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# EU membership and the press

An analysis of the Brussels correspondents  
from the new member states

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## ABSTRACT

In light of the 2004 and 2007 enlargement of the European Union with 12 new member states we need to reconsider what we know about the Brussels press corps. Brussels journalists play a pivotal role in the European integration process. They act as agents of Europeanization, wedged between complex European issues and national public spheres, privileged in terms of information supply, geographical proximity and social networking. This study is one of the first to examine correspondents from new member states vis-a-vis the rest of the Brussels press corps, EU institutions, home offices and audiences. In-depth, semi-structured interviews with 14 journalists from different new member states show that the current work situation of the new member states' correspondents in Brussels could impede the emergence of a Europe-wide public discourse. The growing heterogeneity of the Brussels press corps reduces the relative importance of journalists from smaller member states and leaves them at a disadvantage in the news-gathering process. Moreover, volatile and also tense media markets in the new member states, paired with little interest for EU affairs in these countries, constrain the journalists' news performance, leading them to stress national angles over European ones.

**KEY WORDS** ■ Brussels correspondent ■ EU enlargement ■ European public sphere ■ qualitative analysis

## Introduction

In light of the 2004 and 2007 enlargements of the European Union with 12 new member states we need to reconsider what we know about the Brussels press corps. Journalists, but especially those working in Brussels as the 'capital of Europe', play an important role in the EU. They are agents of Europeanization in a stagnant integration process, wedged between complex European issues and national public spheres, privileged in terms of

information supply, geographical proximity and social networking (Gerhards, 1993; Baisnée, 2002). Accordingly, the Brussels setup has brought about distinctive forms of journalism, and a growing number of studies deal with correspondents (Morgan, 1995; Baisnée, 2002; Meyer, 2002; Gleissner and De Vreese, 2005).

However, most of our extant knowledge stems from a limited number of interviews and has concentrated on journalists from core EU member states.<sup>1</sup> Hence, little is known about how journalists from new member states fit into the Brussels press corps or how they perceive their situation in an enlarged EU. Arrived in Brussels, correspondents from new member states can face distinct constraints that distinguish them from their colleagues. Financial and personnel limitations, differing journalistic traditions, new demands and lack of networks in Brussels can impede journalists from new member states in their work (e.g. Gross, 1996, 2004; Coman, 2000, 2004; Splichal, 2001; De Vreese, 2002; Schäfer, 2005). However, such assertions have not yet been confirmed through empirical research. Thus, in light of these considerations, it is the purpose of this study to examine Brussels correspondents from new member states and their relationship to other colleagues in the corps, the EU institutions, home offices and their audience.

### **Enlargement, integration and (Brussels) journalism**

The anticipated effects of the 2004 and 2007 enlargement upon the integration process had long been a cause for speculation and concern. Initially, the so-called 'big bang' enlargement round of 2004 posed the problem of greater complexity of this enlarged Union and the question of how a bigger Europe would affect the Union's alleged democratic deficit and legitimacy problems (e.g. Scharpf, 1999; Hix, 2002; Moravcsik and Vachudova, 2003; Nugent, 2004). Such anticipated concerns were supported by the outcome of the European elections of 2004, conducted only weeks after the official accession. Characterized by low turnout, Eurosceptic party victories, and an attitude of the voting public that oscillated between apathy and disappointment, these elections boded ill for a Union of 25 and beyond. The irony of such Eurosceptic and apathetic tendencies in countries that had just joined the Union as a consequence of positive accession referenda only led to further questioning of the Union's maligned democratic credentials (e.g. Henderson, 2005; Smith, 2005). However, only little thought was spent on examining to what extent this apparent disinterest or even hostility towards the Union in new member states was affected by the situation of the media and journalists in the new member states. This is surprising, given the ability of the media

and especially Brussels correspondents to create a Europe-wide discourse, or public sphere (e.g. Gerhards, 1993; Meyer, 2002).

The emergence of a European public sphere is held as one of the possible 'cures' for the democratic and legitimacy shortcomings of the bigger and more heterogeneous Union (see Machill et al., 2006). Habermas (2001), for instance, stresses the importance of a European public sphere and the fact that, today, such a public sphere is ultimately enabled by the mass media. However, to date, the conceptualization and also existence of a European public sphere are fiercely contended (e.g. Risse, 2002; Van de Steeg, 2002; Peter et al., 2004). While some authors assertively deny the appearance of a European public sphere (e.g. Grimm, 1995; Gerhards, 2000; Peter and De Vreese, 2004), others feel that some form of it is beginning to emerge (e.g. Eder and Kantner, 2000). These diverging assessments mainly derive from differing normative as well as empirical approaches, which have led to more or less incompatible data and conclusions (Risse, 2003; but see Machill et al., 2006).

