



European
Research Area

EUROPEAN POLICY BRIEF



Communication in Crisis: Europe and the Media

Policy implications of EMEDIATE, an EU-funded research project involving nine institutions led by the European University Institute.

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INTRODUCTION

Why does Europe need a coordinated communication strategy?

In order to seriously engage its citizens and mobilise their support, the European Union needs to establish a coherent communication strategy. Such a strategy is essential for promoting integration and advancing the EU's geopolitical aims. Unfortunately, an effective unified policy on communication does not currently exist among EU member states. This deficiency compromises the EU's capacity to promote a cohesive set of values and engender a shared sense of purpose.

Without a competent communication policy, the European Union will continue to have difficulties defending its legitimacy at times of political and institutional reform.

Unlike the notion of 'Europe' – which has retained much of its symbolic power - the European Union lacks a sustaining myth and corresponding set of symbols. This limits the bloc's ability to elicit feelings of belonging among its citizens. Consequently, the EU is widely perceived as 'cold', technical and too complex, and its activities are generally not regarded as newsworthy.

To overcome its communication deficit, the EU should establish new symbols and imbue them with meaning. Progress can also be made by promoting a distinctive EU ethics in public communication. Such an effort could help gain recognition for the achievements of EU institutions, highlighting their contribution to socio-economic development throughout Europe.

KEY OBSERVATIONS

**Part 1 of the research:
Based on European media coverage of crisis events in Europe between 1956 and 2006.**

How have the media in Eastern and Western Europe dealt with European issues in the post-war period?

Mass media are the primary means of access to a European public sphere, and they are the main producers and reproducers of European issues in that sphere.

Media references to 'Europe' and European identity are relatively uncommon in Western European countries. This may reflect the fact that they regard themselves as part of Europe's historical core and take their 'Europeanness' for granted.

Starting in the 1980s, there is a noticeable change in focus with respect to the way Western European media cover European issues. Their focus shifts away from Europe to the European Union. This trend gathers pace in the 1990s, with the concept of 'Europe' being largely eclipsed thereafter by a notion of 'the EU'.

- In the 'East', references to Europe or the EU are rare before 1989.
- After 1989, with the continent undergoing geopolitical re-organization, media references to Europe become more common in Eastern and Central Europe. This is particularly true for countries such as Poland and Slovenia that have sought to redefine their Europeanness.
- Only in the first decade of the 21st century do references to the European Union gain greater significance in Central and Eastern European media discourses.
- Whereas Europe and the EU appear as clearly defined notions in Western countries, references to them in Central Eastern countries are ambiguous.
- A positive perception of the 'EU' as a unifying force dominates public opinion after the end of the Cold War.

From the late 1990s onwards, general debates about the nature and development of Europe and the EU are replaced by debates focusing on institutional aspects, becoming more technical and less identity-oriented.

KEY OBSERVATIONS**What role do national 'filters' play in public perception of the EU?**

The increase in technical representations of the EU at the turn of the century coincides with a revival of 'national filters': the national 'we' takes precedence over a common European 'we'.

Occasionally the disconnect between national and EU identities expresses itself in criticism of the EU's legitimacy with respect to crucial concepts such as democracy.

National media interest in Europe tends to emerge only after internal political problems are solved, as was the case in Spain, Greece and Ireland in the 1970s and 80s.

Europe appears in the national public spheres only when it serves the national political aims of media-based debates.

Today the EU is perceived as 'cold', technical and too complex.

The media generally do not regard the EU's activities as newsworthy.

KEY OBSERVATIONS

Part 2 of the research:

Based on interviews with 90 journalists in 11 countries (the Czech Republic, France, Hungary, Ireland, Italy, the Netherlands, Serbia, Slovakia, Slovenia, Spain and the United Kingdom) and a review of current research literature.

Why is there so little media coverage of EU topics?

European and EU-related news topics tend to play a relatively minor and sporadic role in the overall content of the mass media.

The lack of EU-related news coverage reflects:

- the privileged status of national news relative to the seemingly ‘foreign’, and
- a general neglect of business, politics and international news in favour of less serious content.

A preponderance of evidence shows there is no shared ‘European’ dimension to journalistic cultures.

Journalism cultures are intrinsically ethnocentric and state-centric. EU issues are still largely viewed through a national media lens.

Creating a ‘European’ editorial product is possible only if the style and content are adapted to the individual media cultures where the consumers live.

