

EU MEDIA RELATIONS VIEWS OF FINNISH AND ITALIAN JOURNALISTS

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Abstract:

This study aims at providing a different answer to the question of EU visibility and tonality in national news coverage. Specifically I claim that the negative or null coverage of EU news depends on the type of relationships that subsist between journalists and EU officers, that is, it depends on EU media relations. Two countries have been chosen, Finland and Italy, to determine the status of EU communications targeted at the national media. From December 2005 to April 2006 thirty journalists from Finland and Italy were interviewed by means of a qualitative questionnaire. The data gathered from journalists in these two member states show that the relationship between journalists and EU institutions is a persistent problem and thus underlines the necessity to improve media relations between EU press officers and the national mass media. The approach applied in this investigation is based on public relations theories concerning media relations

Introduction

In recent years European institutions have felt a necessity to improve the channels of EU communication by establishing better relations with governments of the member states and with the news media. It is through gaining more local support that EU institutions could improve their reputation and increase citizens' participation in EU affairs (European Commission, 2005). Citizens' participation in EU affairs is not only dependent on citizens' motivation and desire to intervene in supranational political affairs but also on citizens' knowledge of EU policies and decision-making processes. It could be argued that the availability of reliable information about the EU is a pre-condition for the establishment of knowledge of the EU which may lead, depending on the level of interest of each EU citizen, to a greater political activism. In this perspective, the news media play a significant role in the acquisition of information by EU citizens of EU institutions, policies and affairs. Citizens' opinions are partially determined by the quantity and quality of the information available on different EU issues. The national news media are thus among the first and more important vehicles for EU communication and are the prime source of citizens' information (Flesh EB 142, 2003: 60).

Previous studies on the EU and news media have generally approached the analysis of news reporting as a factor in either EU visibility or the tonality of EU news. For example de Vreese (2001) conducted a cross-nationally comparative investigation of the news coverage in Britain, Denmark and the Netherlands when specific major EU events occurred. Peter et al. (2003) examined how the European Union was portrayed on prime evening television news; other scholars have studied the national perspective of EU news media reporting (Statham and Gray, 2005; Le Torrec et al., 2001), or they have considered the news media as a vehicle of political participation (McLeod et al., 1999), as an essential tool for creating a European public sphere (Brüggemann et al., 2006) or as a form of media culture (Machill et al., 2006). However, few have sought to understand what journalists think about EU information and how media relations could be strengthened in order to promote public discourse and opinion (Valentini, 2006; Gleissner and de Vreese, 2005). Morgan (1995) and Gavin (2001) analyzed the working conditions of EU correspondents in Brussels in order to find some explanations for the poor visibility of EU news coverage in the UK. Their findings show that the working relationships of correspondents with EU institutions are problematic and thus might compromise the quality of the information available. Morgan claimed that these problematic relationships are a consequence of the lack of special orientation training for EU correspondents. However, since 1995 the EU has financed and promoted many courses in media training for reporting the EU through the European Journalism Centre in Maastricht. It has also changed its internal structure by hiring more PR and communication specialists and it has embraced a new communication philosophy of dialogue with citizens and other publics (Euractiv, 2006, 2005; Wallström, 2005a, 2005b). In this wave of renovation the "Directorate General (DG) Press and Communication", which is in charge of communication and media relations, has recently changed its name to "DG Communication".

In this study my intent was to learn more about the opinions of Finnish and Italian journalists on EU information and media relations activities. The originality of this study relates to the subject investigated and the approach. The subject studied is not EU correspondents, but journalists from two countries, Finland and Italy, working for national and regional newspapers/magazines, and who may or may not have attended a course in EU media training and may or may not have worked in Brussels. These journalists differ from EU

correspondents in that their job is at the national level, distant from the Brussels-based offices of EU correspondents and consists in reporting not only EU but also national political and economic affairs.

The approach applied in this investigation is based on public relations theories of media relations. Specifically this study aims at discovering what journalists think about courses in EU media training¹ in terms of their utility, efficacy and potential for learning, their opinion on the material they receive from EU in terms of quantity and quality, the actual and desired coverage of EU news in their newspapers/ magazines, different issues on the EU agenda in relation to those on the national agenda and the journalists' perceptions of their role in forming citizens' opinions of the European Union.

Go local - EU interest in the national news media

The increasing interest of the EU in the national news media largely rests on two variables: the decreasing support of EU citizens for EU policies combined with increasing dissatisfaction with the way the EU works (EB 2006b) and the acknowledgement by the European Commission of the importance of communications with different publics for the future of the European Union (Wallström 2005c). The two variables are linked. In fact, past statistics show no increment in positive opinions either on the reputation of, or in public support for, the European Union. Less than 50% of EU citizens have had positive opinions about these two issues during the past five years (EB 2006b, 2005, 2004, 2003). The European Commission believes that these results are due to the limited or distorted knowledge of citizens on EU matters and this is partly a consequence of the type of information they receive from the media, which loses its neutrality and is generally re-interpreted and reworked by different relays, national parties and other opinion multipliers (European Commission, 2002a: 10). In order to reduce apathy, the European Commission believes that improving communication channels with citizens could be a solution to the currently limited knowledge that EU citizens have concerning EU matters.