One group of authors conceptualize a European public sphere as an ideal, bigger version of national public spheres (Grimm, 1995; Kielmansegg, 1996). However, this ideal public sphere is unlikely to emerge due to a number of impeding factors, such as language diversity, national media boundaries and the lack of a European demos (Grimm, 1995). Moving away from this stringent approach, Gerhards (1993) articulates a second possible form of European public sphere: the gradual Europeanization of national public spheres, characterized by an increased public discussion of European issues in the media and the evaluation of these issues from a European rather than a national perspective. However, it is as yet unclear when and how such a Europeanization takes place and at what point we can call a national public sphere truly Europeanized (see e.g. Meyer, 2002, 2005; Van de Steeg, 2002).

The empirical literature on the European public sphere has concentrated on measuring the relative visibility of European issues in news coverage, or has looked for 'similarities' in national news reporting across Europe, in order to make suggestions as to its extent of Europeanization. Here, attention is mainly paid to the analysis of news coverage around decisive European events such as European elections, the Commission corruption scandal or the BSE epidemic (e.g. Eder and Kantner, 2000; Trenz, 2000, 2004; Meyer, 2002; Risse, 2002; Van de Steeg, 2002). However, what remains unexplored is the fact that all news coverage is produced by journalists and that those journalists' attitudes are important in the process of news production. Media are not mere conveyors of information but actors in their own right. They produce opinionated commentaries, glossaries and editorials, and even plain news coverage is rarely wholly without an imprint of the journalist who pieced it together (Donsbach, 2002; Koopmans and Pfetsch, 2003; Koopmans, 2007).

In the European case, it is the correspondents working in Brussels who play a prominent role (Gerhards, 1993; Baisnée, 2000). This is accomplished through a systemic interplay of European actor groups and the media in Brussels, which serves to form common perspectives and criteria of relevance, facilitate international discussion and debate, and bring about a European public sphere: Gerhards (1993: 102) pictures Brussels as a crucial link between Europe and home audiences, whose work is determined by (1) information input from European institutions, (2) the anticipation of the home audience and (3) their structural embedding and role in Brussels. Accordingly, journalists in Brussels are brokers between European issues and national public spheres. As the primary media actors of the European tier of the communication space, the correspondents provide a forum for the dissemination of transnational political communication; while in their close proximity to one another they facilitate horizontal integration by allowing for a sharing of perspectives and criteria of relevance on European issues. However, as a 'microcosm' with distinct journalistic roles and conflicting demands from the home offices and audiences, their individual relationships and role perceptions become important factors in their degree of transnational reporting and sharing of perspectives, and thus large influences in the development of a European public sphere (Gerhards, 1993; McNair, 1999; Baisnée, 2002; De Vreese, 2002).

Despite their impact, the interdependency of actors in the European communication space or in fact in any form of political communication means that Brussels correspondents are not free agents but are subject to the influence of various actor groups of the political communication process. Accordingly, these include their colleagues in the press corps, EU institutions, home offices and audiences (see Gurevitch and Blumler, 1977, 1990; McLeod and Blumler, 1987; McNair, 1999; Meyer, 2002; De Vreese, 2002).

### **The Brussels press corps**

Most studies on the Brussels press corps focus on journalists from core member states (e.g. Morgan, 1995; Gleissner and de Vreese, 2005). Results show that Brussels correspondents spend most of their day in close vicinity to the so-called 'European quarter', the traffic junction *Rond Point Schumann* with its surrounding EU institution buildings and the international press centre in the Residence Palace. Here, most correspondents meet at noon every day at the midday-briefing, a press conference organized by the European Commission where the news of the day is presented and questions are answered by spokespeople. To correspondents, the midday-briefing is an information bazaar (Baisnée, 2002; Meyer, 2002), with information being peddled by

everyone to everyone. However, in terms of relationships within the press corps, competition is not alien to Brussels correspondents and a significant upturn of European issues and the growing transparency of all (European) communication processes over the years continuously elevate rivalry in the press corps (Meyer, 2002). Moreover, studies on Brussels correspondents suggest that language barriers, different news-gathering traditions, lack of appropriate training and financial constraints provide further examples of friction points in the press corps (Morgan, 1995; Nandelstädt, 2001; Gleissner and de Vreese, 2005; Drehkopf, 2006).

With the ongoing integration process, the importance of EU press work and the need for access of journalists to the EU institutions increased steadily. This changed the journalists' relationship with the institutions in Brussels and gave rise to the proliferation of external news sources, such as lobby or interest groups, think tanks and research centres (Morgan, 1995; Baisnée, 2000; Meyer, 2002; but see Gavin, 2001), as well as an emphasis on press releases and briefings. However, Gleissner and de Vreese (2005: 227) argue that journalists are critical towards EU institutions' press work: The institutions' efforts were characterized as being not very supportive of the correspondents' work. In this respect, the press releases were especially criticized for being too dull and overly complicated.

