is to be accepted by those people.

(Interview with a French broadsheet journalist)

This accusation of collusion is fairly routine in the journalistic milieu and, as far as Brussels is concerned, is used by other journalists to describe the kind of ties that exist between the institutional journalists, on the one hand, and politicians and Commission officials, on the other. Given that they arrived very young (it was often their first assignment as a journalist), they met people of the same age who were at that time Commission trainees

and who later moved up the hierarchy to become members of *cabinets* or even Commissioners. Yet these kinds of acquaintances imply comradeship and friendship with people whom they are supposed to be able to criticise. Undoubtedly, this relational capital that they have cultivated makes their work easier and is reinforced and legitimised by their 'faith' in the European political ideal. In the past, as long as the press corps was small enough for everybody to know each other, the daily exchanges/communication between journalists and civil servants (especially spokespersons) was very friendly. As one journalist puts it, the daily briefing used to look more like a 'pleasant discussion' than a professional press conference. Nowadays, as the institutional journalists bitterly point out, the will of the spokespersons 'to get a message across' is obvious and they seem to regret the 'good old days' when information was given confidentially between friends who shared the same convictions about Europe.

Rather than insisting on what is in fact a relatively 'natural' collaboration between journalists and their sources, more benefit can be derived from an analysis of this phenomenon in terms of the shared assumptions and beliefs which exist between these two sets of actors (on the phenomenon of shared assumptions, see Radtke 1976). Since these journalists have both a social and intellectual identification with their sources' world, they develop a 'reaction of protection of the institution', a kind of self-censorship which they justify by their belief that the Commission is acting for the public good, even if there are occasional lapses of behaviour.

Yet, as one German journalist explained, things have changed in Brussels and the Breydel's cosy press centre now welcomes journalists who tend to practise a new kind of journalism:

Until the early nineties investigative journalism was an unknown species in Brussels. Most of the press corps, myself included, saw ourselves as fighting on the same side as the Commission to build up our common Europe. . . . Only a couple of years ago some journalists, given time and money by their editors, started to dig deeper and to look behind the daily press conferences, declarations and so-called 'background' briefings. Far away from mainstream reporting another truth saw the daylight.

(Nathie 1998)

Investigative reporting and the politicisation of the EU

A second approach to EU coverage recognises that Europe is not just limited to the Common Agricultural Policy, but that it has become a political and institutional system in its own right.

My contribution to the French press (I think) is to have shown that Europe, the coverage of Europe, isn't 'techno', isn't obviously techno-

cratic. And that you can make investigations, you can make revelations, you can make scoops . . . you can make the news and that's something that wasn't true five years ago. . . . One used to have the impression that only the Common Agricultural Policy existed (which is definitely boring and the less I write about it the better). . . . Now everybody knows things are not boring.

(Interview with a French broadsheet journalist)

This 'new species' of journalist is made up of those who define themselves as 'investigative reporters', since they were able to uncover scandals concerning Edith Cresson and other Commissioners as well as expose the BSE crisis. Unlike most of their peers they do not consider that EU coverage is limited to experts and they refuse to hide behind a specialisation which they see as synonymous with a technical, expert-like and biased coverage. As one academic commentator notes, 'the position of critic of specialisation is a way for those who adopt it . . . to disqualify their colleagues since the worst reproach that can be directed at a journalist is to consider him as a "militant" or a spokesperson, that is someone who goes against journalistic "objectivity" and "honesty"' (Marchetti 2000). As they strike a new journalistic pose in Brussels, investigative reporters accuse their predecessors of being actively involved in the issues that they cover. In contrast, their new approach highlights their self-definition of a journalist's status: their 'objectivity' is demonstrated by their will to reveal scandals and dig out scoops. They have also decided to treat the EU as they would any other political system by giving an account of the internal conflicts and struggles that exist.

These journalists differ from the institutional journalists in respect of their 'late' arrival in Brussels – usually in the period following the signing of the Maastricht Treaty in 1992. Compared with their British colleagues they seem quite established in the job, yet at the same time they represent a new generation. They did not come to Brussels on the strength of their own conviction or faith in the EU's political project but they saw fit to make the most of their socialisation processes within the EU microcosm. Once their training period was over, their intimate knowledge of the functioning of Europe's political system enabled them to go beyond the traditional account of decisions taken in Brussels. Indeed, after a few years in Brussels, they have developed their own informers' network, with whom they enjoy a trustworthy relationship, and are likely to understand what is at stake in every conflict that fuels their investigative and political news stories.

