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## **Media Representation of the European Union: Comparing Newspaper Coverage in France, Spain, and the United Kingdom**

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Based on content analysis of newspapers and in-depth interviews of journalists, this article analyzes the role of the media in defining the European Union and, therefore, in contributing to the production and reproduction of social representations of the EU in the public. The research concentrated on three EU member countries: France, Spain, and the United Kingdom. The study is theoretically informed by news production theory. Results demonstrate that there are major differences among the newspapers analyzed here in terms of how they represented the EU in the news, according to their nationality and political orientation. Furthermore, many of the principles that dominate the production of news undermine information on the EU. The material on the EU tends to reinforce traditional views on economics, politics, and society, including the widespread belief that a national government is better than the EU for solving society's problems.

### **Introduction**

The moves toward further European integration and expansion to 27 members at the beginning of the 21st century have made Europeans more aware of the importance of the European Union (EU), and the media widely diffuses EU initiatives, policies, and actions. My earlier research suggests that most opinions of the EU are influenced by stories that circulate among the public and images that can be characterized as symbolic experiences, which are mostly diffused by the media. Research suggests that the media can shape public views, and could contribute toward creating a framework of reference of the European Union. In sum, because European citizens rely on the media for information about the EU, it is important and relevant to evaluate how the EU is portrayed in the news.

Newspapers and television are the main sources of information for the public on political issues. Newspapers in particular are consistently listed as the most important sources of information about the EU for citizens in Europe (Eurobarometer 56, Eurobarometer 162). Newspapers tend to have more political

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news, which include news on the EU, than television news, because they have fewer limitations in terms of time, space and costs (de Vreese et al. 2006). This is particularly pertinent in the case of the EU. Indeed, as Zucker argued, and the more recent study by Robinson (2000) confirms, the less direct experience or contact the public has with a given issue, the more it must depend on the news media for information. Because most issues dealing with the EU are relatively removed from people's daily lives, the media become the main agents through which people can find information or explanations.

This article analyzes the role of newspapers in defining the European Union and, therefore, in contributing to the production and reproduction of social representations of the EU.<sup>1</sup> It emphasizes the visibility, the tone of the coverage, and the aspects that affect news coverage about the EU. The research concentrated on three EU member countries: France, Spain, and the United Kingdom (UK). These countries were chosen because they represent different characteristics in terms of their history in relation to the EU.<sup>2</sup> Given the particularities of this research, the language abilities of the researcher were also taken into consideration. The newspaper industry in these three countries is controlled by private companies.

The assumptions of the study are based on news production theory, as discussed in particular in the work of Martin Gleissner and Claes de Vreese (2005), but also Clausen (2003), Lecheler (2008), Semetko and Valkenburg (2000), and Zucker (1978). These studies provide evidence of the importance of the media in influencing what people think about a given issue, and how issues are covered, and why. In these perspectives understanding the mechanisms of news production and the journalists' approaches will inform the content. Other important works that have informed this research includes Shoemaker and Reese's (1991) research on who determines media content, including works on framing theory, particularly as they relate to how the media gives stories a certain "spin." As Entman (1993) explains, the media "select some aspects of a perceived reality and make them more salient in a communicating text, in such a way as to promote a particular problem, definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation, and/or treatment recommendation" (p. 52). In short, the way the media present the news can affect how audiences understand and perceive the EU. The framing of issues is determined by several elements, particularly organizational constraints and journalists' professional judgments and evaluations of their audiences (e.g., de Vreese, 2007; Neuman, Just, & Crigler, 1992). The conceptual framework of this study integrates the two traditional perspectives of news production analysis: transmission and construction. Indeed, as Clausen (2003) suggests, in the production of news the aspects of selection, gate-keeping, allocation of resources, framing, and production interact. There are certainly other

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<sup>1</sup> The concept of social representation is based on Jodelet's definition (1991, p. 36): "A form of knowledge, socially elaborated and shared, having a practical goal and converging towards the construction of reality shared by a certain social ensemble," as well as on the empirical approach suggested by Breakwell (1993).

<sup>2</sup> France was a founder country, playing a key leadership role in the first Coal and Steel Agreement (the beginning of what became the EU); Spain represents the countries of the Mediterranean that joined the EU in the third wave of accession in the 1980s and were net receivers of EU structural funds; the UK is the most euroskeptic country of the EU and sees the EU as merely a form of loose agreements rather than as a supranational organization with political and economic unity objectives.

important determinants to consider in the production of news, such as the historical development of the media systems in each country, but this will require another article on the issue.<sup>3</sup>

Previous research identified several aspects in relation to how the media represented the EU. The most significant concern the visibility, including quantity of news on the EU (de Vreese & Boomgaarden, 2007; Gavin, 2000; Meyer, 1999) and the type of coverage (Glessner & de Vreese, 2005; Norris, 2000). Indeed, these studies suggest that more news about the EU increases knowledge on the EU among the population, and this combined with a greater visibility of European wide issues and pro-EU actors, tends to influence support for EU membership and a positive appraisal of the European Union, while negative tone in the news about the EU has been found to be related to negative public evaluations of the EU.