Despite the increasing importance of EU affairs, the Brussels press corps inevitably finds that lack of interest and knowledge from the home audience means that primary selection criteria for stories must take on an explicitly national angle. Here, Brussels correspondents face a distinctive dilemma. On the one hand, they agree with the logic behind focusing mainly on issues with national relevance. On the other hand, they feel the need to put more than just EU issues with a link to the nation state across in their coverage (Gleissner and de Vreese, 2005: 229). Moreover, financial constraints and lack of interest at home considerably affected journalistic performance in Brussels, forcing many to only cover 'key EU events' (2005: 239, see also de Vreese, 2002).

### **New member states' journalism**

In view of the previous findings, journalists from new member states may, however, differ in more than one point from their colleagues in Brussels. The 2004 and 2007 enlargement rounds brought in 10 new member states, whose media had undergone profound changes over the last 15 years with a shift from communist media control to a democratic media system (Paletz et al., 1995). After the breakdown of communism, media markets exploded and, naturally, a new generation of journalists sought to enter the profession.

This transition gave rise to a potential for the 'birth of a new journalism profession' (Coman, 2004: 45) with differing socio-demographic characteristics and role conceptions.

Today, the media in post-communist states are diverse, have the potential to fulfil democratic functions, and can operate in a market-oriented world (Gulyás, 2003; Lauristin et al., 2005). However, post-1989 media systems have not yet finalized their transition and it is suspected that the media in post-communist countries still lack the 'establishment of the system of institutions, norms and values through which Western journalism was built and imposed' and which can only evolve over time (Coman, 2004: 47).

Along this line, only few journalists have attended formal journalism training, while most have learnt their trade on the job, as journalism training in post-communist countries continues to be characterized by a lack of practical manuals, modern equipment and experienced teachers (Gross, 1999, 2004; Coman, 2000). Furthermore, the social position of journalists in post-communist countries differs from that of Western journalists, leaving them under pressure from the political arena and the so-called 'barons' (former journalists, now powerful business men) (Coman, 2000, 2004). Coman (2000: 45), arguing from Romanian evidence, suggests that the majority of journalists are 'not protected against the abuses of bosses, not by law, not by clear conventions, not by a professional tradition'. He suggests later that most journalists have 'lost control of this profession and are in quasi-total dependence on the bosses' (Coman, 2004: 55).

Previous studies describe post-communist journalists as opinionated, highly politicized and often inaccurate in their reporting (Gross, 2004: 123). However, Lauristin et al. (2005) find that Estonian journalists have quickly internalized 'Western values' and the 'formal criteria of news writing' but repeatedly compromised such standards in favour of sensational journalism (see also Hiebert, 1999; Splichal, 2001). Coman (2004) explains such 'double standards': high aspirations of the upper echelon of the journalistic profession characterized by objectivity and careful analysis stand in stark contrast to social reality, where sensationalism is the prevailing standard.

## **Research questions and method**

This study centres on Brussels correspondents from new member states, with the goal of exploring how these actors operate in the interdependent system of colleagues, institutions and home. In doing so, the study draws upon an analytical framework of the European public sphere (e.g. Gerhards, 1993; Meyer, 2002), as well as previous work that has focused on the Brussels

press corps or journalism in post-communist societies (e.g. Baisnée, 2002; Meyer, 2002; Coman, 2004; Gross, 2004; Gleissner and de Vreese, 2005).

In Brussels, journalists are integrated into a societal network, encompassing their colleagues, political institutions, home offices and the audience. Previous studies suggest that the Brussels press corps is characterized by strong intra-group relations and growing pressure on its members. Thus, this study aims to explore, first: *the relationship of Brussels correspondents from new member states with their colleagues in the press corps*. Once arrived in Brussels, a second essential of the correspondent's life is press work and relations with the EU institutions. Studies suggest that these relations are steadily improving (Morgan, 1995). Accordingly, the second research question reads: *How do new member states' correspondents experience their interaction with EU institutions?* A third factor in the interplay of political news journalism is the home offices. Even though far away, there is reason to believe that financial and personnel restraints as well as lack of interest from home put a burden on journalists from new member states. Thus, third, *the relationship of the Brussels correspondents with their home offices and editors* is investigated. Journalists, lastly, are dependent upon their audiences. Accordingly, fourth, this study aims to examine *how correspondents perceive their audiences at home*.

