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An Elusive ‘European’ public sphere?: the role of shared journalistic cultures

Monika Metykova¹ and Paschal Preston²

ABSTRACT

It has been widely accepted that media (and consequently journalistic values and practices) play a crucial role in the creation of a public sphere and this applies to a shared European public sphere as well. This chapter explores issues linked with the existence of a shared European journalistic culture, and, based on empirical data collected in eleven EU member states for an EU-funded research project (EMEDIATE: Media and Ethics of a European Public Sphere from the Treaty of Rome to the ‘War on Terror’, project no.CIT2-CT-2004-506027), the authors argue that we can hardly identify such a shared European journalistic culture. There are, however, shared expectations of the role of the media in European societies such as representing the public and promoting social values, as well as shared professional values (such as objectivity, factuality and balance, often reflected in codes of ethics) and underlying Enlightenment values that inform journalistic cultures.

Biographies

Paschal Preston is a professor in the School of Communication, Dublin City University where he teaches modules on media theory, digital media and communication in international relations. He founded the Communication, Technology and Culture (COMTEC) research centre in DCU, an interdisciplinary research unit focused on socio-economic and policy aspects of new ICTs, with a particular focus on media sector developments. Among his publications is *Reshaping Communication: technology, information and social change* (London: Sage, 2001).

Monika Metykova works as a postdoctoral researcher at the Centre for Research in Media and Cultural Studies, University of Sunderland, UK. She is currently working on a project on Eastern European migration to the UK. Her recent publications include: 'Establishing Public Service Broadcasting in the Slovak Republic (1993-2004): From State Control to the European Single Market.' *Trends in Communication* Vol. 12, No. 4, 2004.

Introduction

The European public sphere has been explored from a number of viewpoints. In this chapter we argue that media and as a consequence journalistic practices and values play a crucial role in the creation of a public sphere. We explore whether a shared European journalistic culture that would contribute to a European mediated public sphere can be identified and in doing so we draw on the findings of empirical research focused on journalistic cultures in eleven countries: the Czech Republic, France, Great Britain, Hungary, Ireland, Italy, the Netherlands, Serbia, Slovakia, Slovenia and Spain.³

The public sphere and its relevance to European media today

Jürgen Habermas's seminal *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere* (1989; German original published in 1962) provides a basis for discussions of the public sphere(s) in contemporary societies. In his historical narrative informed by the Frankfurt School tradition Habermas traces the development of the bourgeois public sphere and its consequent transformation, suggesting that the bourgeois public sphere reached its peak in the early to mid-19th century. Habermas argues that the public sphere emerged as a space in which private individuals came together as a public to use their own reason to discuss, *inter alia*, the power and direction of the state. In this light, the bourgeois public sphere came into existence as a result of struggle against despotic states. The development of competitive market capitalism led to the creation of institutions within civil society that occupied a space distinct from both the economy and the state. These institutions included newspapers, debating societies, salons and coffee houses.

With the further development capitalism throughout the nineteenth century, the public sphere underwent significant and (according to Habermas) detrimental changes. The decline of the public sphere is connected with developments such as the growth of large or monopolistic blocs of capital, changes in state-society relations and the increased commercialisation of the newspapers and popular culture. Thus, the rational-critical debate that characterized the bourgeois public sphere at its peak was displaced by several developments, including a shift towards consumption. In Habermas's influential account, the public sphere continues to exist in appearance only and remains modernity's unfinished promise or incomplete project.

Habermas's concept of the bourgeois public sphere and its transformation has been much invoked, discussed and criticized. It has been understood as a key guide for the analysis of the adequacy of contemporary media institutions (for example, Garnham, 1990). It has been criticized on at least three grounds (Dahlgren, 1991; Fraser, 1993). Firstly, although Habermas admits the exclusionary nature of the bourgeois public sphere in terms of class, he neglects the question of gender. Secondly, he remains silent on alternative public spheres (see Negt and Kluge, 1993). And finally, Habermas has been criticized for omitting questions of meaning production and social settings.

