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**Television news and the European public sphere: A preliminary
investigation**

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Abstract

This paper focuses on an aspect of a Europeanised public sphere that has so far received little attention. Although a considerable amount of research has recently been undertaken on the way EU issues are being reported and debated, especially in the printed press, less is known about the way in which television bulletins report on events and issues in other European countries. The paper examines the weight given by British, French and German public service broadcasters to stories from other European countries in their main television news bulletins over a period of two weeks in June-July 2003. It concludes that, relative to both domestic news items and to items originating from outside Europe, stories from other European countries are often given low priority. This has implications for the knowledge Europeans are likely to acquire about each other, and for their ability to identify with other Europeans.

Introduction

This paper aims to contribute to the debate on the European public sphere. It is based on the assumption that a functioning public sphere is an essential requirement for any democratic system, be it on the level of the nation-state or that of the European Union. This does not, however, imply that a European public sphere will necessarily express itself in the same way as a national public sphere.

The paper makes a further assumption, namely that the creation of a European public sphere could legitimately be seen as a particular responsibility of public service broadcasters (PSBs) in Europe, although by no means theirs alone. It is the prime function of PSBs to address audiences as citizens and not just consumers. At a time when the concept of citizenship has already acquired a distinctly European dimension, purely as a consequence of the existing degree of economic and political integration within Europe and independent of any moves to create an even closer Union, it could be argued that European PSBs should reflect this by Europeanising their content, particularly that of their news bulletins.

Here the paper suggests a different way of evaluating degrees of Europeanisation. Much of the existing research, both on the printed press and on television, is concerned with the vertical dimension of Europeanisation, resulting in two main questions being asked: 1) How are European Union affairs reported and commented on in the media? 2) To what extent is a European Union dimension introduced when national issues are reported or commented on? This paper takes a horizontal approach and looks at the extent to which events or issues from other European countries are included in public service television news bulletins of three European countries. It compares the treatment of these stories with that of two other news categories, domestic and non-European international.¹

Researching the European public sphere

The European public sphere has recently become the focus of serious academic attention. There is now a respectable body of evidence, particularly that produced in the context of the Europub² project, documenting the different manifestations of such a public sphere. This research work constitutes a real advance since the early 1990s when a number of writers identified the absence of a European public sphere (see for instance Habermas 1991, Gerhards 1993) and with it a serious democratic deficit. Partly as a result of this widely shared diagnosis, attempts were made to address the perceived problem by establishing a supranational public sphere in Europe through pan-European media initiatives, from “The European” newspaper to the “Euronews” television channel.

¹ Although research has been conducted on the horizontal dimension of the European public sphere (see Koopmans and Erbe 2003), this is limited to the print media.

² Europub is a EU Framework Five-funded project on ‘The Transformation of Political Mobilisation and Communication in European Public Spheres’, currently being conducted across six EU member states. Principal investigators:

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For more information see <http://europub.wz-berlin.de>

The recent research work is valuable because it helps to clarify both the definition of a European public sphere and ways of measuring it.

The theoretical difficulties relate, firstly, to the very possibility of a public sphere within the EU as an association of nations, which not only has no common language but whose members staunchly defend the right to use their own languages (Kielmansegg 1994, p.28). However, the Swiss example of a multilingual society has been used to show that a public sphere can exist without a common language, although it will differ from that of monolingual countries. (Habermas 1991; Kriesi 1992)

A second question concerns the conditions for the emergence of a public sphere without a European demos. How can a European Union, now at an advanced stage of economic integration, lay claim to a public sphere when every time the European demos has the opportunity to prove its existence, namely in European elections, the result is risible? Is the realistic approach not to recognise that public spheres coincide with territorial borders in Europe – and that, in the absence of a European demos held together by a common European identity, no European public sphere can exist? Several writers point to the dangers of a maximalist position that sees a European demos and identity as independent factors. As Risse (2002, p.7) says, ‘the causal arrows between European integration and institution building on the one hand and the evolution of European identities on the other seem to run both ways.’ Van de Steeg (2002) argues that making a strong collective European identity into the precondition for a public sphere would be putting the cart before the horse. Indeed, the media can be seen as an important factor in the construction of European identities (Groothues 2002). This is a dynamic process, in which numerous smaller demoi in Europe can sometimes come together into one larger demos (Eder and Kantner 2000).