With the intention of improving these channels, the Vice-president of the European Commission has started to implement specific actions towards the national news media – seen as, among other channels, key vehicles for EU communication with citizens (Wallström, 2005b). In fact, the media have a crucial role in the process of “Europeanization” and in the development of a new European identity (Kivikuru, 1996) for various reasons: not only is the media a vehicle for informing citizens but the media help to create public opinion and influence public support in relation to administrative and other relevant institutions. Various scholars take a view that assumes that public opinion drives government policy (Downs, 1957), and have documented high correlations between opinion and policy in support of that view (Erikson et al., 1993; Monroe, 1979; Page and Shapiro, 1992).

Since 2002 the European Commission has decided to take a more active role in providing messages that might be interpreted in specific ways by EU citizens and that, at the same time, lead to positive feedback through the establishment of cooperative and synergic actions between EU institutions and the national media in all member states. Greater visibility of the European Union through news coverage that is as unbiased and as objective as possible can reduce the distant and hostile feelings that many citizens have (Friends of Europe, 2004). This type of information is partly determined by the quality of information provided by EU press officers and partly by their relationships with the national media. In fact national media have the power to select what they consider publishable not only on the basis of specific journalistic rules but also on what they perceive as interesting and from reliable sources. The source-reporter relationship has been one of the central subjects of media relations theory and practice (Shin and Cameron, 2003; Cameron et al., 1997; Schoemaker and Reese, 1991; Giber and Johnson, 1961). Several studies (Curtin and Rhodenbough, 2001; Lee and Solomon, 1990; Sallot, 1990; Aronoff, 1976; Sachsman, 1976, Schabacker, 1963; Cutlip, 1962) show that PR influence can account for 80% of news content in certain circumstances. Baxter (1981) argued that public relations sources have little direct influence on the news, but indirectly influence journalists' perceptions; that is, the influence is not on the news *per se* but it depends on the quality of the personal relationships between journalists and PR officers. The results of these studies have motivated governments and other public institutions to invest more in media relations activities so as to be able directly to explain their objectives and at the same time gain public consent for their actions.

Possible factors that influence journalists' opinions on EU information

The extensive use of media relations activities both in public and private organizations has prompted several researchers to attempt to determine the effectiveness of media relations activities for organizations and in developing models that could explain journalists' decisions on news selection (Jeffers, 1977; Turk, 1986; Sallot, 1990). In this study two models have been used to understand journalists' opinions on EU media relations. The first model was proposed by Statham (2006) and is based on six factors that influence the level and form of EU coverage. In this model journalists are conceived as fulfilling a dual function: they are at the same time mediators of political information from external sources and actors in their own right who contribute to

processes of opinion-formation by commentating on political affairs (ibid: 3- 4). Taking into consideration this dual function of journalists, Statham argues that the main factors that influence journalists' decisions on the level and form of EU coverage are: the readership's demand for information, the influence of collective actors in framing the agenda-building, the specific newspaper's organisational culture, journalists' information gathering and their news selection, and, finally, the media agenda-setting.

The second model presented by Sinaga and Wu (2007) was employed to predict journalists' use of public relations news material in Indonesia. The aim of this study was to understand what factors influence journalists' decisions in accepting and then publishing news material produced by public relations officers. This second model considers five main factors that influence journalists' decisions, these are journalists' professional roles, news values, business pressures, informal relations and public relations and journalism education. Some of these factors are similar to those in the previous model. For example the news value factor of Sinaga and Wu is similar to Statham's journalists' selection of news/ readership's demand for information, while the business pressures factor of Sinaga and Wu is similar to Statham's newspaper's organisational culture/media agenda-setting. The second model introduces three other variables, two of which are considered important for the outcomes of this study. These are journalists' professional role and informal relations. Other studies (Johnstone et al., 1972; Weaver and Wilhoit, 1991) on journalists' professional role found that journalists view their professional role differently. Some journalists believe they are neutrals, or simply channels of transmission, others believe they should serve as an adversary of government and business. The way journalists perceive their professional role influences their journalistic practices and the tonality of their news reporting.

The other important factor for this study is informal relations. Shin and Cameron (2003) and later Sallot and Johnson (2006), demonstrated that the type of relationship between sources of information and journalists influences journalists' decisions about newsworthiness. Since journalists' decisions about whether to report specific EU information and the tonality of the coverage is also influenced by their knowledge of the EU (Morgan, 1995), another factor, journalists' opinions of EU media training courses, has been included in this study. The European Commission believes that these courses could improve journalists' understanding of EU affairs and thus make journalists more prepared to report EU matters in their national media. These courses are part of the European Commission's strategies for media relations and as such they must be considered in order to assess the quality of EU media relations.