## **Interviews**

To investigate the proposed research questions, 14 semi-structured, in-depth interviews were conducted in Brussels with correspondents from new member states. Previously, a number of studies have applied such qualitative interviews to examine (political) journalists (e.g. Baisnée, 2000; Drehkopf, 2006). However, other studies have relied partially or entirely on quantitative research methods (e.g. Köcher, 1986; Weaver and Wilhoit, 1986; Schneider et al., 1993; Weischenberg et al., 1994). Qualitative interviewing enables the researcher to portray a context in greater complexity and depth, and is therefore mostly applied in exploratory or provisional studies (see also Minichiello et al., 1990). A semi-standardized interview format was chosen, which required the design of an interview guide but allowed freedom for open questions and follow-up enquiries (Berg, 1998). On a hierarchical level, the guide was structured into several lines of inquiry, components and questions. The lines of inquiry followed the structure discussed above, with separate lines following relationship of the correspondents with colleagues, EU institutions, home office and audience. For instance, for the 'relationship with home offices' possible factors included 'freedom of topic choice', or 'interest of chief editor on European issues'. An accompanying questionnaire



was included in the data collection, in order to orient the results with previous quantitative data. The questionnaire covered important socio-demographic data, such as the correspondents' age, citizenship and level of education, their length of stay in Brussels to date and income group.

## Sampling

Studying new member states' correspondents recommends the selection of journalists across the new member states of the EU.<sup>2</sup> This study followed the practice of choosing 'typical cases', cases that appear to adhere to the broad general patterns provided by the analytical framework (Möhring and Schlütz, 2003). Thus, journalists were chosen for interviewing who appeared as typical according to the discussion of the Brussels press corps, while taking into account the limitation of acquiring journalists for in-depth interviews during a relatively brief enquiry period. This selection incorporated two primary selection criteria. The journalist had to be (1) stationed permanently in Brussels as a correspondent (under contract or freelance) and (2) reporting to media from new member states. Furthermore, the study aimed for maximal variance in gender, age and type of media.

Taking into account the above criteria, the sample eventually comprised 14 journalists (see Table 1). However, there were no journalists from the Slovak Republic and Slovenia in the sample. This fact, together with a country skew

**Table 1** Sample correspondents

Case	Nationality	Media	Length of interview
Journalist 1	Latvian	Radio	53 min.
Journalist 2	Polish	TV	53 min.
Journalist 3	Polish	Radio	41 min.
Journalist 4	Estonian	Radio/Press	40 min.
Journalist 5	Hungarian	Press	38 min.
Journalist 6	Estonian	TV	59 min.
Journalist 7	Lithuanian	Radio	45 min.
Journalist 8	Hungarian	Press	41 min.
Journalist 9	Polish	Press	54 min.
Journalist 10	Czech	Press	46 min.
Journalist 11	Polish	Agency	30 min.
Journalist 12	Czech	Press	53 min.
Journalist 13	Czech	Agency	50 min.
Journalist 14	Polish	Press/Radio	30 min.*

Note: \*this interview was conducted via telephone.

in the sample, can largely be ascribed to difficulties in recruiting journalists from a number of (smaller) member states. Some of these member states do only have a very limited number of correspondents stationed permanently in Brussels, of which – in turn – some did not consent to participate. However, the sample was well balanced in terms of gender (1:1) and included correspondents working for the press, TV, radio, news agencies and also internet media. Thus, while not representative, the composition of the sample allows first insights into the work of Brussels correspondents from bigger and smaller new member states, from different media outlets and of differing experience and expertise.

## **Data analysis**

The interviews conducted were recorded and subsequently transcribed. The transcripts were analysed according to the method of qualitative content analysis introduced by Mayring (1983, 2000). From initial readings of the transcripts, statements were extracted, paraphrased, set into context and explained when necessary. The shortened transcripts were subsequently sorted according to dimensions and re-read several times, with subsequent modifications and resorting. For example, in a number of cases statements dealing with relationship with colleagues were inextricably linked with statements concerning the relationship with EU institutions. In those cases, the relationship taking up more space of the selected statement was favoured. The analysis thus kept the same sorting procedure as quantitative content analysis, while allowing for a more organic generation of content categories (Mayring, 1983). Topics were chosen for discussion in the results section based on commonality and uniqueness of response or explanatory power.

## **Results**

### **The press corps: rising levels of competition**

Most of the interviewed journalists from new member states maintain close relationships with compatriots and colleagues of other nationalities. A nuanced examination of relationships in the press corps indicated that alliances in the sample depended on a number of factors. Nationality was the most important criterion, but the analysis also shows that subject specialization, the length of time spent in Brussels and personal disposition help determine relationships with other colleagues.