Thirdly, once there is agreement on its theoretical possibility, what exactly constitutes a European public sphere? Is it enough if the media in different countries talk about the same European topics? Do they also have to do so at the same time? And do they in addition have to frame the issues within roughly the same meaning structures? Do they, on top of all this, have to agree on the issues? It is easy to see that this variety of definitions could, on the one hand, help detect the presence of a European public sphere wherever one looks, on the other hand make it completely impossible for such a sphere to exist because nowhere are all the criteria fully met.

Various authors (Eder & Kantner 2000, Risse & Van de Steeg 2003) have discussed the minimum requirements for a European public sphere and there is general agreement on at least two criteria that have to be met: the simultaneity of a debate in the media of different countries and the similarity of meaning structures. Risse and Van de Steeg (2003, p.21) add to this the existence of a transnational community of communication ‘in which speakers and listeners recognise each other as legitimate participants in a common discourse that frames the particular issues as common European problems’. Repeatedly the point is made that for a public sphere to exist speakers do not have to agree on the topics they discuss – lively disagreement within the same frame of reference is just as strong an indicator.

Within the Europub project the empirical research has focused on the print media and to a limited extent on the internet, broadly taking a two-pronged approach: the first

one analyses the Europeanisation of the media within one country (e.g. Koopmans & Pfetsch 2003, della Porta et al 2003), the second looks at the treatment of a particular issue or set of issues by the media across several countries (e.g. Meyer 2003, Risse & Van de Steeg 2003, Trenz and Münzing 2003). Both the salience of European issues in the press and their framing by various categories of actors are examined. To arrive at reliable data that are comparable in a time and a cross-national perspective, frame analysis is used, where frames are defined as involving both selection and salience (Entmann 1993).

A number of these studies conclude that a European public sphere can indeed be shown to exist: newspapers in different European countries debate European issues at the same time using similar meaning structures. One example is the debate in selected European newspapers on the reactions of EU governments against the new Austrian government formed by the ÖVP and Jörg Haider's FPÖ in early 2000 as analysed by Risse and Van de Steeg (2003). They detect an emerging European public sphere, and find it remarkable that 'similar reference points and meaning structures emerge when people debate European issues, irrespective of one's particular viewpoint...' (Risse & van de Steeg 2003, p. 21) In their study of quality European newspapers, Dereje, Kantner and Trenz (2003, p. 22) find a 'highly Europeanized media system which is penetrated by the effects of European resonance'. Della Porta, Caiani, Mosca and Valenza (2003, p. 18) come to the conclusion that 'in the Italian public sphere there is a growing Europeanization, taking various forms'.