News media in Finland and in Italy

In this study two EU member states, Finland and Italy, were analyzed in order to obtain an initial portrait of EU media relations in two countries that are geographically, historically and culturally different. Before presenting this study, I will briefly introduce the Finnish and Italian media environments. In Finland newspapers are the leading news media. Papers reach more Finns daily than any other medium, and their share of media marketing in 2001 was just over 50%. In fact Finland rates third in the world per capita distribution of newspapers. There are 53 daily newspapers, 146 newspapers that are issued one to three times a week and another 100 free newspapers on the market. The publishing of dailies is concentrated in three newspaper chains: Sanoma-WSOY Corporation, Alma Media Group, and Intermediate-Finland Media (Väli-Suomen Media), which control over two thirds of the net sales of dailies of the country. Outside the three chains there are 11 dailies with a circulation of 490,000, or 21% of the total. Television has recently switched from analogue to a digital system. Currently there are five state-owned digital stations operated by the Finnish Broadcasting Company (YLE), six commercial digital stations, and six pay-tv channels². YLE also operates thirteen radio channels and services complemented by 25 regional radio programmes. Television viewing time in Finland has remained relative stable. For three years Finns watched television on average 2 hours 47 minutes a day (Jyrkiäinen, 1999).

The media in Finland have an important role in the construction of public debate, especially in regard to EU policies. Publicity and the news media, especially newspapers, played an important role in the political debate and campaigns preceding the referendum on EU membership in 1994. The political elite, citizens' organizations and other social groups sought to reach citizens through the media (Bonsdorff, 1998) and to convince them of the benefits of EU membership. Considering the low level of information about the EU, which characterized the beginning of the nineties in Finland, the media had the possibility to persuade Finns. Additionally, the belief in the media's influence was strong. Today the Finnish media remain a powerful source of information on the EU, but since the EU is no longer a novelty for Finns, EU news is no longer as attractive (ibid, 1998). Statistics show that the majority of the Finnish people (69%) are of the opinion that the Finnish media report about the right amount of news regarding the European Union. Over half of the population (57%) thinks that the media present the European Union objectively, 34% thinks that the EU is talked about too positively and 5% too negatively. Manual workers, supporters of the political left wing and people living in the northern parts of the country, in particular, consider that the media give too positive a picture of the European Union (EB 61, 2004).

In Italy, there are 177 daily newspapers, most of them owned or controlled by a small number of publishing trusts, including *L'Espresso*, *Il Corriere della Sera*, *La Repubblica*, *L'Unità*, *Il Resto del Carlino*, *La Nazione* and *Il Giorno*, to mention some of the most important. Italy does not have tabloid daily newspapers. Two major broadcasting groups, three publicly owned RAI channels and three privately owned Mediaset channels, lead Italian television. There are also three other privately owned channels and several channels at the regional level. In Italy the first medium is television, followed by mobile communication and radio (Censis/Ucsi, 2006). Newspaper readership figures in Italy are relatively low given the size of the population (approx. 58 million) (BBC News, 2006). In fact 90% of people watch TV every day, but only 35% read a newspaper at least three times per week, including the sports news, and only 29.9% read three books per year (Censis/Ucsi, 2006). This tendency is increasing and shows one of the biggest differences between the Finnish and Italian use of different news media. Another difference is the use of the internet. In Finland the number of internet users is very high, reaching more than 67% of the population (Jyrkiäinen, 2004). In Italy the number of citizens who use the internet is growing, about 37.6 % but it is still far behind the Finnish numbers (Censis/Ucsi, 2006). Although the availability of EU information in Italy is similar to Finland, the number of people who search for such information on the internet or read newspapers is much lower than in Finland. In addition, TV programmes like Euronews, TV5 Euro and EuroSat are not followed by the average Italian because of the costs of receiving cable and satellite TV and because of the limited capacity and/or interest in following programmes in languages other than Italian (EB 243, 2006a). In addition, fiction and entertainment programmes are far more popular on TV than public debates and special programmes dealing with the European Union. If we look at the statistics on the EU and Italian media, 33% of Italians think that the national media present the EU in an objective manner – a figure that is slightly lower than the EU average (41%), 28% share the view that the EU is presented by their national media in a more positive light than is warranted. Half of the Italians also think that their national media do not give the European Union enough coverage (EB 61, 2004).

With regard to the role of the news media in diffusing information about the EU, the situation is quite different between the two countries studied. In Italy the first medium per number of users is television (94%), while the newspaper is fourth with 59.1% (Censis/Ucsi, 2006). In Finland 78% of the population are newspaper readers (European Commission, 2002b). Since EU discourses are generally complex and often cannot be reduced to TV news stories, and consequently tend to be presented more in print than in an audiovisual format, statistically more Finns are exposed to EU debates and affairs than are Italians. In fact, the preferred media for learning about EU institutions, policies and debates, are newspapers and magazines.