Despite these criticisms Habermas's ideal model has remained highly influential. For example, Garnham points out three key components of Habermas's thesis as essential in an understanding of the public sphere(s) in contemporary societies. Firstly, Habermas focuses on "the indissoluble link between the institutions and practices of mass communication and the institutions and practices of democratic societies" (1999, 360). Secondly, he stresses the "necessary material resource base for any public sphere" (ibid). Thirdly, Garnham praises Habermas for his avoidance of the simple dichotomy of free market versus state control in his

distinction of the public sphere from both state and market that enables him to discuss the question of threats to democracy from both of them. Garnham suggests that these arguments have particular relevance in contemporary societies as the emergence of global markets as centres of private economic power undermines the nation-state and new public spheres and political institutions are needed for the control of the global polity and economy.

In contemporary societies the public sphere ideal is closely linked to evaluations of the role and practices of mass media. Curran, for example, argues that “the media are thus the principal institutions of the public sphere or, in the rhetoric of nineteenth-century liberalism, ‘the fourth estate of the realm’” (Curran, 1991, 29) as they play a key role in enabling the public to exercise informal control over the state. Carpignano et al. argue that in the debates about mass media, politics and the public sphere “there is a common ground, a mutual acceptance of basic premises, shared by participating politicians, conservative ideologues, and leftist cultural critics. Its unquestionable truism is that the mass media today *are* the public sphere and that this is the reason for the degradation of public life if not its disappearance” (1993, 93).

If we are to understand the nature of public sphere(s) in contemporary European societies we need to relate such high-level concepts to a more empirical inquiry into the institutions and practices of mass communication. In this paper we consider some findings from a recent multi-country research project *Media and Ethics of a European Public Sphere from the Treaty of Rome to the ‘War on Terror’* (EMEDIATE). Here we focus in particular on whether there are emergent/embryonic elements of a common mediated European public sphere, for example, as marked by shifts towards a shared European journalistic culture.

Literature on European media/journalism cultures

Before moving to such empirical registers, we will briefly consider the prevailing research literature addressing the key factors influencing journalistic practices and media cultures in contemporary European societies. Here we find a large and growing corpus of recent work concerned with the changing nature of the journalistic profession, practices and media products – produced by media and communications studies scholars as well as by media professionals. In sum, this work tends to identify the following as major factors or forces influencing media products and practices: changing economic conditions (especially, ownership changes, increased competition etc.), policies and regulation (for example, increased pan-Europeanization of media policies within the EU and reliance on self-regulation), journalists' employment contracts and working conditions (for example, changes in these related to technological changes), and the changing interplay of journalistic and other elites (for example, journalists' interaction with sources and other influential actors as well as audiences).

Our own research confirms that developments in these areas have had a significant impact on the mediated public sphere over the last two decades. However, our interview findings suggest that although journalists themselves identify these trends and developments and their impact on their work ethics and routines they maintain that key journalistic values which guarantee objective, impartial and balanced reporting continue to be maintained.

One major 'Europe'-related theme in the research concerns the way journalists deal with European news or current affairs topics and EU-related information. In general, we find that 'European'-related themes comprise a relatively small research topic in the eleven countries under discussion. Although the number of studies is small, we find several relevant and

empirically grounded studies of the manner in which journalists and the media deal with EU news and current affairs information in the researched countries.

The literature review suggested that in terms of media content 'European' issues tend to be addressed through national frames. Generally, news and current affairs genres remain strongly orientated around national frames or epistemic communities. The most popular forms of shared European mediated experiences seem to lie in the realm of entertainment and sport, but even these are occasional or event-specific rather than routine in character (for example, the Eurovision song contest, European World Cup). Even when the phenomenon being addressed is a 'common' European or EU-related topic, it is treated and addressed in very specific ways in each national setting. The findings are similar in relation to ownership and EU policy.

Whilst there has been an increase in the transnational ownership structures and pan-EU policy and regulatory frameworks related to the media, this has not been replicated at the level of media content production or editorial cultures. There has been a certain growth in the cross-border application of certain programming formats originating in Europe (for example, *Big Brother*) and in the co-production of films and television programming. The growing array of commercial and cable or satellite television channels (enabled by EU-level and national policy changes) has certainly led to an expanded demand for programming or 'content', but here the biggest supplier and beneficiary has been the U.S. audiovisual sector.

Journalism cultures in contemporary Europe: some findings from our interviews

In addition to our review of existing research on European journalistic cultures, we have worked with data collected in interviews with a wide range of journalists in the eleven countries which form part of the study. The interviews were designed to include as wide a cross-section of journalists as possible, from as wide a selection of media as possible. The

criteria adopted for choosing the interviewees were that they should be mid-career, with reasonable experience, and preferably with a measure of editorial responsibility as editors or ‘gate-keepers’. The following table summarizes the number of interviews conducted in the countries under study.