I would say that after four years, I began to be efficient. That is, I began to understand all the internal mechanisms and power struggles. I began to know enough civil servants and then you can dig out scandals . . . [You need] to be completely integrated into the mechanics, to know people who trust in you, who know you'll never break an 'off', that the documents they give you are in a safe and that nobody will lay

their hands on them. I mean you need networks to understand what is going on.

(Interview with a French broadsheet journalist)

The professional methods of the 'investigative reporters' also differ from those of the institutional journalists. While the latter have developed useful contacts inside the institutions and have reliable sources which they protect, the former do not have the kind of 'reaction of protection towards the institution' that is characteristic of the institutional journalists and they do not hesitate to reveal even their most compromising information. Moreover, in a journalistic circle which has long been characterised by friendly and intimate contacts, they have professionalised their relationships with sources by refusing to dine with officials and develop friendships.

We aren't friends with these people. We are from different social backgrounds. We'll never belong to their social world: we'll never earn as much money as they do, we'll never be civil servants. So, we should never forget what we are: small.

(Interview with a French broadsheet journalist)

After arriving in Brussels, which is not in itself a very symbolically rewarding posting, these journalists wanted to redefine the traditional EU correspondent's job in a way that conformed more to their professional expectations. They wanted to show that Brussels was capable of allowing the most legitimate and prestigious form of journalism to prosper, rather than just supporting an institutional approach that essentially offered local symbolic rewards to journalists. As Marchetti emphasises, by refusing to class their older colleagues as 'journalists' the new generation are defending 'a more professional and more autonomous conception of the job, that is, most of the time, a more subversive and moral one' (Marchetti 2000).

You give the posting the complexion you want. In the past nobody would have imagined that it was possible to undertake investigative reporting.

(Interview with a French broadsheet journalist)

In order to do so, these journalists have developed routines which are closer to a professional definition of good practice: investigative reporting and political journalism. Although they remain 'Europhiles', they are not seeking prominent local positions in the microcosm, nor do they share the same set of beliefs and assumptions as the institutional sources. Hence, they tend to be more critical towards the functioning of the EU. This intermediary position ('Europhile' yet critical) makes them a privileged beneficiary of any eventual leaks. Since they have gained the reputation of being 'investigative journalists', those who want certain documents and facts to become public go directly to them.

They also tend to analyse EU events in a political way, explaining and describing the internal struggles and conflicts that take place inside the institution. They consider the EU as neither a technical nor an apolitical issue, nor do they regard it as an inclusive fraternity. To them it is a 'continual struggle' which involves member states, officials, Commissioners and institutions, and they want to give an account of this political reality. They therefore develop a style of political journalism in which they portray Euro-politicians and write accounts of daily political life so as to explain what goes on behind the official discourse. One of the best examples of this approach was a regular column called 'Couillises' [Backstage] published in the French national daily *Liberation*.

The introduction of these professional methods into the daily coverage of the EU enables them to turn the Brussels post into a more prestigious and potentially interesting job for other journalists. Even if this new form of coverage is still not widely spread in the French press – it is mainly to be found in *Liberation* and the weekly news magazine *Le Nouvel Observateur* – competition between national broadsheets and the retirement of most of the institutional journalists may lead to an increase in the value of EU news.

What is actually taking place here is a symbolic struggle, particularly fierce in the French case, concerning the most legitimate journalistic approach to take in Brussels. The scandals involving nepotism and the resignation of the Santer Commission brought this opposition fully out into the open and helped to harden each group's position. Members of each group traded accusations: institutional journalists were alleged to have connived with EU officials, while investigative reporters were accused of being superficial and of having been manipulated. In fact, this symbolic struggle in Brussels between two conceptions of the journalist's function is a reproduction of what is taking place within the profession in France: the institutional journalists now represent an anomaly in a field dominated since the 1980s by a definition of journalism that tends to privilege exclusives and spectacular news (Champagne 2000).