The main sources of EU information for Finnish and Italian journalists

Finnish and Italian journalists, as with journalists located in the other member states, acquire the majority of their information about the EU from press officers and spokespersons of the European Commission through the national Representation offices. One of the main functions of the Representations of the European Commission is to make closer and stronger contacts with the general publics, governments and media of the member states than the Brussels-based EU institutions could do. As DG Communication states on its introductory web page, its mission is to “inform the Commission of the evolution of opinion in the member states; co-ordinate the activities of the Representations in the member states; centralise all contacts with the media; seek to ensure a coherent approach to communication and information issues within the Commission. This involves contacts with Directorates General and Services within the Commission that have information units responsible for sectoral information”. Other official EU news sources that are frequently consulted by national journalists are reports, articles and editorial notes produced by think tanks and other non profit organizations such as European voice, Euractiv, Centre for European Policy Studies, Agence Europe, journalist associations and resource centres such as the International Press Association (API), European Federation of Journalists (EFJ), International Press Centre, and several online and print publications³.

Generally, journalists are contacted directly by press officers or indirectly informed through emails and newsletters about different aspects of EU agenda, specific events and political decisions. Accredited journalists can access press releases and background material posted on the European Commission's virtual press room, download audiovisual material from different EU web links and participate in meetings and seminars. They can live-stream the daily briefing in Europe via Satellite, which also covers sessions of the European Parliament and some of the Council of Ministers' press conferences. In order to enable journalists to better understand EU institutions and decision-making processes, the European Commission has also invested in a second action whose aim is to provide concrete tools and to support knowledge diffusion through media training. The European Union supports the costs of implementing training programmes for the media and, through its call for tenders, finances media projects aiming at enhancing EU visibility. National and local institutions and organizations can apply for funds to implement such programmes.

However, journalists who work for regional and local newspaper are not necessarily able to benefit from all the EU programs. Regional and local newspapers may not have the resources to provide courses in EU media

training to their employees or their circulation may be too small for them to be considered a recipient of EU funds for media projects. Moreover, most regional and local journalists are not full-time EU reporters. Commonly, their main task is to cover internal, economic, or cultural affairs. Whenever these aspects of the national agenda are linked to EU agenda, or when there is an important EU decision or stance that is worth covering at the local level, they then report the EU position. The material they use is generally obtained through indirect sources such as internet web pages, press material received by the national Representation of the European Commission and/or by the government press officers and national agency feeds. Their contacts with the EU commissioners, their spokespersons or with Members of the European Parliament (MEP), are thus rare. According to Statham (2006, 8) a newspaper with a specialist correspondent based in Brussels is likely to receive better quality information on events in supranational European politics, than one that relies on a domestic reporter, or on news agencies.

Research sample and methodology

Since EU debate in both Finland and Italy is mostly contained in newspapers and magazines, this study only includes findings on press journalists. The sample contained 54 interviewees of whom 14 were from Finland and 40 from Italy. The method of investigation was an online questionnaire sent in the Finnish and Italian languages between December 2005 and April 2006. The aim of this questionnaire was to gather qualitative data with which to understand the role that the news media have in the process of European integration. It was addressed to journalists reporting EU information and working on national/ regional newspapers/magazines in Finland and in Italy. The majority of the questions were closed answers (N= 32), and some were open-ended (N= 12). The questionnaire was divided into three sections plus a fourth optional section. The first section (7 questions) dealt with some general information about the interviewee; the second section (11 questions) dealt with media training for journalists with the purpose of finding out what journalists thought about the courses in media training they had participated in, in terms of their utility, efficacy and potential for learning. The third section (25 questions) took up different issues such as the EU agenda in relation to the national agenda, the national media coverage of EU issues and journalists' possibilities to gather EU information. The fourth section (1 question) was for comments and remarks.

The method was qualitative rather than quantitative. Journalists were pre-contacted by telephone in order to establish whether they wrote or had written articles about the EU and whether they were interested in participating in the survey or not. Only journalists writing about EU affairs were interviewed. Additional selection criteria were gender, geographical area, political view and the circulation and number of readers of the journal/magazine. The Finnish sample was composed of journalists working for *Aamulehti*, *Helsingin Sanomat*, *Ilkka*, *Kainuun Sanomat*, *Karjalainen*, *Kaupparehti*, *Keskisuomalainen*, *Lapin Kansan*, *Suomen Kuvalehti* and *Turun Sanomat*. The Italian sample included journalists working for *Avvenire*, *Corriere della Sera*, *Il Campanile Nuovo*, *il Foglio*, *il Giornale*, *Il Giorno*, *Il Mattino*, *il Messaggero*, *il Sole24ore*, *L'Espresso*, *l'Unità*, *Panorama*, and *Venerdì di Repubblica*. The answers to the open-ended questions were classified according to the definitions used by the participants themselves (Patton, 1990), that is, a coding scheme was established after all responses were collected, then systematic content analysis was conducted applying this scheme to the responses with appropriate reliability assessment. All the open-ended questions, apart from the last item on comments and remarks, implied very short answers, typically either to name three adjectives pertaining to a specific issue or to name three important topics on the national agenda or three personal opinions on their job and on EU information. Since the open-ended questions were few and implied short answers, it was possible for each question to identify two or three main themes by focusing both on concepts expressed in the answers and on their relationship with the specific question. As the questionnaires were submitted in the Finnish and Italian languages and thereafter translated into English, the use of dictionaries was necessary. To reduce the subjectivity factor, control of the coding scheme was performed by native speakers of both languages.