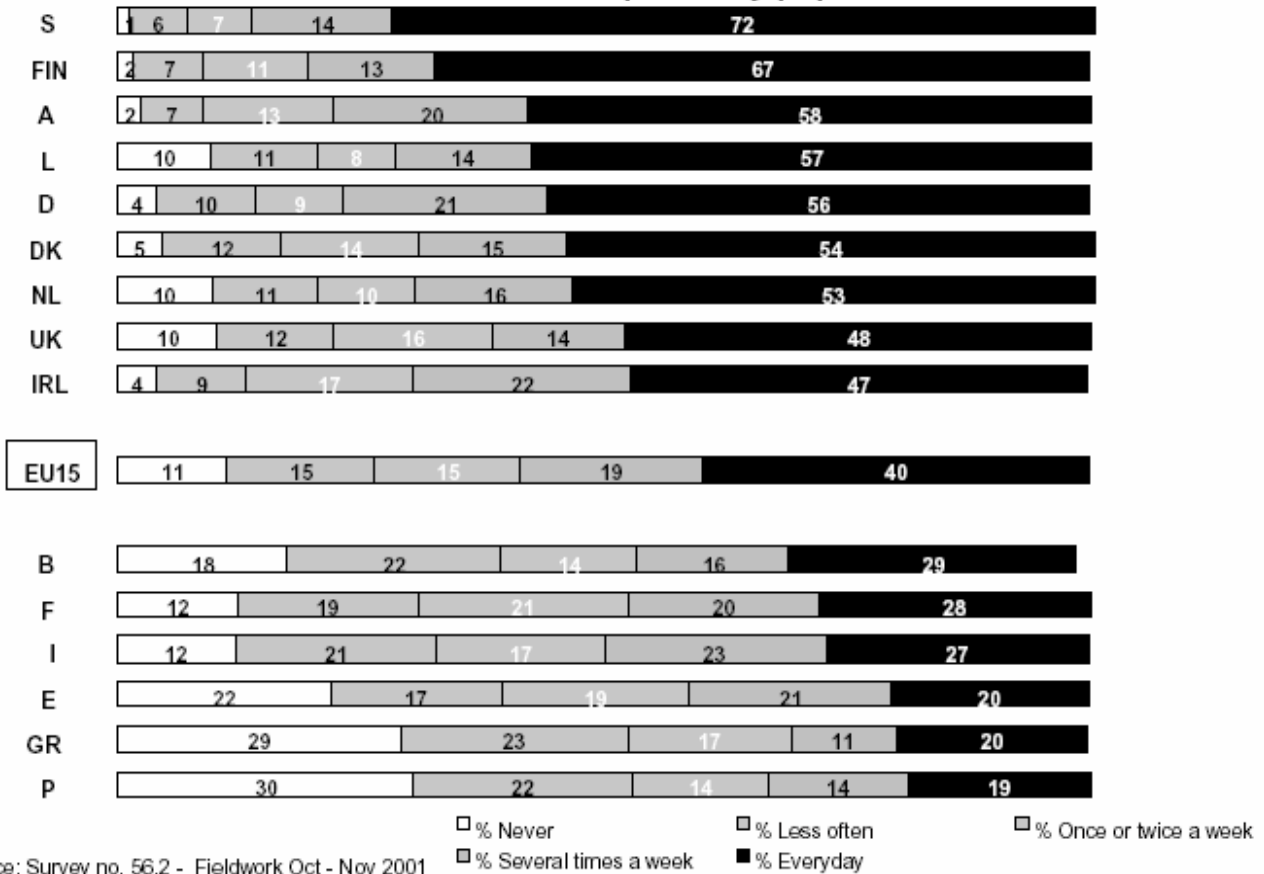
European television and the public sphere

Looking at the totality of the media on offer in Europe, the central role of television is striking. Europeans now obtain their news more from television than from newspapers, with an average of 69% of adults in current member countries watching television news bulletins every day (Fig.1). Only 40% of EU citizens in the 15 member countries get their news from newspapers. There are significant regional variations: newspaper consumption is much lower in Southern than in Northern Europe, whereas television is a source of news for at least 55% of adults everywhere.

The primacy of television as a news source is particularly marked in the whole of Southern Europe as well as in the applicant countries, where the average percentage of news viewing on television rises to 71% and that of newspaper readers falls to 24% (Eurobarometer 56).

Data trends between 1994 and 2000 reveal a gradually decreasing importance for newspapers in most countries and an increasing role for television. The daily media reach of newspapers declined slightly in most countries, whereas that of television rose. In Germany, for instance, the daily newspaper reach (including regional newspapers) fell from 81% to 78% of the adult population between 1994 and 2000, but the daily television reach rose from 93% to 96% over the same period (Zenith, Central and Eastern European Market and Mediafact 1996 & 2002, Western European Market and Mediafact 1996&2000).