Most journalists commented on the good nature of their relationship with colleagues and supported the idea of the Brussels press corps as a close-knit

community, stating that there was a 'good amount of solidarity' among Brussels correspondents (Journalist 4). The interviews indicate that journalists from new member states initially align themselves with compatriots but then later move towards forming relationships with other nationalities. Close relationships with compatriots facilitated information-sharing. Faced with the vast amount of information, press conferences, briefings and background talks in Brussels, a number of journalists interviewed decided to build surprisingly close information networks with journalists from different publications, in order to distribute coverage of different events among each other and enable the exchange of notes or quotes for their respective articles. This was especially the case for journalists working for print media.

The interviews yielded mixed results regarding how correspondents forged alliances with journalists of other nationalities. In general, most journalists stated that they were also in contact with journalists from 'older' member states and that they had little difficulty 'making friends' with, for example, British or Italian journalists. However, the analysis indicated a rift between new member state journalists who had been in Brussels for a considerable amount of time and those who had recently arrived. Accordingly, the veterans placed much less emphasis on compatriot relations but stressed instead that their relationships were rooted in topic coverage preferences ('there are specialized groups here: those dealing with environment, those dealing with competition', Journalist 5) and personal characteristics ('I just like British people. It's their sense of humour', Journalist 9). Yet, on some occasions the journalists remarked on certain difficulties when encountering journalists of other nationalities:

We cannot share the same experience with the journalists from Germany or England, our journalism tradition is quite new. It changed completely after Soviet times. My colleagues from Latvia tell me that it sometimes happens that you are disadvantaged because of that. (Journalist 1)

Journalists considered the level of competition in their work to be much lower than in other positions (e.g. other press corps or at home). In fact, as mentioned above, many journalists are willing to share a great deal of information from different press conferences, swap notes or even pictures and sound bites (e.g. Journalist 12, Journalist 8). However, competition does tend to emerge and journalists do not share their information when it comes to interesting 'scoops'. Indeed, most journalists only felt competitive with journalists from their home country. This is illustrated by the observation of a Czech correspondent, who suggested that 'only very few Czechs read German newspapers', and 'few Germans are going to read the Czech

newspaper' (Journalist 12) which reduced international competition considerably. More importantly, however, almost all participants agreed that international competition is only relevant for extremely 'big news' or scandals which are generally beyond the scope or capabilities of journalists from – especially smaller and poorer – new member states with limited financial and personnel resources. A Polish newspaper correspondent illustrated the situation in Brussels surrounding a 'scoop':

The competition can also be ferocious. The supply of important news is sometimes scarce and the demand always on the rise [...] I share information with my colleagues from other newspapers. Yet, there are times when we all go out and fight for a Holy Grail of journalism. One example: In November 2005, the final British proposal for the EU budget was expected. Once obtained in advance, such information would never be shared. Needless to say that it was very, very sought after. (Journalist 14)

Most journalists noted that they by now had realized 'that the English, the French or the Dutch colleagues or newspapers get the information before [they] have access to it' (Journalist 8). Better-equipped media correspondents have considerable advantages in ferreting out important news before the rest of the corps, and one of the Czech journalists remarked dryly that 'The FT has 8 people in Brussels and I am alone. Do the maths' (Journalist 10).

### **EU institutions: unequal access and voluminous press work?**

While the journalists from new member states in this study work closely with almost all EU institutions and other external sources, such as lobby groups and think tanks, access to these institutions varies, and some journalists find it hard to make their voices heard when sitting in a press conference among colleagues from well-known media such as the *Financial Times* or the BBC.

Generally, all European Union institutions serve as important sources of information for journalists in Brussels. The most important supplier of information is the European Commission. Here, not only spokespeople, but also other contacts inside the Commission are invaluable resources. Contacts of the same nationality are deemed most important (Journalist 8), so in terms of pure numerical advantage, journalists from new member states have fewer contacts at their disposal than media from older and mostly bigger member states:

If you look at the numbers of officials from each country: For French or German journalists it's much easier to have sources from their country [...] people from your country are generally more helpful. So, if you look at the size of the Polish Cabinet and at that of the German [...]. (Journalist 2)

In most of the interviews, the European Parliament was named as an important institution to turn to, for its members were expected to deliver more opinionated and concrete information in comparison to the neutral and overly technical press releases issued by the Commission:

The EP, that's almost 800 deputies and they are politicians [...] and they can not only talk about the EP but also about the situation in their countries. (Journalist 9)

A large number of respondents named the Permanent Representations of the new member states as 'close partners' that helped them to navigate the jungle of information in Brussels. Journalists from small new member states like the Baltic rely heavily on information provided by the representations. At the other end of the scale, journalists found that the Council provided little assistance and a correspondent from the Czech Republic even labelled it as the 'least useful source of information', uncooperative due to its lacking of a 'policy of openness' (Journalist 10).