In this research, visibility was measured by quantity of stories and placement of the story within the sections of the newspaper. That is, whether the story was treated as a national, European, or international issue. The assumption was that if the story on the EU was treated in a world affairs/international section of the newspaper it would contribute to create distance between the EU and the readers. The tone refers to whether the story was presented with negative, neutral or positive spin. In sum, visibility (quantity of coverage and placement) and tone (in terms of negative, neutral or positive news) constitute the main dependent variables in the study. Based on an understanding of national media systems and the socio-cultural environment, reporting differences among different news outlets, and the salience of European issues, I expected variation in these variables across outlets and countries. I also expected that there would be differences shaped by both the political identification and the nationality of the newspaper.

In a first section, the article analyzes and compares the content of the newspapers. In a second section, based largely on in-depth interviews with journalists, the article attempts to explain the rationale for the type of coverage on EU issues. Particularly the study concentrates on journalists' perceptions, media routines, practices, and organization goals as related to EU issues, as well as evaluating the possible influence of interest groups and ownership.

This study is exploratory in nature. The intent is to contribute to the debate on the media and EU public opinion by providing analysis of print media content across three member states, each of which has different experiences and approaches to European integration. Indeed, analyzing media content provides significant indications for understanding possible citizens' perception of the EU, because, as de Vreese et al. (2006, p. 481, evoke, media content "is an important parameter for assessing the nature of public debates." The article presents a comparative frame and develops an approach for the empirical exploration of newspaper coverage of the EU. The use of multiple methods of research and the content analysis over 21 months constitute an important contribution to media research, and particularly to comparative research in news production. The results of this study reinforce previous findings on media

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<sup>3</sup> According to Hallin and Mancini (2004) these countries have historically evolved within three different media systems: The French system, they argue, is a mix of a polarized pluralist model and democratic corporatist model, while the Spanish media are classified within the polarized pluralistic model, and the British media are closer to the liberal model.

coverage of the European Union, but also produce knowledge on media content categorization, and journalists' experiences and perceptions on covering European Union issues.

### Methodology

Two research methods were employed: content analysis and in-depth interviews. The content analysis focused on media coverage of issues dealing with the EU in France, Spain and the UK, with emphasis on broadsheet newspapers. I concentrated on what is generally called the "mainstream independent media." The so-called tabloid newspapers were not considered; neither the outlets officially connected to political parties.<sup>4</sup>

The content analysis of the news coverage allows us to assess the extent to which the EU is covered in each newspaper and the negative or positive nature of this coverage. Indeed, more visibility of the EU in the news and the characteristics of the coverage are important aspects that affect public understanding and appreciation of the role of the EU in their lives.

The analysis of newspapers was conducted over a period of 21 months on two of the publications that were considered the most influential in each country. This time frame was determined by a desire to obtain data over a period long enough to include episodes of intense coverage of the EU (such as the bi-annual meetings of the European Council), as well as episodes of less intense coverage. The original intent was to reach 24 months of analysis, but limitations of resources and other considerations forced me to stop three months earlier. I considered a combination of the perceived influence of the publication on its readers in each country and its circulation. Also, the newspapers represented the two major mainstream political tendencies in their editorial approaches. This implies a concentration on conservative and liberal political ideologies; specifically, the right and the center-left of the political spectrum. In France, I selected *Le Figaro* as corresponding to the right-wing and *Le Monde* as the center-left; in Spain, *ABC* exemplifies the conservative ideology and *El País* the center-left; in the UK, *The Times* represents the conservative ideology and *The Guardian* the center-left.

A sample of 147 online issues of each newspaper, from June 1, 2005, to February 28, 2007, was analyzed. To select specific issues, a composite sample technique was used. Seven issues with the same date of publication each month were chosen for each newspaper. I constructed a composite week for each month (i.e., I chose at random one Monday, one Tuesday, and so on). Riffe, Aust, & Lacy (1993) have made a convincing argument that a composite-week sample technique is the most appropriate when dealing with newspaper content.

The unit of analysis was any newspaper article (presented as news) focusing on the EU. The content analysis included the number and length of articles dealing with EU issues. Only news was considered in the analysis (i.e., lengthy articles on the EU written for special issues were excluded).