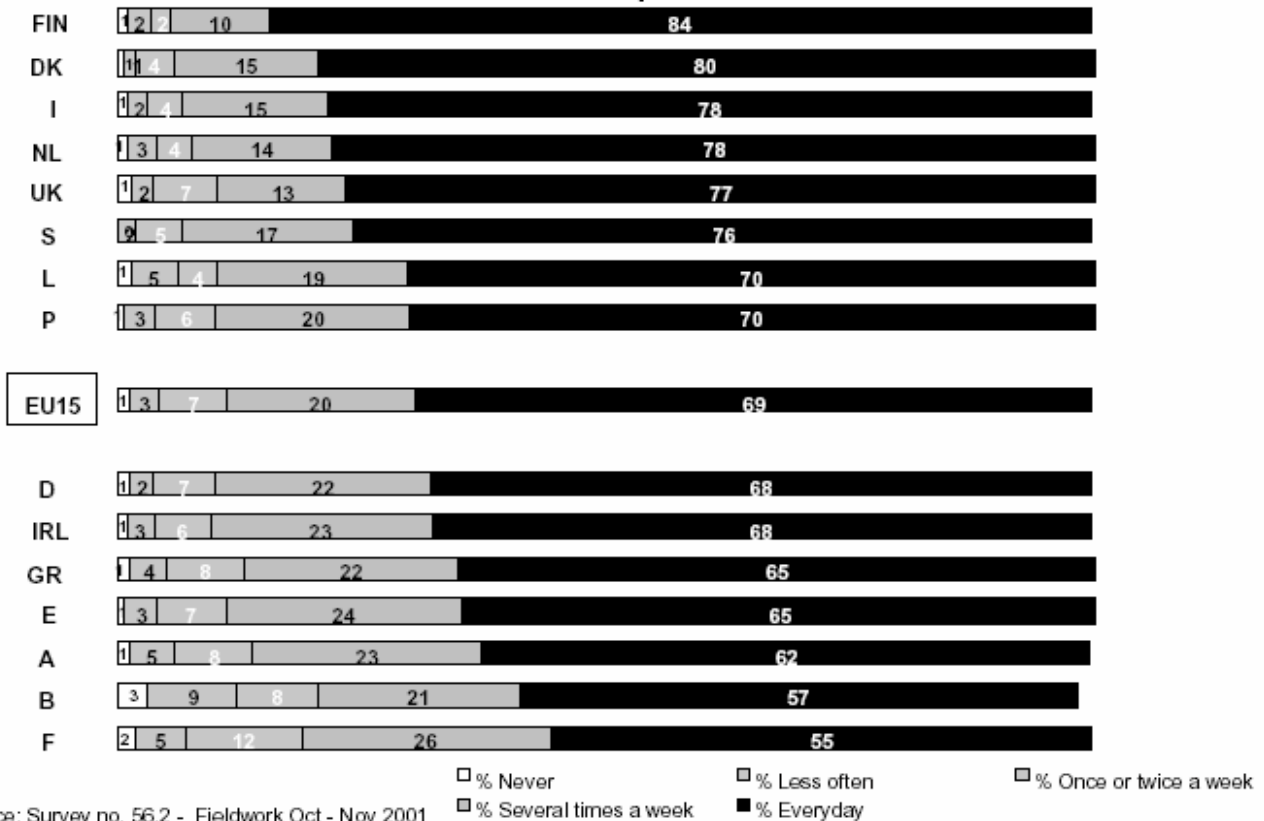
News readership of daily papers



Source: Survey no. 56.2 - Fieldwork Oct - Nov 2001
Standard Eurobarometer 56 - Fig. 7.3b

Percentage "don't know" not shown

News viewership on television



Source: Survey no. 56.2 - Fieldwork Oct - Nov 2001
Standard Eurobarometer 56 - Fig. 7.3a

Percentage "don't know" not shown

Similarly, there is a significant difference in the medium people trust most. Whereas an average of 62% within the existing member countries tend to trust the television, the figure for newspapers is much lower at 46%. There is not a single member country in which newspapers are more trusted than television, although radio is the most trusted medium in a number of countries, notably the UK, where the trust in newspapers falls to 20%. Overall, though, radio consumption for news is much lower than television viewing: an average of 38% in the member countries and 41% in the applicant countries.