In addition to EU institutions, Brussels correspondents from new member states also regularly turn to external sources such as lobby groups, policy centres or think tanks (e.g. the European Policy Centre). However, while all media types avail themselves of the resources that policy centres and lobby groups have to offer, news agency journalists, for instance, consider think tanks to be irrelevant to their work (e.g. Journalist 11). Overall, think tanks cater predominantly to journalists working for political news media. This is because they function primarily as a source of opinion and provide journalists with inspiration for new angles to their stories.

A major cause of frustration among the interviewed journalists from new member states is, however, the actual access to their sources. While most correspondents agree that they can easily obtain information from the EU institutions for their day-to-day business, almost all respondents felt that they were at a distinct disadvantage due to their status as members of 'insignificant' media on the European market. A Polish correspondent, who worked for one of the major opinion-forming newspapers in Poland, asserted that a distinctive hierarchy existed within the Brussels press corps and that sometimes in Brussels 'some animals' were 'more equal than others'. He observed that the press corps hierarchy consisted of three 'leagues': (1) a league of 'heavy weights' from Reuters, the *Financial Times* and the BBC as well as major German, French and British publications, (2) a league composed of other journalists representing major national papers, and (3) a league of local media, smaller publications and freelancers. He describes the 'first league' as follows:

Sometimes, the journalists of these media are GIVEN the exclusive news by the EU staff, in order to make a big news-splash. If the Commission wishes to have its newest initiative talked about, it sells it 'exclusively' to the FT. The effect is guaranteed. It is frustrating for the journalists from other 'leagues', but that is how the system works. (Journalist 14)

Such bitterness stemming from this perception of unequal treatment was a recurring theme during the interviews, and the *Financial Times* emerged as the common example against which many journalists directed their resentment:

You obviously know the joke that the FT computers are connected directly to the Commission. That's a running joke over here. I admire what the FT is doing; it's a great paper with great European coverage. Although some people say it's too pro-European and that is why they get all the scoops. (Journalist 12)

If you are FT, spokespeople seem to be more attentive. They try to make sure you don't go against them. (Journalist 4)

They just have better contacts. The FT is sometimes called the official journal of the European Commission. I believe – no, I am convinced – that most of the documents are given to them first. (Journalist 8)

However, while this study cannot provide sufficient information to prove or confute these allegations, the interviews showed that the journalists shared common experiences of discrimination based on the relative size and importance of their home market.

Correspondents considered the Commission's press work to be too technical and voluminous. Even though some journalists acknowledged the Commission's professionalism, their assessment was rather critical:

It's very technical, it's vague, it's complicated, the language is too complicated. Very often it is not comprehensible and unattractive to read. So, actually, it's not very helpful. (Journalist 10)

Similar points were made by a number of journalists, whereas the 'too vague' voice of the Commission's press work was stressed most prominently. Some of the correspondents found that the complex nature of the Commission's press releases put especially 'generalist' journalists, i.e. those journalists without specific subject matter knowledge, at disadvantage:

If there is something important, you need to be very quick. I myself am weak in economics and then when we get information, some of the other journalists are so quick and ask questions. And I don't get the opportunity to ask, because I only realize what it is all about once I have come home and I could read through it quietly. [...] You already need to understand everything. You cannot learn. (Journalist 7)

### **Home offices: low levels of interest and financial constraints**

The interviews show that new member states' correspondents maintain close contact with editors and colleagues at home, but that the correspondents themselves primarily set the topic agenda. However, home offices impose constraints on their correspondents in terms of space or airtime, for they consider European news to be too technical and hard to sell. The interviews also revealed that journalists assigned to Brussels may pose significant financial burdens upon some home offices.

Generally, correspondents are in close contact with their home offices. Most of them communicate with their editors every day via the telephone or email, and in most cases, topic choices are made by the correspondent:

It's completely on me. It works because I send emails every day and tell them about what is happening here and what I want to concentrate on and what not. And then I give them a range of topics and they let me know what they think. Sometimes it's smooth [...] sometimes it's an argument [...] but the first player, the one who kicks the ball, that's me. (Journalist 10)

Indeed, most journalists felt that they enjoy a high level of freedom in their work. A Latvian correspondent explained that her editor granted her professional autonomy because 'he knows that I have a better idea of what is really important here and what not' (Journalist 1).