Country	Total number of interviews	Press	Broadcast	Other
Britain	7	4	3	~
Czech Republic	8	5	2	1
France	9	4	5	~
Hungary	7	3	3	1
Ireland	9	7	2	~
Italy	7	5	2	~
Netherlands	6	3	3	~
Serbia	11	6	3	2
Slovakia	6	4	1	1
Slovenia	10	2	8	~
Spain	10	4	5	1
TOTALS	90	47	37	6

Table 1: Interviews by country and type of medium.

We will here offer a brief summary of interviewees’ responses to three questions: (1) What are the dominant influences today in the culture of journalism?; (2) Is there a ‘European’ journalistic culture (values, standards – including ethics – and practices reflecting a specific European sense of identity or common purpose)? and (3) Is there a pattern to the way in which ‘European’ topics or issues (i.e. issues connected with the governance, enlargement, and political agenda of the European Union and the European project generally) are dealt with in your publication/broadcasting station? (See Preston and Horgan, 2006.)

(1) When asked about the dominant influences in the culture of journalism today, the most frequent response from journalists in every country was that accuracy was the most important value. Among the many specific values which were articulated, an emphasis on accuracy was common to all. Perhaps this is because it covers so many aspects of the journalist's craft, encompassing factual correctness, comprehensiveness and balance, so that if a person is accurate they are more likely to be fair. In general, we found that the following issues comprised the professional values most frequently mentioned: seeking the truth; objectivity; getting as many sources as possible; checking sources, and citing sources correctly; balance; strict separation of fact and opinion, and for both commentary and analyses to be strictly based on fact.

However, for several interviewees, professional ethics such as these were only half the story. Journalists in the Czech Republic and Slovakia, for example, argued that, in current media organisations, profit and circulation/viewing figures were the ultimate arbiters. Yet even in the face of the economic (and sometimes also political) pressures that journalists face in the course of their work, some of the media professionals interviewed in this study also emphasised that they had major societal obligations. Significantly, the journalists who articulated such views tended to come from countries which had undergone profound political change over the last three decades (for example, Spain and Slovenia). Also, in many cases it was editors working for public service media who felt societal obligations more strongly than others.

Several editors raised the question of whether the media ought to reflect the values of the society in which it operated, or to try to shape them. For example, some interviewees in Slovenia argued that the media's job was to stimulate positive values such as tolerance in

society by reflecting such values. They were of the opinion though, that while it was possible to shape public opinion, they could not create new values. There were significant differences of opinion on this subject among the Hungarian editors. Of the seven interviewed, five felt that journalism could not influence or change existing values, but could only reflect them. They argued that Hungarian society was currently undergoing a crisis of values, and that this was being reflected in the low quality of Hungarian media at this time. The other two felt that the onus on journalists was to try to counteract this trend, by emphasising social solidarity. A similar point was made by the Serbian interviewees, who spoke of the need for journalists to maintain a “critical distance from the government and control of state”, and of the media’s educational role. A Serbian interviewee expressed the view that journalism is “crucial to how a community or country forms its values as journalists play an important role in shaping public opinion,” for good or ill. The notion that journalists ought to take an interventionist approach on public opinion was explicitly rejected by Dutch editors.

Journalists from some post-Communist countries reflected on the changing professional standing of journalists since the fall of Communism. Czech and Slovak media professionals, for example, pointed out that immediately after the Velvet Revolution of 1989 journalists were acting more as citizens than as journalists, as papers promoted political stances and journalists supported the transformation. As one interviewee put it: “that was revolutionary journalism, it was frequently waving a flag belonging to this or that, often, and this lasted quite a few years [...] With time this changed, most of the journalists emancipated themselves [...] and often, since everything is so new here, often they overdid it in the other direction.” Since then, journalists gradually became professionals, yet, according to our interviewees, this also means that there is a growing number of journalists who are more concerned about their appearances, their salaries and their careers than about upholding journalistic values.

None of the British or Irish journalists interviewed even mentioned the idea of the media as a promoter of values or morals, in strong contrast with their colleagues on the continent.

Indeed, they were more likely to emphasise practical issues, particularly the importance of balancing accuracy with speed, rather than philosophical ones. As a senior editor at the London-based Sky News put it, the dominant influence in British journalistic culture was “getting the story first and getting the story right”.