It is virtually impossible to create a common informational or editorial product across national/cultural boundaries in the short or medium-term.

What impact have EU policies had on public broadcasting?

The role of public service broadcasting (PSB) has declined significantly in most EU countries compared to the situation 10-20 years ago.

In some countries PSB viewing has declined to a tiny fraction of the total audience, especially in places (like Greece) where there has been a distinct failure to insulate PSB from direct government influence.

The decline of PSB services is attributable in large part to policy changes at both national and EU levels.

KEY OBSERVATIONS

The increasing role of commercial broadcasting services (allied to public policies) has led to a convergence of content, schedules and formats among public service broadcasters and their competitors.

EU policies on media content services have privileged commercially orientated enterprises, producing more 'lite-news' and entertainment-orientated news formats.

EU media policy does not support the treatment of complex news events related to EU or 'European' developments.

Although in some countries (e.g. Britain) PSB is deemed to have a special responsibility for providing 'European' news coverage, current policies aimed at promoting that may be highly limited in impact or even counterproductive.

Despite its limitations, public service broadcasting may offer the best (and in some countries the only) source of media diversity since commercial media are increasingly serving up the same product.

What is holding back the development of a pan-European media culture?

Obstacles blocking the development of a common European journalistic culture include:

- editorial demands that media coverage be relevant to people's immediate, everyday lives,
- the national or regional character of advertising markets, and
- the trend rejecting an information-based editorial culture in favour of a more entertainment-oriented culture.

Recent EU and national media policies amplify the commercial and competitive pressures on journalistic practices and editorial cultures - pressures which discourage the serious and sustained treatment of foreign news, including that related to European affairs.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- Develop ideas for the public sphere to legitimise the EU's enlargement and integration (e.g. promoting social solidarity in post-industrial societies).
- Further develop information and communication policies that simplify the public image of EU institutions, explaining in plain language their work and achievements.
- **Seek to create a visual EU vocabulary that avoids the obstacles of linguistic pluralism.**
- Utilize iconic images from EU history (such as those found in EMEDIATE's Visual Archive on Europe) to promote pan-European public discourse.
- **Promote pan-European rather than national interpretations of 'Europe' and stress their relevance for the EU. Establish common meanings of Europe that resonate in all countries.**
- Emphasise the value dimension of the EU.
- Strengthen the role of transnational and European media in creating a European public sphere.
- Link up transnational and European media with national media corporations.
- Explore options for preserving public broadcasting as a vital feature of journalistic culture in European countries.
- Use interactive media technologies such as cable TV and the Internet to involve the viewer in the construction of a European-national news culture.
- Demonstrate that a united Europe has an important responsibility as a positive actor in world politics with far greater power than any single EU member state.

RESEARCH PARAMETERS

EMEDIATE (Media and Ethics of a European Public Sphere from the Treaty of Rome to the ‘War on Terror’) was a research project that sought to advance our understanding of the European public sphere and the media’s role in shaping it.

Objectives

To provide an overview of the literature on the European public sphere.

- To assess how existing literature has analysed the connection between the media, the public sphere and ethics.
- To integrate research done at national level (also in less-known languages) in member and accession states into a common European research area.
- To investigate the role of the media in creating and discussing ‘European crises’.
- To investigate the diverse national editorial cultures in Europe and assess their convergence in a single global (rather than distinctively European) news-making culture of the post-war period.
- The investigation of common visual repertoires used to represent the morally ‘right’ and ‘wrong’ during periods of ‘European crises’.
- To assess the role of the media in constituting European public spheres.
- To develop a set of ethical guidelines for media reporting in Europe.

Methodology

The study adopted a variety of methodological approaches, notably:

- analysis of secondary sources (e.g. media studies),
- analysis of press material and radio programmes,
- visual analysis of images,
- content analysis of web sites and interviews with journalists.

The analysis of media materials followed the intellectual and methodological tradition of Critical Discourse Analysis. The overall integration of case studies adopted a critical historical comparative perspective

PROJECT IDENTITY

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Website	http://www.iue.it/RSCAS/Research/EMEDIATE/Index.shtml
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Further reading	Triandafyllidou, A. Wodak, R. Krzyzanowski, M. (eds) (2009) <i>The European Public Sphere and the Media: Europe in Crisis?</i> London: Palgrave