Finally, one should note that some British newspapers have also developed a form of investigative journalism in Brussels. The case of the *Daily Telegraph* is rather revealing in this respect. Since the start of 2000, Ambrose Evans-Pritchard has been the newspaper's EU correspondent, having previously served as a correspondent in Washington where he became famous as an investigative journalist by uncovering scandals about the Clinton presidency. Before he arrived in Brussels his future colleagues had already nicknamed him 'the Prodi killer'. In fact, a few months before his arrival, he was in Italy to investigate Prodi's political career and the potential scandals he had been involved in. It is clear that the Euro-sceptic position of the *Daily Telegraph* played a big part in the decision to send a journalist with such a profile to Brussels.

The 'nationalisation' of EU news is one of the main differences between the British and French press.⁶ First, political journalists based at Westminster may find themselves regularly involved in coverage of EU news, something which hardly ever occurs in the French press. Second, the coverage produced by these journalists, either on their own or with the regular EU correspondent, is intimately linked to the national political debate. In this respect it differs from a journalistic definition of the post where EU politics are covered on their own terms, with specific actors, conflicts and power struggles. In contrast, such a 'nationalisation' of EU news occurs in the French press only on very specific occasions.⁷

This cross-national difference in approach is connected to the kind of political issue that 'Europe' represents in the two member states. Since the Maastricht referendum in 1992, the EU is no longer a watershed issue in French politics. In fact, among mainstream parties there exists a widely shared consensus on Europe and arguments about fundamentals between leading politicians hardly ever occur. In Britain, however, EU issues are deeply embedded in national political debate and some of the fiercest struggles between (and within) mainstream political parties concern European issues (Wilkes and Wring 1998; Anderson and Weymouth 1999). The only British journalist to have retained a post in Brussels for fifteen years explains how his relationship with his editorial offices has evolved over time:

It was quite an easy job because as an EU correspondent I was quite important. But there wasn't much to do because the news desk did not want much. When Mrs Thatcher arrived asking 'what is going on in Brussels? We are losing sovereignty' etc.' then it began . . . then it became domestic politics . . . Little by little I've been in continuous contact with my political editor in Westminster. At the beginning there was nothing, it was pointless; nothing to discuss. But since Thatcher, there is always something happening at Westminster which is linked to what is going on in Brussels and the other way round . . .

(Interview with a British press agency journalist)

After Mrs Thatcher's premiership turned the EU into a domestic political issue, it became not only part of political debate but also of the political positioning of the national press. One of the main differences between the British and French press is the partisan politicisation of newspapers. While British newspapers adopt a clear political line, their French counterparts, using a 'rhetoric of objectivity', refuse to act in a partisan fashion (Marchetti 1997). While French newspapers may have political leanings, no editorial stance is adopted which favours one political party or another. Thus, in the French case the elite political consensus among mainstream parties on

Europe continues to be reinforced by newspapers which, broadly speaking, are all Europhile.

In stark contrast, the British press is not just divided over Europe, but the majority of national newspapers have adopted a Eurosceptic approach (Tunstall 1996: 240–55). The politicisation of EU news is therefore carried out through the prism of domestic politics. As newspapers reflect and reproduce the clear division that exists among political elites, EU news is introduced into debate within a particular national framework. While French coverage is characterised by two rival conceptions of the EU correspondent's job (broadly speaking, institutional versus critical journalism), British coverage of the EU can be depicted as being dominated by a particular newspaper's editorial policy, with the correspondents supposed to cover Europe according to the newspaper's position on the issue of 'Britain and Europe'. For example, in the British case, the role of the sub-editors is to rewrite the pieces produced by correspondents, taking into account the newspaper's stance on the EU. This role is much less important in the French case.

This 'nationalisation' of EU news has affected the way in which the group of British journalists organises itself in Brussels. While the French press corps has two poles of attraction based on the two forms of journalism we have outlined, British correspondents have only one – Geoffrey Meade, the Press Association's correspondent in Brussels. When asked to name the most influential person or newspaper in the British camp, journalists spontaneously and unanimously cited this representative of the national news agency. He is the journalist who determines the 'newsworthiness' of any event. As one of his colleagues remarked, 'when he decides it's a story, it's a story', and Meade himself ironically explained that British journalists consider him as an 'oracle' and that his views and advice are listened to with great respect. His influence is related to three factors. First, it is linked to his seniority; he is the person who has the greatest in-depth knowledge of the European institutional system. Second, each journalist has to bear in mind that Meade's press releases 'are on [their] chief editor's desk'. The final component of his influence – and the most revealing one – is the fact that the media he deals with cover only British current affairs. Given that his entire coverage of EU news is UK-centred, it corresponds perfectly to what the London editorial offices expect.