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<sup>4</sup> Tabloid newspapers are certainly important, particularly in the UK, as are some newspapers published by political parties in France, but, as with any project, there is a choice to be made in the scope of the research.

Coverage of the EU was evaluated in terms of negative, neutral, or positive content. Negative content was defined as any coverage that presented member countries in conflict, concentration on the negative impact of a particular EU policy or action, or a negative portrayal of EU officials or institutions. EU officials included members of any EU institution (Commission, parliament, etc.). Obviously, the positive nature of a particular coverage included the opposite: emphasis on the positive impact of EU policies or actions, and positive portrayal of EU officials or institutions. Neutral content refers to coverage that cannot be interpreted as having either direct positive or negative content. To reach an acceptable level of reliability, two research assistants and I codified and contrasted our findings on the same unit of analysis. The research assistants were recruited based on their language capabilities and their research skills. They were trained and we conducted a pilot study to ensure that the three categories were clearly defined. The inter-coder reliability was measured using Cohen's *Kappa* (1960) formula, which allowed us to determine the reliability of nominal data in terms of percentage of agreement. We included in the analysis all the news items that produced inter-coder reliability above 0.8.

The in-depth individual interviews were conducted by the author with journalists, face to face (three from each media outlet studied), including journalists covering the EU in Brussels and other places in Europe, as well as news directors and others at the newspapers' headquarters in London, Madrid, and Paris. Basically, I interviewed one person with editing/supervision responsibility and two reporters with each newspaper. This provided an important insight for better understanding the process of news production on the issue of the EU. As is the norm in this type of sociological research, the interviewees were assured of anonymity. Therefore, unless it is necessary to comprehend the logic of an argument, I will use the general term "journalist" or "interviewee" (independent of the interviewee's position on the newspaper). The author translated all the interviews from French and Spanish. The open-ended questions addressed to journalists concentrated on several aspects of news production and in particular the criteria for selecting news on the EU and how to present it, including conflict framing, European versus national emphasis, what factors influenced the process of news selection, the tone of the news, the institutional constraints, the specific ways in which the journalist interacts with sources on the EU, and use of official press releases. The collected data were interpreted and structured according to the aforementioned objectives and categories, quantified when possible, and summarized. That is the data analysis of the interviews focused on the respondents' perceptions of their role on making choices about what to cover, the use of categories to give meaning to their experiences, and how they constructed their experiences. The process of integrating this information included: sorting the responses according to the categories above mentioned, mapping the information and creating links between categories, such as for example establishing a particular order reflecting the logic of the journalists' experiences.

## Results

I divided the content analysis into categories of negative, neutral and positive in the content of both the headlines and the body of the article. The body of the article includes the three elements of the article (lead, body, and ending). The main results for each newspaper are presented in the tables below. The table shows in the first column the total number of articles on the EU published by each newspaper during the period we studied, and in the second column the average number of words per article. The other columns present the results of the content analysis according to the three categories: Negative,

Positive, and Neutral. Each of these categories was then subdivided according to the parts of the article: headline and main body. For example, considering the negative category, most articles were negative in the headline and the body, others were negative only in the headline and a few were negative only in the body. The same applies for the other categories.

Table 1. Total Articles

Newspaper	Total Articles	Average Words/Article
<i>Le Monde</i>	212	681
<i>Le Figaro</i>	209	537
<i>El País</i>	184	626
<i>ABC</i>	171	598
<i>The Guardian</i>	158	499
<i>The Times</i>	90	381

Table 2. Tone of the Article: Headline and Body Coincide

Newspaper	Total Same Tone Head and Body	Negative Head & Body %	Neutral Head/Body %	Positive Head/Body %
<i>Le Monde</i>	132	37	39	24
<i>Le Figaro</i>	125	44	34	22
<i>El País</i>	115	34	30	36
<i>ABC</i>	115	40	38	22
<i>The Guardian</i>	108	36	43	21
<i>The Times</i>	72	53	31	16

Table 3. Tone of the Article: Headline and Body Different

Newspaper	Total Tone Head and Body Different	Negative Head %	Neutral Head %	Positive Head %	Negative Body %	Neutral Body %	Positive Body %
<i>Le Monde</i>	80	41	33	26	9	63	28
<i>Le Figaro</i>	84	52	21	27	5	65	30
<i>El País</i>	59	36	37	27	7	51	42
<i>ABC</i>	56	39	29	32	9	57	34
<i>The Guardian</i>	50	36	42	22	12	46	42
<i>The Times</i>	18	50	33	17	11	50	39

In all the newspapers, there are more stories with negative content than positive, although in *Le Monde* and *The Guardian*, the largest proportion is neutral. Indeed, our analysis shows that 41% of the stories in *Le Monde*, 49% in *Le Figaro*, 37% in *El País*, 43% in *ABC*, 40% in *The Guardian*, and 56% in *The Times*, had some negative coverage of the EU in the headlines or body of the article. The most negative of all is *The Times*, which corresponds to the newspaper's open opposition to the euro and to the idea of a federal Europe.