In addition, audience figures show that television news, particularly when originating from public service broadcasters, is both a mass and an elite medium, unlike the highly fragmented printed press, which targets specific segments of the population.

It follows that an assessment of the European public sphere should include television, although the analysis of broadcast material raises complex methodological issues. Clearly pictures are highly important, for their affective as much as for their informative value, so a technique of coding pictorial information needs to be found. As in radio, the way a text is delivered can be as meaningful as any content that can be gleaned from a transcription: speakers can convey criticism or approval through their tone of voice. In addition, the selection of material needs serious consideration. Although news bulletins can act as catalysts for debate in the political life of a nation, it would be wrong to exclude a priori softer forms of television content, such as films or documentaries.

A number of studies have indeed focused on the coverage of European issues in television news bulletins, although they do not specifically address the question of the European public sphere. Again they can be divided into those that are concerned with the portrayal of the EU or an aspect of it within one country (Gavin 2000) and those that compare the framing of EU issues in a number of EU member states (Norris, P. 2000, de Vreese, Peter et al. 2001, de Vreese 2001, Le Torrec, Blanchard et al. 2001).

Overall, therefore, the research on both the printed press and on television analyses how European issues are represented in the media, where 'European' is defined as in some way relating to the EU. It can be argued, however, that the development of a European public sphere depends on more than the transnational debate of EU issues, particularly in the television context.

Defining Europeanisation

Because the current notion of Europeanisation postulates a degree of vertical referencing to the EU for both supranational and national issues, it excludes a basic category of news items: if the media of one country report an event or an issue in another EU member state without any reference to a common European framework, a basic criterion for Europeanisation is not met. In order to qualify as Europeanised, a text must acknowledge – if only implicitly, e.g. by referring to a debate on similar issues in other EU countries – the existence of a European Union to which we all belong.

This definition of Europeanisation presumes that the media in Europe are already doing their job on another, more basic level: that of reporting events or issues from other European member states, even if they are not obviously political. So the answer

to the following question is crucial to the concept of Europeanisation: are the citizens of EU member states being sufficiently well informed about the issues, debates and events, political or not, that preoccupy the citizens of other EU countries?

The answer has fundamental implications for the formation of a European “we”, as it is impossible to identify with somebody in another country about whom little is known. The layer of European identity can only be built up gradually by the routine accumulation of knowledge about other Europeans. It is essential that this knowledge is not confined to the political processes in other countries, nor to the way EU institutions impact on these processes. The information should encompass everything that makes life in other countries special and different, i.e. it should relate to the lifeworld of other EU citizens.

The elements of this knowledge constitute the raw material on which vertical Europeanisation, the one relating to the political EU dimension, can base itself. Without such knowledge formation, the legitimacy of European institutions will always be in doubt, because just as there cannot be true identification with those we don't really know, why should we accept being jointly governed with them? The vertical dimension of EU governance critically depends for its legitimacy on a functioning horizontal level of information exchange between the citizens of member states.

Editorially, the challenge for the media is to find the appropriate attention threshold at which events and issues in other EU countries register. It is obvious that the media of country X cannot just adopt the domestic agenda of country Y. But if events of country Y only figure in the media of country X in times of crisis, the essential information exchange between EU citizens of different member states is deprived of an important channel.

At issue is whether the existing national media in Europe are currently reporting events and issues from other EU countries in a way that is different from their reporting of other international issues. Is a European category of journalism emerging, between the international and the national levels, which would mean, for instance, that for a UK audience Germany appears closer than Sri Lanka?

A first indicator that will help in answering this question has to be the frequency and salience of reports from other European countries. As has been shown above, television plays such a dominant role in providing news to audiences in Europe that it is worth focusing at least part of the analysis on television news bulletins. Furthermore, because of the very limited time slots at their disposal, television news editors are forced to make much starker choices than their newspaper colleagues in deciding which types of news items merit inclusion. The composition of television news bulletins is therefore an important field on which to focus.