The 'national filter' which this particular journalist represents is symbolic of the way in which British newspapers deal with EU news. The form this politicisation of news takes is a result of interpretations made on the basis of domestic political frameworks: is a decision of the Commission likely to embarrass the British government or not? Paradoxically, however, though it has the strongest 'Eurosceptic' press, British journalists did not anticipate the political crisis that led to the resignation of the Santer Commission. Since Euroscepticism fuels most of the articles that are written on the EU, corruption and wastage are taken for granted and 'Euro-

scandals' are commonplace in British newspaper coverage of Europe. In addition, since British newspapers and journalists have always considered EU news from a domestic perspective, they were unable to detect the existence of a real and specific political crisis. As a result, they did not pay much attention to the changing balance of power between the European Parliament and the politically weak Commission. Moreover, as no British Commissioner was involved and the main informer was 'an unknown Dutchman' (Paul Van Buytenen), the national editorial offices were not interested in articles which might have given an account of events. The belatedness of British journalists to react in this instance is evidence of the kind of politicisation that takes place in their newspapers: a politicisation that fails to take into account the specific political dimension of an institutional system which cannot be compared or reduced to that which exists in individual member states.

Box 5.2 Three attitudes towards the politicisation of EU coverage

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| <p><i>Institutional journalism</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Older, in Brussels for more than fifteen years • Self-assimilation to the institution • Intellectual and political project • Protection of the institution <p><i>Investigative journalism</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Younger • Distance and reliable sources • Professional project • Scandalisation <p><i>Politicisation through national politics</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Four or five years in Brussels • Professionalisation of the source-journalist relationship • Editorial project (for example, 'Profit Killers') • Scandalisation through national politics |
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Conclusion

This chapter has given an overview of the way the EU press corps organises itself, the role it plays in the socialisation of journalists and of the kinds of journalism that can be found in Brussels. Since we have focused on the politicisation of news, many other aspects have not been taken into account. However, by concentrating on the internal organisation of the selected national groups it has been possible to describe the processes of internalisation and of self-legitimation that presently take place in the press corps. The comparison we have made also enables us to counterbalance what might be mere national particularities and so to enrich the analysis

of each group with factors that relate back to political, professional and cultural differences.

Notes

- 1 For a critical approach to theories of the democratic deficit, see Smith 1999.
- 2 This situation is probably changing as investigative reporting develops. However, for most journalists who do not practise this kind of journalism, competition still does not exist.
- 3 The most striking example of this organisation of the Brussels press corps along national lines is provided by the seats the journalists occupy in the press room, for instance, French and British journalists always sit in the same part of the room alongside their national colleagues. There are very few exceptions to this unwritten rule.
- 4 One purely economic explanation for the turnover policy among British correspondents is that after five years their companies are obliged to make national insurance and social security payments at the Belgian rather than UK rates.
- 5 One could ask to what extent the *Financial Times*, especially in its European edition, qualifies as a *British* newspaper.
- 6 Interview material.
- 7 This is not to argue that French media coverage never adopts a 'national' approach to EU news. In the French case such 'nationalisation' of coverage may take place under two sets of circumstances. The first concerns a crisis issue which has direct consequences for domestic politics. A good example of this was the BSE crisis in which the French government opposed the Commission and other member states regarding health and safety issues in general and the continuation of the ban on British beef in particular. The second – and more common occasion – concerns coverage of EU summit meetings when the President and Prime Minister of France are presented as defending national interests. At these events, journalists from the national desks and from media that do not have any permanent EU correspondents (which is true of most broadcasting companies) arrive to cover the event and, according to their colleagues based in Brussels, do so from a national perspective, for example only attending press conferences involving French representatives and being much more concerned with power struggles among French officials (especially within the context of executive 'cohabitation') than with the European bargaining taking place.

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Part II

Towards a cynical coverage of politics?