The newspapers analyzed here devoted a considerable number of articles to the EU if we compare to other articles on international issues. UK newspapers dedicated the least space to covering the EU. *Le Monde* from France dedicated more space than any of the other newspapers to EU issues in number of articles and words per article. In fact, both French newspapers dedicated the most articles to the EU during the period we analyzed, although *El País* from Spain had longer articles than *Le Figaro*.

*Le Monde* has its largest office of reporters outside Paris in Brussels. "We have made that choice because most of the national political decisions reflect to a large extent what is decided at the level of European Institutions. We now follow Brussels as a center of power, a place of political decisions that affect all of us," said an interviewee from *Le Monde*. *Le Figaro* is not far behind *Le Monde* in the resources it allocates to covering the EU. This attention to the EU in the French newspapers reflects the role that France has played in the EU since the beginning.

News on the European Union was treated differently according to the newspaper. *Le Monde* has a special section on European news while the other newspapers label news on the EU as world news. Only in a few cases was the EU also discussed in the context of national news.

The content of the newspapers is to a certain extent tied to the general social environment and the context in which the news is produced. As a journalist from *The Guardian* asserts: "The fact that almost every newspaper in the United Kingdom tends to be very euroskeptical, it makes it harder for our newspaper to overcome that view, and be completely different." Indeed, there is a general ambience of euroskepticism in the UK regarding European integration; therefore, even if the editorial line of *The Guardian* tends to favor European integration, it cannot completely escape the predominant socio-political and cultural environment. When journalists cover the news they must produce attractive news, and what is attractive cannot be completely different from the environment in which the news is produced, particularly regarding how other media address European issues, which means that the news would have some negative emphasis on what is happening in Brussels. One interviewee from *The Times* sees the results of our content analysis as a direct result of the way they cover the EU. Indeed, *The Times* strongly opposes the UK joining the single currency.

We think that the single currency is a bad idea for the UK. So because we have gone through an intense debate about the euro, this has probably created a negative perception regarding our coverage of the EU in general. (journalist, *The Times*)

*El País* is admittedly pro-European integration, but journalists recognize that the need to attract readers might include the use of negative headlines, which in turn will affect readers' perceptions. Indeed, the



information about Europe is very complicated, with a very complex institutional organization. It is not perceived as exciting news. Therefore, journalists use certain types of headlines to attract readers.

Indeed, the differing coverage of the EU can be explained in part by the newspapers' perception of their readers' interests. For instance, there is less news on Europe in the British newspapers because there is a perception among British journalists that news on the EU does not interest as many readers. The newspapers must respond to the context of their respective societies, and they must face the constraints and requirements of the market. In other words, the process of producing the news on the EU responds to several technical requirements as well as the economic, ideological, and organizational constraints of the industry, and the socio-cultural context. In the next section we will address the most common of those factors affecting coverage of the EU.

### **Challenges in Covering the European Union**

The most salient aspects that newspapers have to consider when covering the European Union are tied to general rules and mechanisms, as well as to socio-psychological aspects. Most of these are also taken into account when producing other types of news, and some are specific to covering the EU. From the interviews with journalists, we identified and analyzed the following aspects that we considered more important: 1) The difficulty of explaining the process of European integration, 2) attractive headlines, 3) emphasis on contest and conflict, 4) emphasis on bad news, 5) reaching the widest possible audience, and 6) the influence of bureaucrats, politicians or political ideology on the content of the newspapers. Some of those aspects are obviously interconnected, but are presented in the following pages under different headings for explicative purposes.

#### *Difficulty of Explaining Europe to the Audience*

The difficulty for publishers of printed media is how to make the European Union attractive to read about. EU institutions decide important political choices and many directives and policies that affect the public directly. The difficulty of the journalist is to make people understand those directives and policies so that readers realize the importance they have on their lives. It is a difficult task to make a complex institutional machine understandable, particularly when the machine is perceived by the public as distant and not directly connected to their lives. As a journalist at *Le Figaro* suggested:

The EU is a very hard subject to cover because most people do not have enough information, people do not know how the EU works, the Commission, the Council of Ministers, etc. It is complicated because the EU is something that is not completely federal or only supranational; it depends on the areas. Furthermore, there is not any clear historical reference to relate to the readers.

