

# Towards a european journalism? : Limits, opportunities, challenges

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STEPHAN RUSS-MOHL\*

## TOWARDS A EUROPEAN JOURNALISM? - LIMITS, OPPORTUNITIES, CHALLENGES

Much has been changing recently: The EU is enlarging; the work of the constitutional convention is making progress; institutional reforms are being planned and will hopefully lead to less self-blockage and to more local and regional political participation in the EU. The national governments may still have diverging views on most important issues. But the “European phone number” in the field of foreign policy and security policy, which Henry Kissinger demanded a few years ago, is no longer missing.<sup>1</sup> Xavier Solana answers, if President Bush, German Foreign Minister Fischer or the Swiss Federal Counselor Micheline Calmy-Rey calls. However, as the last days and weeks have shown once again, he cannot answer with one single European voice.

Perhaps more impressive is the progress of cross-national cooperation among publishing houses and broadcasting stations. It is accompanied by a frightening concentration process of the European media industry. Bertelsmann, Pearson and Berlusconi's Mediaset are creating European TV empires – and the conglomerate which Saban inherited from Kirch will probably soon join the club. Long before any Eastern European country could become a member of the Community, most of them were colonized by media conglomerates from Western Europe; Scandinavian Publishing Houses like Schibstedt exert a strong influence in the Baltic countries, German companies like Bauer, Burda, Springer, the Passauer Neue Presse Group, and the WAZ Group are omnipresent in Poland, the Czech Republic, Slovakia, Hungary, Russia, and in the Balkans. The Swiss Ringier Group owns print media in Hungary, Rumania, Slovakia,

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<sup>1</sup>Bütler (1998: 21).

and the Czech Republic. For the “big guys” in the media industry, national borders obviously play a less and less significant role. They have been creating Europe for quite a while.

## 1. Limits

But what about journalism? At a first, and at a second glance, journalism is lagging hopelessly behind. Thus, addressing the “Limits, Opportunities, and Challenges” of a European Journalism means to begin with the Limits. And these limits seem to be everywhere: Whether you take a look at media contents, at presentation forms, at professional norms<sup>2</sup> or at the media use<sup>3</sup> - European journalism is escaping like the mythological “Europa” of the famous Rembrandt painting. Perhaps, it is not even accidental that this particular painting is no longer to be found in Europe. It is part of the Getty Museum in Los Angeles.

There are few, if any indicators pointing towards the development of a European public and a European journalism:

- The first truly European weekly newspaper – Maxwell’s *European* – closed a couple of years ago. Since then some quality newspapers have tried to overcome language and cultural barriers: The *Financial Times* has been offered for quite a while in a German edition. The *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* continues to experiment with a weekly edition in English added to the *International Herald Tribune*, but it has ceased to publish a daily supplement.<sup>4</sup> We do not yet know whether the new Italian newspaper *Europa* will survive in an already overcrowded marketplace.
- “Europeanized” print media remain orchids like *Lettre internationale* and *Le monde diplomatique*. Some sunflowers like *GEO* or *Auto-Bild* are being published in different languages and adapted to different national reading cultures. So far, the small market of international newspapers in Europe is clearly dominated by the Americans - by *USA Today*, the *Wall Street Journal Europe* and the *Herald Tribune*.
- Television has its European platforms, too: there are *Euronews* and *Eurosport*. And there are *arte* and *3sat* - at least two excellent cross cultural public TV programs. But once again, in news coverage none of

<sup>2</sup> Donsbach/Patterson (1996); Scholl & Weischenberg (1998); Seifert(2001).

<sup>3</sup> Kraft (2002: 61).

<sup>4</sup> Krupp (1999: 18).

them can compete with national programs, be it the American *CNN*, the British *BBC* or even the small private German news channel *n-tv*. Looking at the readership or audience, all European publications and programs are simply irrelevant. The field of political information is clearly dominated by national newspapers and magazines, networks and talk shows. Media products are mass products. And masses of people are, unfortunately, not cosmopolitan, polyglot Europeans. They are Swedes, Russians, Poles, French, Italians, Swiss, and Germans. It's not only language barriers, it's rather the different cultural identities which make a European journalism improbable, if not impossible.

## 2. Opportunities and Challenges

One way to deal with my topic would be to stop here: No, there are not even limits of a European journalism – because there is, so far, simply no European Journalism to be found in Europe.<sup>5</sup> But then, we might miss the opportunities and challenges. Let us therefore explore our topic more in-depth by asking:

Why is it so difficult to overcome the different cultural and journalistic traditions in Europe? What might create the identity of a European Journalism? What kind of European journalism would be desirable? And what can we do about it?

The answer to the first question leads us to something I would like to name the Bütler paradox. According to the editor of the *Neue Zürcher Zeitung*, Hugo Bütler, “it's one of the strange contradictions of our times: Globalization means that borders are dissolving which have so far limited economic activity. But many media concentrate more and more on parochial, regional interest. To put it in a more straightforward way: they are focussing on the local church towers.”<sup>6</sup>

Saving money is not the one and only reason why the media behave like this. Certainly it is cheaper and in most cases more profit-promising to have a couple of additional local reporters and free lancers on the payroll - than just one foreign correspondent in Tokyo. But the media also emphasize localism, because the public is much more interested in local

<sup>5</sup> So far there seems to be a far-reaching consensus at least among German communications researchers. Kopper (1997: 9); Sievert (1998: 18); Russ-Mohl (1999), an overview: Lünenborg (2000: 245-246).

<sup>6</sup> Bütler (1998: 21) (translated by the author).

news than in news from Tokyo. Besides this, it is a typical human way to react to a threat: the forces of globalization seem dangerous and incalculable. Instead of facing them, we retire mentally to our safe and familiar shells. Thus, it becomes more difficult to find the audience for an adequate coverage of global or even European affairs.

