

Reporting the EU: News, Media and the European Institutions

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Review by **Kevin d'Arcy**, former executive secretary of the AEJ UK Section

This is the most important report the AEJ ever produced. It is a concise and totally convincing description of the relationship between media and the European Union today, together with how it got here. Considering that the first aim of the AEJ has always been to promote understanding of Europe, it is sad, to say the least, that we have done so little in over half a century to draw attention to the obstacles. This does it very well.

Of course, we all know the basic faults. First, no one could answer the basic question long ago asked by Henry Kissinger: "Who is in charge in Europe?" This is because the framework has never changed since the creation of the original Coal and Steel Community as a means of heading off national domination, to prevent the next world war. We left this detail to those who understood it, our faceless civil servants. Few of us needed to know.

However, since then, the structure has grown to reach every corner of our daily lives, without any adjustment of the basic framework. In the same way, responsibility for communication has not changed; it primarily remains with national governments, or so they like to think. Michael Heseltine, the former Conservative minister, stressed that most emphatically at a lunch with the AEJ British Section when he said, with obvious frustration as a politician, that "Brussels leaks like a sieve". He never mentioned the citizens.

So what that means, according to this report, is that those same citizens of Europe are paying a substantial amount of money for the continuously contradictory communication of a process that, not surprisingly, few of them understand. The Commission this year will be spending €246m, the Parliament at least €21m, and the Council €10.4m on communication. To do this the Commission employs about 100 spokesmen, the Council another 100, and the Parliament 86, plus 751 employed either full or part time by each of the MEPs. Meanwhile, the leaders of national governments will each be spending whatever they think fit, through their own spokesmen, on delivering their often quite different reports. A sieve with innumerable holes.

There is little doubt that Alastair Campbell explained the daily co-ordination between information heads in Westminster in his recent visit to the Commission's President. There is also small doubt that the President shrugged and blamed the politicians.

The pertinence of this analysis from Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism is that it relies for its accounts on journalists. Which is not as facile as many might assume. A wide range of people were interviewed, from many nations, from many media, with experience over many years.

There is general agreement that the resistance to "Europe" as a subject worthy of media attention depends entirely on a general inability to understand the relevance to everyday life. There is also small will to understand, through lack of interest in institutions and a growing distrust of politicians, who are nevertheless still used by reporters to lead typical reports: boring. Hence nationally based editors see no point in encouraging stories that would not be welcomed, however true, however important. They usually fall for their own government's line, if only because the national spokesmen are known to most of their public. Hence "Europe" is always to blame, of course.

National spokesmen seldom admit that every decision reached in Brussels inevitably results from mutual agreement, at least among the politicians. Commissioners are misty strangers, usually appointed for that very reason, so better tempered accounts from them are inevitably less welcome. So the shrinking number of reporters in Brussels do not usually opt for suicide. Only a few of them take a stand in trying to tell a relevant story. Learning how some reporters do this – and survive – is intriguing reading.

The power of media is also limited. While the major media is television for most people in member countries, despite the increasing use of the web, its mechanical limits are counterproductive. Even a five-minute spot on a television programme can do little to explain an issue, especially when the subject is previously unknown. The result: an inevitable yawn.

Of course there are centres of reporting excellence (such as *The Financial Times*, *The Economist* and the news agencies in Britain), and these can sometimes exert a wider influence, but not to any great degree. Even then, the most active reporters usually cover just politics and economics. And few move very far from Brussels, so that the real Europe that most of us know is inevitably ignored. Hence "Europe" is Brussels and boring.

The Reuters Institute has recently labelled a new category of news reporting, which is becoming more popular every day: in the US weird news has become of equal importance to the average consumer as what the institute calls traditional. In Britain it is only one third as important, but shows every sign of growing. Much of this is sourced in Brussels. But how to reverse the trend? This report has several clues.