For example, when covering the debate regarding the European Constitution, the newspapers had to report on technical and complicated political matters with many possible implications. Thus, most of the newspapers analyzed in this study wrote short, simple pieces for the public at large and more detailed pieces in special sections of the paper. These longer analytic pieces were published once or twice

a week, depending on the newspaper, but were read, according to the estimation of the journalists, by only a small number of readers (most of those readers, they estimate, are highly educated).

Furthermore, journalists frequently have to cover European issues in terms of policy rather than politics, and policies, contrary to politics, are mostly dry and very technical. EU policy is characterized by its bureaucratic language and acronyms, which makes it unattractive. The challenge is to present this information in a way that is readable, interesting, and understandable:

The prime criterion is to make attractive for the readers something as abstract as the EU. The trouble with the European stories is that in many occasions the story is very important, but if we can not make it attractive to read, the story is lost. (journalist, *The Guardian*)

To make it attractive, newspapers appeal to what works well when covering politics; that is, producing shocking headlines, often combined with conflict and bad news.

#### *Attractive Headlines*

Newspapers need to attract readers to inform them; therefore, they try to use shocking headlines. This implies that an eye-catching headline does not always reflect the real content of the article. More often than not, the headline emphasizes the drama and negatives, rather than positives, as reflected in our content analysis. A common headline found in the newspapers after an important meeting in Brussels or an intergovernmental meeting is reflected in the following examples: "Europe does not advance" (*Le Monde*, June 2005), or "Europe is in a standstill" (*El País*, December 2005). This kind of headline creates the illusion that when the representatives of EU institutions meet they have to accomplish something important. Given the nature of EU institutions, and the nature of negotiations it is unrealistic to expect important advances at every meeting. For instance, because many fundamental issues require a large vote (in some cases a unanimous vote), it is normal that the meetings do not always produce agreements. But the way the press covers these meetings creates the illusion that it is a failure when agreements are not reached, which in turn fuels a sense of frustration among the public. As one journalist interviewed from *El País* said:

We want to inform with rigor, but if we have a cold, dry headline we lose our objective of informing because we do not stimulate people to read the article; therefore, sometimes we need to have a headline that is not necessarily 100% correct in its implications, but it would attract more readers than a headline that is very exact, but lacks impact. (journalist, *El País*)

Indeed, information on Europe could be boring for the average citizen. It is dense; it is about unending negotiations, policies, and institutional change. Journalists believe that it is difficult to attract readers with these topics:

As arid as the information could be, our obligation is to inform the public, and in order for us to inform, the public should read, and in order to read they should be attracted to

read with headlines that are attractive to them. (journalist, *Le Figaro*)

Therefore, journalists try to write attractive headlines and stories that imply some type of conflict or situation that the reader will be interested in reading. In the process, they often reify reality.

#### *Emphasis on Contest and Conflict*

There is a widespread assumption among journalists and other media practitioners that the public is often attracted to conflict, to drama: "If the topic is conflictive and creates debate, it is a major consideration for us to decide to cover it" (interviewee, *Le Figaro*).

To attract viewers in general there is a need for some type of dramatization, when explaining to the population European Union issues; for instance, the reasons for a qualified majority, the majority vote and so on. (interviewee, *ABC*)

Therefore, to entice readers and viewers, print media concentrate on competition between ideas and, if possible, between identifiable individuals representing political parties, EU institutions, or member countries. Issues do not sell newspapers; therefore, newspapers executives see it necessary to emphasize conflict, and, when possible, use opposing personalities, which they believe attract readers:

We like stories that have some conflict, for instance power conflicts between EU institutions or between member states, and especially between leaders. We follow the evolution of those conflicts from one day to the other. In short, confrontations make good news: they attract readers. (journalist, *ABC*)

In some cases, personal enmity between leaders is considered relevant to illustrate the debates and issues of the EU. For example, argued one journalist from *The Times*, "for us it was useful that Blair and Chirac did not have good relations. It made it more interesting to talk about the EU." In general, journalists try to personalize the issues as much as they can because of the aforementioned difficulty in informing the public about EU issues. The public does not necessarily need to be familiar with the background of opposing ideas or individuals to follow the contest. For instance, who is in favor of the CAP (Common Agricultural Policy)? Who is against the CAP? Who is in favor of (or against) social reforms? Also attractive for the newspaper readers are debates in which clear-cut ideologies are opposed, such as rejecting neo-liberal policies, or statements that have some content that could be perceived as anti-German, anti-French, or anti-any nationality. By concentrating on competition between institutions, countries, or individuals, the media play on the common knowledge of the audience. Who wins and who loses is easier to cover:

Even serious and complicated topics about changes in Europe and against protectionist and different views of Europe between London and its allies of Eastern Europe versus Germany and France, attached to their social welfare and protectionism system, could be a great piece of news, but we need to put it in contrast. (interviewee, *The Guardian*)

Journalists also argue that, by emphasizing the contest in a story, there is less chance of being accused of bias. Indeed, an in-depth discussion of a policy and its implications for society are inevitably subjective (the focus, choice of sources, or availability of sources are necessarily judgment calls) and readers (or critics) often perceive this as evidence of manipulation. On the other hand, when the story is put in terms of a contest, the journalist can easily present contrasting positions.

Furthermore, by emphasizing competition, there is always the possibility for different angles on a story, because of the inclusion of new actors or changes in the polls. Indeed, once a particular policy has been explained, it is no longer a novelty. And novelty is a fundamental requirement for the production of news. A story cannot be a repetition; it must have new developments. Contest and conflict offers that sense of change, of novelty.

This perceived need to emphasize contests leads journalists to rely increasingly on opinion polls and surveys. Polls can be used as a tool to demonstrate the importance of an issue to the public or in evaluating public reaction to a particular policy or story. Opinion polls are fundamental to the press's emphasis on contests, such as counting those in favor of or against enlargement, or those for and against the constitution, instead of explaining the implications of enlargement or the adoption of a new constitution. Polls also add apparently scientific and concrete data to a story that might otherwise be too abstract. In short, reporters and editors of newspapers are more inclined to address strategic details of competition in their news at the expense of the more complex, but fundamental, issues because contests are more easily dealt with, given time and space constraints, and the level of reader understanding.

Thus, competitive politics, and not public policy, is what is most covered and discussed in the daily news. The complexities of the issues, therefore, are de-emphasized, and even stories lacking a competitive theme are often twisted in order to focus on contest. Because of this type of coverage, issues are presented as if they were less important than the position taken by politicians from different parties or countries. In consequence, the implications of given European policies for the society at large are barely presented in the daily news.

#### *Emphasis on Bad News*

There is a tendency in newspapers to run negative stories about bureaucracy, and even more so when dealing with the EU and its bureaucracy. As an interviewee from *The Times* asserted: "Newspapers cannot write about the positives of Europe; it is unrealistic. As a matter of fact, often the EU directives encourage a negative reaction, especially if they try to absorb the cultural differences of all the states."

In journalism, good news is often bad news. "What will go into the news in the newspapers tends to be about problems, about negatives rather than: Is not Europe wonderful?" (interviewee, *The Guardian*). Therefore, in the production of daily news, newspapers end up carrying more bad news than good news, and that in turn might affect reader's perceptions, as the following quotes suggest: "Emotionally, British readers do not find interest in European news, unless there is bad news" (interviewee, *The Times*). "We criticize excessive bureaucracy or corruption, and that might contribute to create a negative perception of the EU" (interviewee, *Le Figaro*).

European institutions and people involved in politics, including lobbying groups, try to communicate to the public things that are going great, but many of their explanations are not as prominent in the daily press as they would like. This is because the press does not devote as much attention to success stories or difficult explanations of an issue. As one journalist at *ABC* said:

The sort of thing that the representatives of the EU will communicate about the European institutions is not necessarily the information that will go into the newspapers. What will go into news tends to be about problems about negatives.

#### *Widest Possible Audience and Competition*

All the newspapers included in this study have to deal with two contradictory objectives: to communicate with as many readers as possible, and to produce quality information in order to attract and communicate with the decision makers (i.e., economic and political elites) in a very competitive market. In short, these newspapers are confronted with the challenge of producing easy-to-understand articles that also inform:

We are competing with other newspapers, therefore we need to be popular, to attract a large range of readers, but we also want to be the newspaper of reference in France. So how to deal with all our constituencies when covering Europe is at the center of our preoccupation. (interviewee, *Le Monde*)

We need readers to attract advertising money. But we also need to produce quality articles, reliable information so that the core of our readers, the businessmen and professionals, those who decide, continue to buy our newspaper. (interviewee, *ABC*)

Brussels is a market for the information, and newspapers are continuously competing with other national newspapers for readers: "We want as many as possible of our readers to read but we also want stories that will encourage people to read our newspaper" (interviewee, *The Times*). Newspapers need to sell copies so they can attract advertisers and other sponsors.