The opinions of journalists on EU information

The number of journalists who answered the online questionnaire was 30, of whom 10 were from Finland and 20 from Italy. The pre-contact conversations revealed that 30% of the journalists were male, 50% were between 40-50 years old and 40% had a master's degree. Two out of three had not attended any course in media training for reporting EU information, but a wide discrepancy was observed between the two countries. Only three Italian journalists had attended a course in media training for reporting EU information compared to seven Finnish journalists who had done so at least once. The majority of those who had not previously attended training indicated that they would have liked to participate in such a course because the training could be useful for acquiring more background information (21%), more knowledge about EU institutions, history, economics and policies (20%), and skills/ tools/ tips/ methodologies for writing (19%). However only eleven of all the respondents believed that such courses are necessary for a journalist to be able to write on EU issues, while

fourteen out of thirty did not. Among those who had attended at least one course 26% said that it was generally useful and 33% that they felt more prepared in reporting EU news. Many in this group (40%) also considered it important to attend a course in media training and expressed a desire for further courses. Six of the interviewees, five Finns and one Italian, who had attended a course in media training reported that their opinion on EU institutions and policies had remained the same; four journalists, two Finns and two Italians, said it had become more positive and one respondent in each country said that it had become more negative. In figure 1 below, journalists were asked how their opinions concerning the EU had been influenced by the training:

Figure 1

Your opinion about EU policies and institutions after this training has:	Answers in ITA per sex		Answers in FIN per sex		Total per country		Total per sex		Total of all sample
	F	M	F	M	ITA	FIN	F	M	
become more positive	0	2	1	1	2	2	1	3	4
remained the same	0	1	1	4	1	5	1	5	6
become more negative	1	0	0	1	1	1	1	1	2
I do not know	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
N/A	6	10	0	3	16	3	6	13	19
Total	7	13	2	9	20	11	9	22	31

It is not possible, however, to demonstrate that courses in EU media training necessarily have direct links with changes in journalists' opinions. Frequently, journalists who had a positive opinion (39%) or neutral position (45%), perceived EU affairs differently after attending a course in media training because they previously had little knowledge of EU affairs. The data show a direct correlation between those who found a course in media training useful and were willing to attend another and those who had a positive opinion on EU institutions and policies. In addition, the data show that the more journalists learned about the EU, the more positive their opinion became; only two out of thirty, one in each country, reported that the more they learned from this type of course, the more negative their opinion became. It seems that a good level of knowledge about the EU is an important prerequisite in helping journalists to define their own position as positive, neutral or negative with respect to the EU.

When asked which aspects they thought were necessary to report EU information, the majority of the interviewees considered good writing skills (38%) very important, then a good understanding of and knowledge about the EU and other countries' EU-related issues (28%), while another group believed that both the ability to give detailed and correct information (9%) and to provide a national perspective on EU policies (9%) are important features. The first choice made by the journalists is an obvious one, since it is related to their job, while the other three options are all linked to each other. It is quite difficult to report EU affairs in a detailed and objective manner if a journalist does not understand EU affairs and the issues on other countries' agendas. This knowledge is also necessary in order to give a more national perspective to the news. The second most chosen option for this question was, among the Finnish sample, the national perspective, while for the Italian sample this was only the sixth out of the seven options available.

To the question on what their readers want to find in good quality news on EU issues, 52% thought good writing skills, 14% a local perspective and proximity to readers' interests, 10% a national perspective on EU debates and 10% an EU perspective on debates. Also in this question there were differences between the two countries: one Finnish journalist out of three believed the perspective of local/readers is very important, while for Italians the most important factor is to have good writing skills. According to sixteen journalists out of thirty their readers are interested in EU affairs, while six thought they are not. Again, the Finns were more sceptical about their readers' interest in the EU than were the Italians. Only two out of ten Finns believed their readers have some kind of interest in EU news, compared to fourteen Italians journalists out of twenty. Twelve journalists in the whole sample assumed that the way they report EU information has little influence on public opinion, while one third thought their news reporting affects the right amount of general opinion. The difference in the influence of the news on public opinion was more a country-related question (see Figure 2).

Figure 2

How much does your way of presenting EU issues influence readers' opinion on those issues?	Answers in ITA per sex		Answers in FIN per sex		Total per country		Total per sex		Total of all sample
	F	M	F	M	ITA	FIN	F	M	
very much	0	0	0	1	0	1	0	1	1
The right amount	4	6	0	0	10	0	4	6	10
Little	2	4	2	4	6	6	4	8	12
not at all	0	1	0	0	1	0	0	1	1
readers of this journal/magazine are not influenced by our news	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
I don't know	1	2	0	3	3	3	1	5	6
N/A	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Total	7	13	2	8	20	10	9	21	30

Among those who thought they influence the right amount of their readers' opinions, one out of two were from Italy, while the Finnish journalists felt they have little power in the formation of public opinion. However, half of the whole sample perceived their job position as responsible for possible changes in opinion on the EU within their home country. Slightly more Finnish journalists (60%) than Italians (45%) acknowledged this responsibility. When asked to define their professional role as journalists reporting EU issues, nineteen out of thirty of all the respondents defined themselves as facilitators of EU communication, four Finnish journalists and none from Italy as demystifiers of the EU cause, two journalists both from Italy as promoters of the EU cause, and the remaining six journalists gave other answers.