Comparing TV news bulletins of three public service broadcasters

This study examines the way television stations in France, Germany and the UK apportion their main evening bulletins in terms of domestic, non-European international, European-international and EU affairs stories.

Selected were three bulletins from public service television stations with the highest audiences: Telejournal on France 2 at 20:00, Tagesschau on the ARD at 20:00 and BBC News at 10 o'clock (22:00) on BBC1 (all times local). The period chosen, two weeks from 28 June 2003 to 11 July 2003, can be characterised as 'routine'; no major European events had been planned. However, a major story did develop after Berlusconi's speech on 2nd July before the European Parliament, in which he jokingly offered a German MEP the role of Kapo in an Italian film. For the purposes of this study, the story was treated as falling within the EU category for the first two days, as it then involved a European institution as well as a number of EU actors. When it later mainly concerned the fallout for German-Italian relations it was moved into the category of European international items.

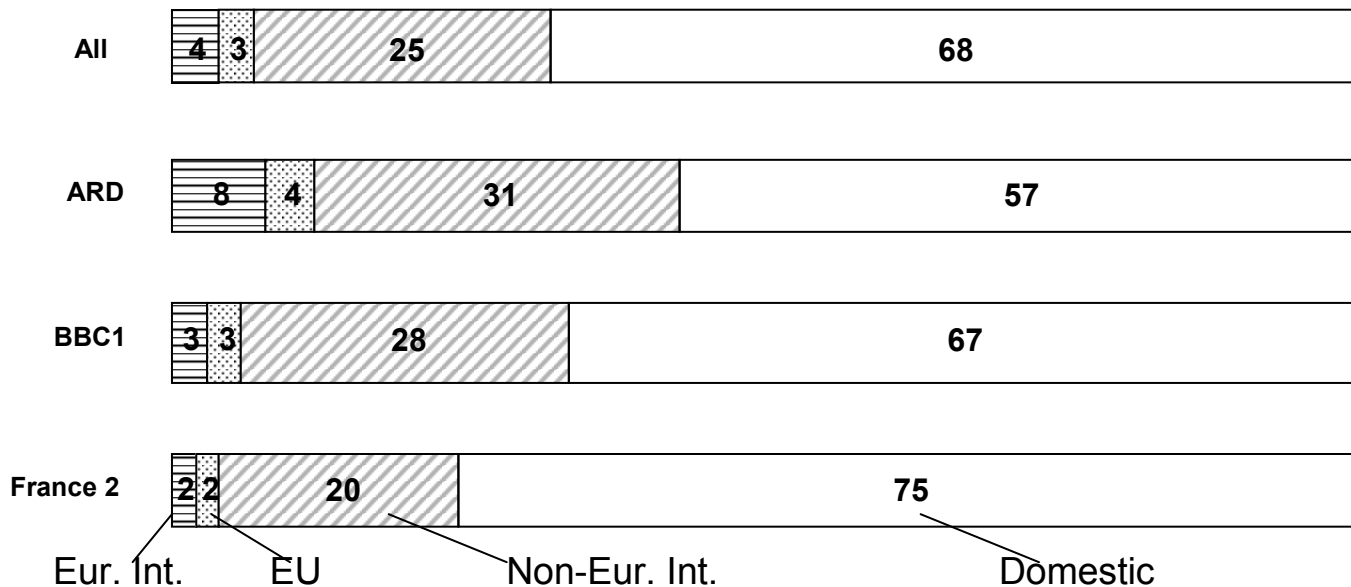
The bulletins vary considerably in length, ranging from 15 minutes for the ARD Tagesschau to 40 minutes for Telejournal. The BBC's bulletins are 30 minutes long during the week, but only 15 or 20 minutes long at weekends.