The level of competition and the demands on newspapers vary according to the country. The British press is very competitive because papers depend on the market to survive, whereas in France there is a basic subvention for national newspapers, and more people read elite newspapers than in the UK. As one interviewee from *The Times* recognized: "In an environment of tabloids and simplistic journalism, it is rather hard to be able to survive by presenting serious news." In short, competition forces British newspapers, perhaps with more intensity than in the other countries studied here, to adapt the information to what they perceive people want to read.

#### ***Bureaucrats and Politicians Controlling the Agenda***

A major recurring criticism of journalists covering the EU is that they are tied to EU programs and policies, and to what EU bureaucrats want them to cover. To a certain extent, the EU bureaucrats do

control the agenda. Because newspapers are always looking for a scoop, information coming from a particular individual in the Brussels bureaucracy could influence what will be covered in the newspaper. As an interviewee from *Le Monde* recognizes, "Because we work with the decision-makers in Brussels, and often we write pieces directed to the decision-makers in the industry or in other areas, there is the risk for journalists to become unknowingly the speaker for the European institutions."

However, in terms of influencing what newspapers publish, national governments are more important than the Brussels bureaucracy, even on European issues. This was recognized by most interviewees: "There is sometimes pressure from Downing Street" (journalist, *The Guardian*).

From time to time, some minister office will call us to state what are the interests of the French government on a given issue, or we could have someone from the government complaining about given information that we published in the newspaper. (journalist, *Le Figaro*)

Also, newspapers tend to cover stories related to the national interest because of readers' interest, as one respondent from *Le Figaro* declared:

What determines what will be covered is to a large extent what we see as important for France, what we think our readers will find important. For instance, if the French interest could be affected, also if the issue will have an important influence on the European Union or on French external relations.

In sum, whether because of pressure from the national government or because of the need to attract viewers interested in what affects their own country, the national government's perspective often influences coverage of the EU. As a journalist from *The Times* admits: "Our coverage will be informed by what the EU perspective from our own UK officials is. Ideally we should be able to inform considering other countries' perspectives, but we rarely do that." In other words, the issues brought about by the national government inform the coverage of the EU.

Furthermore, most newspapers in these countries are tied to a political project, if not necessarily a political party; therefore, the content of an editorial or an opinion piece will show this attachment, and often the news might also be influenced by a given political view, and might be produced with the intention to benefit a given political option.

In addition to the political party in power, other national constituencies, such as large companies or political parties, are constantly pressuring the newspapers on what they should be covering and how. This is the daily reality of any journalist: "Politicians expect that we will defend the national interests or certain sectors such as the sugar producers or the fish industry, or the shipbuilding industry, etc." (journalist, *El Pais*). Some newspapers might occasionally publish a piece that reflects what they see as the truth, even against the interest of their own country, and in opposition to lobbies, which want them to inform according to their agenda, but most of the time they try to avoid confrontation. In short, journalists cannot overcome that they have to report on what politicians say; and what politicians say can vary

considerably depending on the circumstances. Most politicians are not always clear regarding European policies; they might embrace, in a general sense, the idea of European integration, but most are often incapable of endorsing policies that affect their own constituency. Indeed, many politicians have one discourse in their own country and a different one in Brussels. For example, it is not uncommon to hear a politician saying to unhappy constituents in Paris, London, or Madrid, about an unpopular policy adopted by the EU: "There is nothing we can do, Brussels decides," even though he or she supported that particular policy in Brussels. The same minister negotiates an issue in the Council and agrees, and then returns to her/his capital and announces: "It is unacceptable what Brussels is trying to impose." Because most people do not know how the decision-making process in Brussels works, they accept this explanation and blame the "foreign" organization, particularly the Commission, which is often used as scapegoat. In other words, reporting what the politicians say in this context will not help to truly inform the public about how the EU works, nor will there be transparency, and the public will continue to believe, among other things, that there is a distant decision maker, and that the building of the EU remains distant and non-democratic.

### Conclusion

The number of stories about the European Union is considerable in all the newspapers, except *The Times*, with an overall average of at least one story every two days. Comparing quantity of stories by nationality, the French newspapers published the most, followed by the Spanish. The British newspapers have fewer stories on the EU; *The Guardian* slightly fewer and *The Times* about half the number of its British counterpart.

Most stories on the EU are placed in the international/world affairs section of the newspapers. Only in *Le Monde* are European Union affairs presented in a section dedicated to Europe, which gives more visibility to EU issues. But whether in a world affairs section or Europe section, news on the European Union is still presented as foreign affairs.

Contrary to what I expected and some previous research suggested, considering all the newspapers together, there is more negative than neutral and positive news in their coverage of the EU or its institutions. These findings differ from the study by de Vreese et al. (2006), in which they recorded that about 84% of the news mentioning the EU or its institutions was neutral (although the de Vreese et al. study was done only for two weeks, and included tabloids and TV news from 25 EU member countries). In fact, the results of my study reinforce the findings of Norris (2002). In her analysis of the EU Commission's media monitor reports, she found that news about EU policies and EU institutions tended to be negative.