Since news media play such an important role in society and since they have the power to sway public opinion, some questions dealt with aspects of influence on news selection. To the question "Do you feel that external authorities/organizations have influenced or are influencing your choices in presenting EU issues?" twenty-eight out of the thirty interviewees from both countries replied in the negative. Half of the total sample felt that EU institutions have little influence on their national media agenda, while seven out of thirty reported that EU institutions have the right amount of influence. Among those who agreed that EU institutions had an influence on the national media, half were from Finland. In contrast, only one out of four Italian journalists felt almost no pressure from EU institutions in their job of EU reporting. According to the journalists from both countries the influence of the EU on the news media has not effected their profession, although the profession itself has changed. Almost all the respondents (83%) reported that in the last 10 years the rules and regulations governing journalism have changed, but this was not directly connected with the power of EU regulations in media policies.

To the question "How important is the EU agenda⁴ in your daily/weekly news reporting?" one third of the respondents from both countries said that the EU agenda has a good weight in daily news reports; one quarter that it depends on the issue discussed, one out of five that it generally has not so much importance, and only one out of ten that it has very much importance. Five women journalists out of nine believed that generally the EU agenda does not have very much importance while only two men out of twenty-one said the same. The most negative group were the Italian female journalists (see Figure 3).

Figure 3

How important is the EU agenda in your daily/weekly news reporting?	Answers in ITA per sex		Answers in FIN per sex		Total per country		Total per sex		Total of all sample
	F	M	F	M	ITA	FIN	F	M	
very much	1	1	0	2	2	2	1	3	4
a good weight	0	6	1	3	6	4	1	9	10
generally not so much	4	2	1	0	6	1	5	2	7
depends on the issue discussed	2	2	0	4	4	4	2	6	8
depends on the relevance at national/regional/local level	0	2	0	0	2	0	0	2	2

it is seldom covered	0	1	0		1	0	0	1	1
it is not discussed at all	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
N/A	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Total	7	14	2	9	21	11	9	23	32

When asked to quantify the media coverage that the newspapers/journals they work for usually give to EU issues, sixteen out of thirty reported that their journal gives EU issues enough space with more Finns (70%) than Italians (45%) believing so. However, to the question “Do you think your journal/magazine should give more space to EU issues?” sixteen out of thirty checked ‘yes’, six ‘no’ and eight ‘don’t know’. Among those who said they would like to cover more EU issues in their newspapers, fourteen out of twenty were Italians and only two out of ten were Finns. The quantity of space dedicated to EU news in a journal/magazine also depends on the position that the journal/magazine seeks to adopt in relation to other news media. The item “by reporting EU issues your journal/magazine wants to...” aimed to find the journalists’ perceptions of the reasons behind reporting EU news. From the total sample 37% chose the option that their journal wants to satisfy the readers’ need for information, 25% the option to enhance public debate about the specific topic reported, 11% the option to be pro EU and 10% the option to be considered a credible EU source of information and to increase the number of readers.

The data from the open-ended questions also show that the majority of journalists believed that their journal/magazine covers enough EU topics but that this should increase. This indicates the dilemma between personal considerations regarding the importance of specific topics and the restrictions imposed by the journal/magazine’s structure. Among the most quoted reasons for not covering enough EU information in the national media were the following: EU issues do not attract as many readers as local issues do (31%), EU issues are not sensationalistic (17%), most of the topics are not interesting (13%) and nobody is interested in procedural aspects related to EU decision-making (13%). In addition, seventeen out of thirty stated that the national agenda of their country frequently clashes with the EU agenda, especially in the cases related to the European arrest warrant, agricultural/environmental policies and Turkey joining the EU. Another aspect investigated was journalists’ opinions on EU information and their perceptions of media relations with EU institutions.

Frequently journalists prepare their news reports with information obtained through EU institutions and their press offices. Hence, journalists’ perceptions of the availability and quality of EU information have a great impact on news selection and quality. When asked how they would characterize EU communication, thirteen journalists felt it is informative, five promotional, three educational and seven gave other answers, such as frequently inefficient, bureaucratic, complex and confused, not enough and different from one country to another. On the other hand when asked to express their opinion on what their readers think about EU communication the answers showed a slightly negative increment: one third of all the journalists believed that their readers consider it informative, eight propagandistic, while seven gave other answers such as distant, irrelevant, complex, boring, insufficient and not clear. Only two journalists gave promotional and two educational connotations as answers. Half of the Finnish sample reported that a great number of their readers consider EU communication propagandistic, while only three Italian journalists said the same. Journalists from both countries said that the quality of EU information is very poor and that media relations between sources of information and their national media are difficult and not properly established.