At the same time, however, many journalists expressed the view that they sometimes suffered from space restrictions demanded by the home desk. In particular, privately owned audiovisual media allocate little airtime to European news:

If you have the main evening news, they last 30 minutes: 15 minutes national news, 5 minutes international news, then entertainment, then sports etc. In 5 minutes of international news, you have three news pieces at maximum. That's three a day, covering the world. So, the most important news first: the Istanbul airport is burning, the American Congress voted about Jewish settlements [...] and then, but only if something extraordinary happens, maybe a European piece. But it would have to be very extraordinary. (Journalist 7)

And while public broadcasting companies or political newspapers allocate more print space and airtime to their correspondents, an overwhelming majority of journalists from all media sectors thought that EU affairs featured relatively low on the agenda at home offices. Journalists explained in the interviews that their editors were not interested in – or were even bored by – European news (e.g. Journalist 11). Especially journalists working for privately owned audiovisual media lamented the lack of interest in the Union, and a Polish TV correspondent related how his home office refused to acknowledge the perceived importance of European affairs:

And then I propose an interview with a Commissioner and some guy from my TV station says: 'Ok, but who is this person? I don't know him. Nobody knows him'. And I say: 'This is important. How are people supposed to understand if they don't see the people.' (Journalist 2)

Only journalists who worked for publications that emphasized business news found that their home offices were actually interested in European affairs.

Much of the media at home – backed by foreign investors and feeling pressure from domestic political players – currently 'battle it out' amongst themselves for market dominance, thereby affecting the Brussels correspondents. Most respondents found themselves the only representative of their offices in Brussels. Many of them cover not only the EU, but NATO as well. Some are also responsible for coverage from the Benelux countries, and one correspondent in the sample was even assigned to cover French politics. Most journalists remarked that the absence of fellow correspondents or compatriots in Brussels had a significant impact on their work, and many wished for home offices to send more permanent correspondents.

However, supporting permanent correspondents in Brussels incurs heavy costs for home offices. Thus, a number of opinion-forming media from new member states do not have the capability of employing permanent correspondents and instead are forced to rely on their journalists at home or freelancers in Brussels. A Polish correspondent explained:

TV is expensive. For my one story – if you take into account everything – you could employ someone in Poland for a month. For five stories I make here, you could finance a good journalist in Poland. (Journalist 2)

Unfortunately, however, the analysis did not deliver unequivocal results as to relative impact of limitations imposed by financial restraints versus those imposed by lack of interest from the home office.

### **Home audiences: characterized by 'EU fatigue'**

Participants in the study thought that their own work could have only a limited impact on the 'EU fatigue' and Eurosceptic tendencies that prevail in their home countries. These journalists feel that citizens at home do not yet realize the significance of European affairs to their daily lives, and therefore it would be difficult to generate enthusiasm among their audiences.

A number of journalists, particularly those from news media, pointed out that their audiences belonged towards what is known as the 'elite' or 'opinion leaders' in their countries. A Czech journalist described the readers of her national newspaper as 'educated upper- and middle-class, managers and



academics' (Journalist 10). However, the same journalist went on to qualify that she expected few of her readers to actually be interested in European affairs:

I know that, if you have ten readers, who would read the whole paper, only maybe two or three of them would read my EU stories on a regular basis. (Journalist 10)

At the same time, respondents considered the general audience in their home countries to be both uninterested and uninformed. A Polish journalist, for instance, stated that the Polish were not interested in European issues at all but instead found them 'very boring' because they 'don't see the link between the situation in Brussels and their lives' (Journalist 9). This was one of the most common explanations for the apparent lack of interest at home as the majority of journalists agreed that their audiences' disinterest likely stemmed from their inability to understand how events in Brussels could directly affect their lives.

Because their audiences were so rarely interested in their coverage, most journalists found that they had to write each piece as if they were explaining concepts for the first time. However, most journalists empathized and considered it their duty to convey information as clearly as possible. For instance, a Latvian correspondent felt that especially because 'European questions are the last ones people want to hear today', it was her responsibility to 'tell them as simple and interesting as possible' what the EU was about (Journalist 1). Accordingly, a Hungarian journalist noted that, after all, European issues were a 'complex subject matter', which required 'being simple in your writing about it, because otherwise nobody understands you' (Journalist 8).

Yet despite their best efforts, most journalists found that their particular work could contribute little towards a general improvement of the level of knowledge in the citizenry. Here, even correspondents working for so-called opinion-forming media of their home countries found that their 'news writing and sometimes commenting has a very limited impact on the readers' (Journalist 14, a correspondent of one of the most important Polish national newspapers).

## Conclusion and discussion

The purpose of this study was to examine correspondents from new member states in the Brussels press corps, depending on their relationships with colleagues, EU institutions, home offices and audiences (e.g. Meyer, 2002). In-depth interviews with 14 correspondents from different new member

states provided a limited but nonetheless rich collection of data for analysis. The interview responses were analysed within the context of the findings of similar studies focusing on journalists (e.g. Morgan, 1995; Baisnée, 2002; Meyer, 2002; de Vreese, 2002; Coman, 2004; Gleissner and De Vreese, 2005). The Brussels press corps have been credited with being the agents of a new Europeanized public sphere (Gerhards, 1993). In an enlarging EU, the correspondents from new member states play a special role in impacting this newly emerging communication space.