Summary of findings

Looking at the total number of news items (529) for all three stations, a majority, 68%, deal with purely domestic issues. 25% of news items (131) are non-European international, while 4% (22) relate to events/issues in other European countries and 3% (15) to EU affairs.

Number of news items in each category: (from left to right)

- European international
- EU affairs
- Non-European international
- Domestic



Note: If the European international stories are expressed as a percentage of bulletin time rather than number of items, the figures are 6% for the ARD, 1.7% for the BBC and 1.8% for France 2

There is a great deal of variation in the attention given by the three broadcasters to all four categories of news items. The station with the shortest news bulletin (ARD) has the largest number of both European international and EU stories. France 2 on the other hand, the station with by far the longest news bulletin, allocates 75% of all stories to domestic issues. Only 2% of France 2 stories are European international and 2% EU affairs respectively.

The BBC lies somewhere in between. It is less weighted in favour of domestic issues than France 2, but more so than the ARD. Similarly, the BBC carries more non-European and European international stories than France 2, but fewer than the ARD. However, expressed as a proportion of bulletin time, France 2 and the BBC both pay far less attention to European international stories than the ARD.

There was little agreement between the three stations on which European-international stories should be included in their main news bulletins. Even when a particular domestic story strongly dominated the bulletins in one country, e.g. the Corsican referendum on France 2 and the parliamentary report on Blair's role in the run-up to the war in Iraq on BBC1, there was no guarantee that the other two stations would include it in their bulletins, even as a brief item: viewers of France 2's *Téléjournal* were not given any information about the debate in the UK on Blair's role before the war in Iraq, although ARD did report this story as well as the Corsican referendum.

The editorial decision on which European stories should be included can seem arbitrary. One of the few European-international items carried by the BBC during these two weeks was a report on the start of the Tour de France, with strong emphasis on the supposed hostility of the French public towards Lance Armstrong, the favourite and winner of several previous Tours. The correspondent started his piece with the following comparison – against the background of the French-American rift over the war in Iraq: “The peace of rural France (video: rural idyll and cyclists) disturbed by an American advance; and here is the general, Lance Armstrong...”

The dominant EU issue during this period, Berlusconi's outburst in the EP, was covered by all three stations in remarkably similar terms, focusing on the unpredictability of Berlusconi's behaviour and the consequences for the Italian EU presidency. After the cancellation of Schröder's holiday in Italy the coverage then shifted towards the fallout for German-Italian relations.

Of the 529 news items overall during the period under investigation the only one from an enlargement country was broadcast by the BBC, on a speech the then Tory leader Ian Duncan Smith delivered in Prague about the dangers of a European superstate.

Discussion

The main evening bulletins of the ARD, the BBC and France 2 all gave far less coverage to news from European countries than to either domestic or non-European stories. The argument that this may well correspond to an established and tested journalistic balance between these categories is weakened by the widely varying coverage of European countries by the three stations, and the apparent arbitrariness in the way stories from European countries are chosen, leaving open the strong possibility that the news coverage of other European countries is not a strategic

priority for these three public service broadcasters in their main evening news bulletins. There are no indications in these bulletins that a new category of European news coverage is emerging.

In practice this means that the large public service television audiences cannot expect to be reliably informed on a routine basis about events and issues that preoccupy other Europeans. France 2's audiences were left unaware that the way the British Prime Minister had justified the war in Iraq was the subject of parliamentary scrutiny at the highest level and at the centre of heated public debate. This probably made it more difficult for French audiences to understand the significance of Dr. Kelly's suicide and the Hutton inquiry. French topics such as the Corsican referendum and the arrest of a suspected Corsican terrorist remained unexplained in the UK. Even less attention was being paid by all three broadcasters to developments in the enlargement countries.