In the last item in the questionnaire respondents were asked to freely give their comments and ideas on EU information, journalism values in both countries and personal opinions. Only six journalists out of the thirty who replied to the questionnaire expressed their views on these questions, and five of them were Italian. The most noteworthy comments concerned the perceived lack of attention paid by the EU to national journalists in its information services. Some journalists expressed their dissatisfaction with EU media relations: they found it difficult to get in touch with EU officers for interviews, to obtain any type of contact information or material for preparing news reports in their journals/magazines. Nevertheless, they believed that there is a lot of information available but that it is very hard to get when a journal/magazine is not located in or near Brussels. Another important issue discussed was readers’ interest in the EU. Some journalists admitted having tried to give more space to EU affairs but with no positive effects on the readership. For Finland, especially, it would be quite difficult to increase the space devoted to EU news if Finnish journalists’ perceptions of public opinion were true, that is, if a great number of Finnish readers really saw EU communication as propagandistic. Nevertheless, many expressed the readiness to take a risk in the writing format for reporting EU issues in the hope of making it more attractive to readers. A possible solution proposed was to treat EU news as if it were national political news and in this way present the quarrels, arguments, debates and gossip current in Brussels.

Discussion

The results of this study reveal a similar trend in the reporting of EU news in Finland and in Italy. The majority of the interviewed journalists felt an internal pressure towards covering the national agenda rather than the EU agenda. For many it is a question of selling copies and since EU news generally lacks sensationalistic facts, they are less attractive to their local market. The Finnish journalists were more sceptical and critical towards EU information than their Italian counterparts, but they also felt more responsible within their society.

In both countries a need was expressed to improve media relations between EU institutions and the national news media. Journalists should be considered the starter motor of a complex mechanism generating the kind of public discourse that is a precondition of involvement and participation in and support for the European project. Journalists showed interest in taking on this role, but they need the support of politicians, media owners and, above all, of European institutions. At the same time there is still a general tendency towards preserving a traditional national news format which clashes with the new EU news format.

The way the EU media system functions is an issue seen, for instance, in the tendency of journalists to use traditional categories instead of perceiving the novel aspects of the European enterprise. Not only is it a question of a lack of a common language and a unified public, but also one of the dominance of national networks among journalists, the intrusion of the national agenda even in the dissemination of EU news, and the prevalence of intergovernmental and elite-driven images of the EU that convey an image of weakness on the part of certain European institutions, for instance, in the prevalence of the European Commission over the European Parliament (see, for example the findings of the studies by Gerhards, 1993 and Le Torrec et al., 2001) that determine the current situation on EU visibility and tonality in the news.

Courses in media trainings on EU reporting could be a solution to the problem of acquiring knowledge and understanding about matters relating to the EU and other countries, but there are some practical difficulties with this option. Frequently journalists do not have time and finances to invest in such courses, especially if the journal/magazine they work for is a local/regional one. There is a tendency – dictated by marketing policy – to place greater value on the quantity of journal/magazine copies sold and on space limits than on qualitative and educational information. Journalists seem to be ready to invest in information of this kind but they do not have the means to do. Some journalists argue that their readers' interest in the EU will not change if the EU reporting format is not modified and if the profession itself does not recognize the importance of EU coverage and increase the space available for EU news.

Another problem related to EU reporting concerns its lack of proximity to local interests and the national perspective, two elements that determine readers' interest. Some scholars (de Fouloy, 2005; Grayson, 2003; Fishkin, 1995; Entman, 1989) believe that civic journalism could help to solve this problem. Civic journalism is considered a fresh approach to newsworthiness and news gathering, but, like other elements of democracy, it is difficult to implement. Civic journalism brings citizens together around a particular issue by setting up structures within which they can deliberate free of domination by powerful interest groups, vociferous individuals, bureaucrats or institutions.

This new approach to newsworthiness requires that media organizations are willing to meet the costs of establishing the process and making time available to fully report such deliberations. Moreover it would guarantee an increase in circulation or audience, and, presumably, a more positive perception of the press and the electronic media. Regional and local media are particularly well placed to conduct civic journalism because of their closeness to their readership or audience (Glasser and Campbell, 1999). In addition, civic journalism offers participants a sense of influence and belonging, media organizations an innovative and new role, and journalists and editors the opportunity to develop new skills.

Conclusions

Especially in the last ten years, the European Union has increased its power and influence on the decision-making processes of its member states and also outside in the international arena. The process of integration is only beginning and it promises to include many more features and countries. The European Union cannot continue its process of integration without the consensus of its citizens. On the other hand citizens need to know more about EU institutions, EU policies, EU decision-making processes etc. in order to be able to take a stance on the European project. National media are required to play a key role in the diffusion of such information. Especially at the national level, journalists need to find a balance between their own and the national agenda, the EU agenda and different and sometimes conflicting interests.