Our research reveals a very pervasive perception amongst the senior media professionals interviewed that there has been a shift in the news agenda towards lighter, more entertainment-based news, which is seen as largely the result of increased commercialisation and competition in the sector. None of those interviewed felt that this was a positive development.

(2) The vast majority of journalists interviewed, irrespective of where they were based, felt that there was no pan-European journalistic culture, but rather national journalistic cultures remained dominant throughout Europe. Those who could identify a European journalistic culture tended to do so by comparing journalism in Europe with journalistic cultures elsewhere; but interviewees felt for the most part that the differences within Europe outweighed the similarities. For instance, many of the Slovenian journalists interviewed noted the difference between European journalism and that of the U.S.A. but nevertheless felt that there was no commonality between (for example) the writing styles or story ideas that would dominate journalism in individual European states. Similarly, most of the Hungarian editors interviewed were unable to define any common European journalistic culture, believing national characteristics to be more important, although many then made reflexive

references to differences between American and European journalism, although they could not give specific examples of this.

Perhaps it is worth noting that while many interviewees perceived a singular lack of a pan-European journalistic culture, some of the senior journalists interviewed were able to identify similarities between certain countries within Europe. For instance, Spanish journalists observed some similarities between the media in Spain and in France, while one Irish foreign correspondent identified increasing similarities between the Irish press and British tabloids, and not in a positive sense. Other Irish interviewees also referred to the similarities of journalism in Ireland and Britain, which is perhaps unsurprising when one considers the common language and relatively high media penetration of British press and television.

British journalists were most vociferous in their rejection of the notion of a common journalistic culture. Many of the British journalists pointed to the media specifically in France and Germany (no other countries were cited) as examples of profoundly different styles. Both were seen as less vigorous, more reserved or boring, and much less likely to deal with controversial stories than were the British media.

Those who believed that there was a European journalistic area can be divided into two groups. Firstly, those who identified it by contrasting Europe with elsewhere. One British print journalist who had himself worked in the United States for a period noted American journalists' "remarkable" attention paid towards sourcing and reluctance to use off-the-record material. The second group were those who felt that a certain common culture of journalism (or perhaps of journalists) had grown up to an extent around Brussels. Some

pointed to initiatives which had been brought about to foster such a culture, such as France Ouest's training sessions, through which journalists are sent for a week to Brussels or Strasbourg to inform themselves of the institutions and the personalities.

(3) None of the journalists identified a specific approach or pattern in the coverage of European issues. Many of the interviewees argued that European issues are considered uninteresting and publishing on Europe can present difficulties within media organizations. European issues tend to be too complicated and difficult to explain and in order to cover them they must relate to readers'/viewers' everyday lives and involve some kind of national or regional interest. Journalists in Slovakia, a new EU member state, also pointed out that Slovaks in general have not internalized the fact that Slovakia is part of the EU and thus EU related issues are automatically Slovak issues. Some media in the new EU member states (for example, Czech public service television, Slovak public service radio and others) had special programmes or pages devoted to the enlargement process; however, once the process was finished European topics became part of more general programmes/articles.

Conclusion

What are the implications for a shared mediated European public sphere? Our research suggests that instead of a shared European journalistic culture, a continued salience of the 'national' structure which shapes journalistic and media cultures prevails. Even where core and common EU-related topics are concerned, these still tend to be strongly interpreted and framed through a specific 'national prism'. 'Banal nationalism' continues to play its role in framing media cultures throughout both the 'old' and 'new' EU member states. This applies despite all the recent emphasis on cultural (and economic) globalisation and the understanding of the EU as a case of particularly intensified economic integration at world-region level.

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Notes

¹ Dr. Monika Metykova, Post-doctoral Researcher, Media Centre University of Sunderland, St. Peter's Way, SR6 0DD, Sunderland UK

Tel: + 44 191 515 3431 E-mail: monika.metykova@sunderland.ac.uk

² Prof. Paschal Preston, Director COMTEC, School of Communication, Dublin City University, Glasnevin Dublin 9 Ireland

Tel: + 353 1 700 5478 E-Mail: Paschal.Preston@dcu.ie

³ The paper draws on some findings from an EU-funded project entitled *EMEDIATE: Media and Ethics of a European Public Sphere from the Treaty of Rome to the 'War on Terror'*.