These findings also coincide with the traditional assumption that media tend to emphasize negative news. That is, the coverage of the EU in the newspapers studied here, contrasting to what I expected, is not different from other news, even though five of the six newspapers were pro-European union in their editorial line. In order to be successful in their respective objectives (particularly producing fast and attractive news), the newspaper editors choose what they think is the easy and most effective approach: They follow simple one-sided ideas or formulas such as contest or opposition. In the process,

nuances are lost. For instance, as we mentioned earlier, they often present the news in terms of the Commission or the Council, as opposed to the national government, giving the impression that the Commission or the Council acts independently from the member countries' governments. The unintended consequence of this approach is that they end up misinforming the public about the workings of the EU, as well as producing a negative view of the EU. Furthermore, covering issues in terms of context and opposition (e.g., them/us, French/British, the Commission versus a given national government) would most likely reinforce nationalism over the long term rather than attachment to the European Union.

Certainly this kind of coverage (a large proportion of negative news on the EU, with emphasis on contest, bad news, and personalities) would imply that most of the news not only projects a negative view of the European Union, but also does not seem to help to inform the public about several basic aspects of the EU. There is an important and difficult contradiction here. On one hand, by emphasizing bad news, personalities, contest, etc, the media could argue that they attract readers to learn more about the EU, but on the other hand, if most news is negative, then the perception of the EU by the public will tend to be negative as well. It might be that the media try to tailor their content to what will attract the audience, but the audience is also educated through the media. Even assuming the uses and gratification argument that people are not passive receptors, newspapers play a considerable role in bringing their readers information about the EU, which is perceived as distant from their everyday lives, and about which most readers know little, as Robinson (2000) and Zucker (1978) suggest. In short, following only the need to attract readers can end up been counterproductive in terms of facilitating the public's understanding of EU issues. Indeed, polls conducted by the European Commission (Eurobarometer 66, 70) confirm that the EU member countries' populations know little about the workings of the EU.

In sum, many of the principles that dominate the production of news considerably undermine information on the EU. As the theories of news production that inspired this study suggest (Clausen, 2003; Gleissner & de Vreese, 2005; Lecheler, 2008; Semetko & Valkenburg, 2000), the news production practices and the strategies for assigning meaning to EU issues have overdramatized the coverage and, to a large extent, reinforced negative stereotypes of the EU institutions. The search for audiences and the sensationalism that is assumed to attract them cause the media to "dumb down" information. As a consequence, newspaper coverage contributes only slightly to the real debates on the process of European integration.

The points discussed above apply to aspects of news production common to all newspapers analyzed in this research. However, we have seen that there are differences among these newspapers in terms of how specifically they represented the EU, according to nationality and political orientation. These orientations are tied to a certain extent to the national government's position on the EU, the editorial line of the newspaper, and the media-perceived interest of their national readers (particularly competition for people's attention).

Indeed, even though there is no direct control by a political party on what newspapers must cover or say about a particular issue (at least in the outlets analyzed in this study), we have seen that the pressure from politics exists, and there seems to be a complicit relationship between the newspapers and



national politicians (as seen in the interviews). Politicians need the media to advance their agenda, and the media needs politicians to produce news.

Also, although it might be true that owners do not interfere with the production of daily news, every newspaper responds to a certain ideology and has a specific editorial line, which forces journalists to inform within a certain frame. For instance, even though there is a widespread ideology among the mainstream press that follows the liberal model that predominates in the EU, as some journalists interviewed suggested, I found substantial differences among the outlets. While *The Times* and *ABC* tend to advocate for an unregulated market, and often criticize the EU for being too intrusive, newspapers such as *Le Monde*, *El País*, or *The Guardian* are more in agreement with a further regulated European market, closer to a social democratic model. In short, journalists might have a certain independence, but only within a certain frame of reference.

Overall, this research shows that the news on the EU presented to a public with limited knowledge of this supranational organization tends to reinforce traditional views on economics, politics, and society and the relation among the citizens, the national state, and the EU, particularly reinforcing the widespread belief that a national government is better than the EU for solving society's problems. Furthermore, the different content and approaches to covering the EU does not help to create some type of discourse that frames European issues as "common European problems" (Risse, 2003, p. 21). Rather, these findings coincide with previous research interpretations that the media have not been successful in establishing a connection between citizens and the EU institutions (Anderson & McLeod, 2004; de Vreese, 2002).

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