In the study, all journalists declared that they feel integrated into the press corps, and that they maintain close relationships both with compatriots and with other colleagues (see Baisnée, 2000). However, their connection with journalists from their home country or region remains closest. These relationships provide a dilemma, however, for while the interviewed journalists feel little competition with colleagues from other countries, competition is on the rise with colleagues from the same national media market (see e.g. Meyer, 2002). International competition is only relevant for 'big' and exceptional news. However, because the journalists from new member states are subject to limited financial and personnel resources, they feel at a disadvantage in obtaining these 'scoops', when competing with their colleagues from bigger publications or member states.

In accordance with previous findings by Gleissner and de Vreese (2005), correspondents from the new member states consider the EU's press material to be overly technical, vague and too voluminous. While journalists thought their access to the Commission and other EU institutions was sufficient for their day-to-day business, many found that they were at a disadvantage compared to colleagues from influential publications or bigger member states. The preferential access of large publications was strongly emphasized by all respondents in the study, with the *Financial Times* repeatedly emerging as an almost traumatizing example of a 'favoured' publication.

While many journalists state that they are in close contact with their home organization, a number of respondents found that their colleagues at home often neither knew nor bothered enough to engage in real dialogue. Sole exceptions were journalists working for business-oriented media, who indicated strong interest from their home editors. However, most probably due to the lack of engagement and knowledge, topic choices are widely at the discretion of the correspondent. Most importantly, since EU affairs do not rate high at home, correspondents suffer from space or airtime constraints. This especially affects journalists from privately owned media, who are at the mercy of financial battles back at home. Moreover, the support of a correspondent in Brussels often poses a heavy financial burden on a media organization, which only exacerbates the tight fiscal situation. Correspondents find that their

home audience are uninterested and uninformed when it comes to EU issues. Interestingly enough, many of the interviewed journalists believe that their work will change little about the political fatigue and Euroscepticism that prevails in their home countries, unless Eurosceptic national governments change their tone.

This study pays attention not only to the general features of the journalists from new member states, but also to within-sample differences between – for example – small and big new member states or journalists from print or audiovisual media. Here, journalists from small new member states especially feel at a disadvantage: their lack of compatriot sources as well as contacts in the Brussels press corps gives them little chance to build an appropriate network in time. When faced with the amount of information the EU churns out every day, journalists rely on their permanent representations in Brussels to obtain the most pertinent material: through them, they can gain access to information, press conferences and background briefings. Journalists working for audiovisual media reported heavy financial as well as personnel constraints for their work in Brussels. The interviewed journalists mark the lack of audiovisual material from the ‘European capital’ itself as well as the tight financial situation of their media institution as the reasons for their limitation.

Concluding, the results of this first insight into the work and relation of Brussels journalists from new member states suggests that the current work situation and professional network of new member states’ correspondents in Brussels may impede the emergence of a Europe-wide public discourse. The growing heterogeneity of the Brussels press corps reduces the relative importance of journalists from smaller member states and leaves them at a disadvantage in the news-gathering process. Moreover, volatile and also tense media markets in the new member states, paired with little interest for EU affairs in these countries, puts constraints on the journalists’ news performance, leading them to stress national angles over European ones. Although most Brussels correspondents from new member states have integrated rapidly into the rest of the Union’s press corps, their performance is decisively affected by the situation at home.

There are a few caveats to this study. The limited number of interviews in the study cannot provide an exhaustive insight into the journalistic life of correspondents from all new member states. Along this line, the lack of self-collected data on journalists from ‘older’ member states precludes a direct comparison in this study. Thus, the findings of this study need to be enriched by additional empirical research. Moreover, further scholarship could broaden the knowledge on how journalists perceive their role and what

their attitude towards, for example, investigative or adversarial journalism in Brussels is (see Meyer, 2002). In this light, it is interesting to examine if, as suggested by Baisnée (2002), journalists in Brussels over time get almost too integrated into the Brussels microcosm, thereby losing their professional distance (see Scully, 2006). Also, other constituents of contemporary political communication, i.e. the sources of information (EU institutions), the actual products of news coverage (TV footage, newspaper articles) or the recipients of these products (the audience in the news coverage) must be subject to further research.

## Notes

- 1 The term 'core member states' refers to the six founding members of the European Coal and Steel Community (ECSC) in 1951, France, (West) Germany, Italy and the Benelux countries.
- 2 Since, among the new member states, Cyprus and Malta did not undergo a post-communist transition, these were excluded from the analysis. The interviews were conducted in May 2006, before the accession of Bulgaria and Romania.

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