In common with political news reporting on television in general (Schaap, Renckstorf et al. 2001), the coverage of other European countries that did take place was episodic rather than thematic, i.e. it tended to be event-oriented rather than attempting to place issues in a more general, e.g. cross-national context (Iyengar 1991). This approach is inimical to a systematic investigation of themes across EU member states, e.g. different national perspectives on a solution to the pensions crisis. Further research is needed to probe the reasons behind the attitudes of news editors towards the reporting of Europe, on similar lines to that undertaken by Firmstone (2003) on the editorial production process in British newspapers. The following two suggestions can only be tentative and need to be tested:

1. The categorisation domestic versus international news creates a blind spot for stories from other European countries. News editors clearly see it as their public service duty to reflect the major domestic events and issues in their main evening bulletin, in a sense creating a "bulletin of record": viewers should feel certain that all important national developments have been included. On the other hand, public service news organisations recognise that helping audiences to understand the world is also part of their remit. This is evident, for instance, in the BBC's Producer Guidelines, the *Programmauftrag* of the NDR in Germany or the *Charte de l'antenne* of France Télévisions.

In such a domestic versus international dichotomy, international news stories are only accepted if they meet stringent criteria of importance, as do wars, natural disasters or major elections. Judging by these criteria alone, news items from EU countries will rarely be given high priority. But the degree of interdependence within the EU means that developments in EU countries can be as relevant for a domestic audience as some international or domestic events or issues. However, none of the three broadcasters have attempted to redefine their public service remit because of the changes in Europe. Ironically, France Télévisions' *Charte de l'antenne* explicitly refers to the support the Treaty of Amsterdam gives to public service broadcasting, without, however, reflecting on France Télévisions' own public service remit in relation to Europe.

2. Across Europe public service and commercial broadcasters compete fiercely for the attention of television audiences. With the advent of cable and satellite, public service

channels are no longer the automatic choice of viewers who want to watch the news. The slick production values and often tabloid-style news agenda of commercial television have forced public service broadcasters to review their own news strategy. Resources, including correspondents, are concentrated where the highest return on investment in terms of audience share can be expected. This policy increases the likelihood that stories from EU countries are sidelined unless broadcasters are determined to engage audiences in them because they regard knowledge about these countries as a public good.

Conclusion

The paper suggests that in addition to already developed indicators of an emerging public sphere in Europe a further aspect merits investigation: the way in which television, and public service television in particular, covers European countries in its news bulletins. As Venturelli (1998) maintains, it is precisely the responsibility of public service broadcasters to be instrumental in the formation of a participatory European public space. Public service broadcasters are best suited to allow all citizens, regardless of their buying power, access to this public space.

It could be argued that European integration, launched and pushed forward by European elites, primarily depends on elite support, and that therefore a public arena to which elites have access is sufficient, i.e. it could be limited to parts of the quality press. However, the current political difficulties around the adoption of a European constitution, the fact that for the first time fewer than 50% of EU citizens see EU membership as “a good thing” (Eurobarometer 60) and the unwillingness of politicians in a number of countries to defend even the current level of European integration against an anti-EU popular backlash all point to a pressing need for popular support. It seems doubtful that without this support even the present level of integration in Europe can be sustained, let alone progress towards an ‘ever closer Union’. How television news bulletins, the prime information source of Europeans, report Europe is therefore a major concern.

A first analysis of main TV news bulletins in three countries shows that the number of news stories from other European countries lags far behind that of domestic and non-European news items. Editors do not regard the EU area as a space that deserves more attention in coverage terms than the world beyond Europe. If the formation of a European “we” is regarded as desirable, it is not helped by the lack of attention other Europeans are given in domestic news bulletins.

In addition to the investigation of editorial processes in public service television news outlined above, a great deal of further work needs to be undertaken to assess the role of television in the emergence of a European public sphere. First, more countries should be included in a new study to test the findings of this paper. Second, the framing of other European countries merits further analysis, particularly in terms of their portrayal by correspondents, both through text and pictures. In the relatively few European stories in the present sample, the degree to which the foreignness of other EU countries was emphasised varied widely. Finally, and most ambitiously, it would be highly instructive to analyse other television programmes to assess how television as a whole, not just in its news bulletins, both portrays Europeans and acts as a facilitator of the European public sphere.

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