Since one of the functions of the media is to boost public debate and to be a "mirror" of society, where people are confronted with different realities and situations (in this sense it has a sociological function) the news media have a significant responsibility in relation to changes in perceptions about the EU. However, it is difficult to establish empirically how much influence European institutions have in decisions about the quantity and tonality of EU reporting in the national media in member states, because of the complexity of the media

agenda and the ethical issues that journalists have to cope with the process of everyday news selection. Nevertheless, good relations with the national media, transparency and accountability and also openness to feedbacks from citizens, are the prerequisites for public debate, political legitimacy and a more democratic and united Europe.

Within this framework media relations are a very important tool for public institutions in creating the climate of trust and transparency necessary for establishing good and mutual relationships with journalists. For the European Union investing in media relations and thus investing in understanding the needs of information of journalists can improve the image of EU in the media and ensure a constant flow of information to Europeans. More EU coverage in the national media will affect readers' knowledge and involvement in EU matters. On the other hand EU officers in charge of media relations and thus in charge of the EU informative material distributed to the national news media have been hired to act in the best interests of the European Union. The best interest of EU is to promote its cause through different activities.

EU promotional activities have attracted criticism regarding the EU's use of marketing (Rézműves, 2005; Tumber, 1995) and propaganda (Kubosova, 2006; Mullen and Burkitt, 2005; Prokopijevic, 2004; Sima, 2001) as techniques for reaching its objectives. These concerns multiply especially in connection with the training of journalists on how to report EU news. However, as other studies (Gleissner and de Vreese, 2005; Gavin, 2001; Morgan, 1995) have underlined, if journalists do not know how European institutions work and how EU press releases and information are made, they cannot completely understand EU matters which may need to be reported at the national level. While the EU has declared that it stands for freedom of expression, democracy and equality in all the different aspects of the professional and personal life of each EU citizen, it continues to represent a political viewpoint and interest, and as such it has specific goals to attain. Communicating to citizens about the work and policies of the European Union from a partial point of view is part of political campaigning. In the data obtained in this study Finnish journalists expressed their concerns about EU campaigning in their country by questioning the reliability of the EU information sources that they generally rely on. Despite the fact that the Italian sample did not show as much concern over EU influence in their new reporting, they share with their Finnish colleagues dissatisfaction with the quality of the information they receive from EU officers and the constant difficulties they have in establishing good and trustworthy relationships with them.

The findings of this study confirm previous results indicating problems in the relationships between journalists and EU officers that result in limited and somewhat negative attitudes towards the coverage of EU topics, but from a different perspective. The problem of negative or null EU coverage depends not only on journalists' skills and knowledge regarding EU policies and news reporting, but also on journalists' relationships with EU officers. Finnish and Italian journalists are accustomed to dealing with the political pressures of their job at the national level, but they are not as prepared for EU campaigning in their countries. This could be interpreted as another reason for the limited amount of coverage of EU information. Hence, EU institutions should improve their media relations activities by learning how to deal with different types of media systems while developing an understanding of the different cultural backgrounds of news reporters. In fact the quality of EU institutions' relationships with journalists can determine the quality and quantity of the information available at the national level.

This study was descriptive in nature, and thus the findings must be interpreted in the light of this limited media sample and these initial interviews. Further studies are necessary to discover how to improve such relationships and how to provide journalists with the necessary tools for reporting EU affairs. Media relations studies on this specific EU theme are extremely important since they can help to clarify the EU's current situation with respect to EU news reporting and help to find a better solution to journalist's needs in different countries.

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Notes

¹ By courses in EU media training is meant training seminars, workshops and roundtable discussions designed to give media professionals background information about the latest developments in EU policy from directly experts in the European Institutions in Brussels and the tools to understand the mechanisms, impact and challenges facing the European integration process. Most of these courses are organized by the European Journalism Centre in the Netherlands in collaboration with several European regional and national journalist associations and with professional media organisations such as the World Association of Newspapers, the International Federation of Journalists and the European Broadcasting Union. Also at the national level the representations of the European Commission propose similar courses with the financial support of the EU in collaboration with regional and local authorities and journalism associations. The topics of these seminars vary

depending on the issue at the stake. Generally courses in EU media training include seminars on the general functioning of EU institutions and their decision-making processes, but they may also discuss EU policies and legislations about important fields such as energy, transport, external relations and other relevant matters. For more information see URL: <http://www.ejcseminars.eu/index.php/about-us>.

² All analogue stations stopped broadcasting on 31 August 2007. Before the introduction of digital television there were 2 public non-commercial networks, 2 private commercial networks and 2 regional channels. More information at URL: <http://www.digitv.fi/>

³ The full list of media services provided by the EU is available at URL: <http://www.eu4journalists.eu/index.php>

⁴ In this question the term "EU agenda" does not refer to a particular EU policy or issue under discussion, but it is used as a term to differentiate EU interests in discussing specific policies from national interests. The EU agenda is not necessarily considered relevant at the national level. National agendas may have other themes of discussion which are not included in the EU agenda. This question tries to determine the influence of the EU agenda on journalists' reporting at the national level.

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