At least in the larger European countries, most journalists are “localists” themselves. So far very few of them have a command of foreign languages, and even fewer are interested in the developments of journalism elsewhere. It’s only the small countries like the Netherlands and Switzerland which tend to be more “open”. As Ulrich Saxer pointed out many years ago, they are always more aware of their “next door giants”<sup>7</sup> – while the giants are not that much aware of them. Thus, it is not at all easy to overcome the different cultural and journalistic traditions in Europe.

But what might create the identity of a European Journalism? Certainly, there is the *common European history*, including the catastrophes of two world wars having “marked” the last century more than anything else. And there is the peaceful interplay of Western European nations of the last 50 years which might become the model case for the 21st century. If Europe is integrating, this historical experiment can become a success story because of a common history, a common spirit, a common political vision. The historian Ferdinand Seibt has mentioned what we have in common, when he describes European culture in the following way: “(It) promises conduct in life inspired by rationality with its own concepts of the past and of the future, with its order, its planning, its hopes, with the optimism of technical progress and with its classical ideal of humanity, with its broken but still lively Christianity. To all of this a certain amount of cultural pessimism has to be added...Besides this, it is characterized by its specific dynamics in all spheres of life, which can be seen outside Europe in just one continent, America – but even there only since Europeans have been living there.”<sup>8</sup>

Besides such common features, the very *consciousness of the cultural differences* may become a common denominator creating European identity. Compared to the American melting pot, it is fascinating to have a co-habitation of so many different lifestyles in a much smaller continent.

<sup>7</sup> Quoted as in: Frei et al. (eds.) (1983).

<sup>8</sup> “Diese Kultur verheißt eine rational intendierte Lebensbewältigung mit ihren eigenen Vorstellungen von Vergangenheit und Zukunft, mit ihrer Ordnung, Planung und Hoff-

Of course, a European culture and identity can only grow and persist, if the media, if journalism and the entertainment sector become an integral part of this European culture. The politicians may build the European institutions in Brussels and Strasbourg – but it's the media which will create, define and “implant” Europe in our brains, hearts, and souls. And it's the big brother containers and the soap operas where such a European culture has to be “lived” - if the dream is not to burst like a soap bubble.

Next, let's take a look at the map: Europe is not only the battlefield, where the early fights for *freedom of the press* and for *freedom of expression* took place. Together with North America and Australia, Europe has become one of the few spots on earth where these achievements are defended, where press freedom is not only stated on patient paper. It is part of everyday life, and thus part of the constitutional reality (*Verfassungswirklichkeit*).

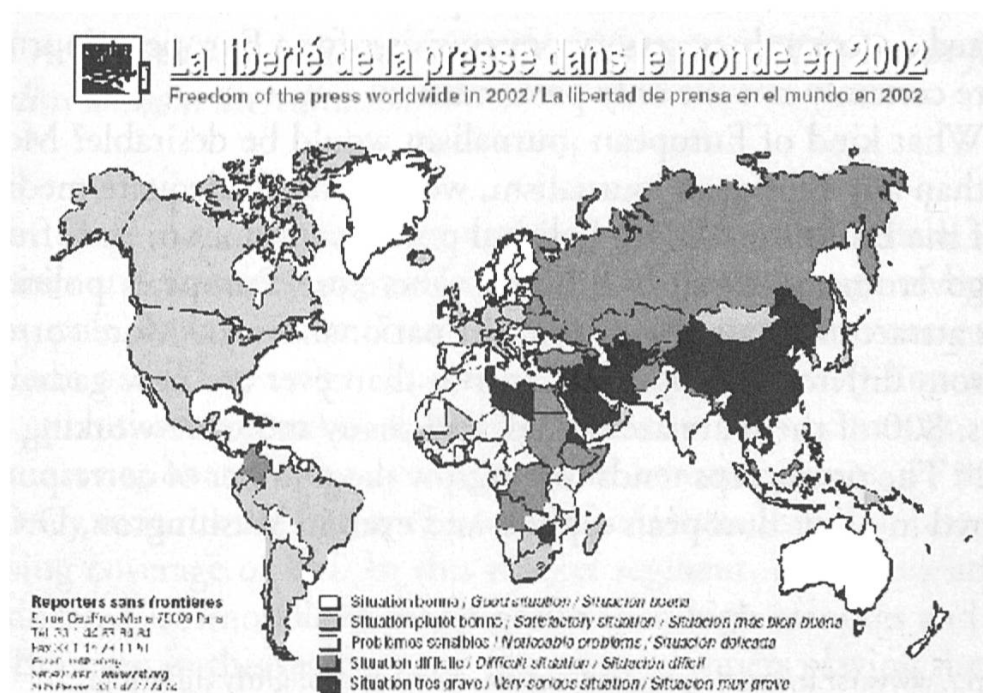


Fig. 1: Press Freedom

We can be proud – but we also have to remain aware that these freedoms are always endangered: journalists and the media themselves abuse press

nung, mit dem technischen Fortschritts-Optimismus und der klassischen Humanitätsidee, mit ihrem gebrochenen, aber noch immer lebendigen Christentum. Dazu noch mit einem Schuss Kulturpessimismus... Überdies kann man es auch kennzeichnen durch seine besondere Dynamik auf allen Lebensgebieten, die man ausserhalb Europas nur mehr einem anderen Kontinent ablesen kann, dem amerikanischen, aber auch das erst, seit dort Europäer leben”. Seibt (2002:18-19, translated by the author).

freedom, populist movements on the right and on the left do not respect press freedom, in some of the new EU member states civil liberties are still less established than in the older democracies.

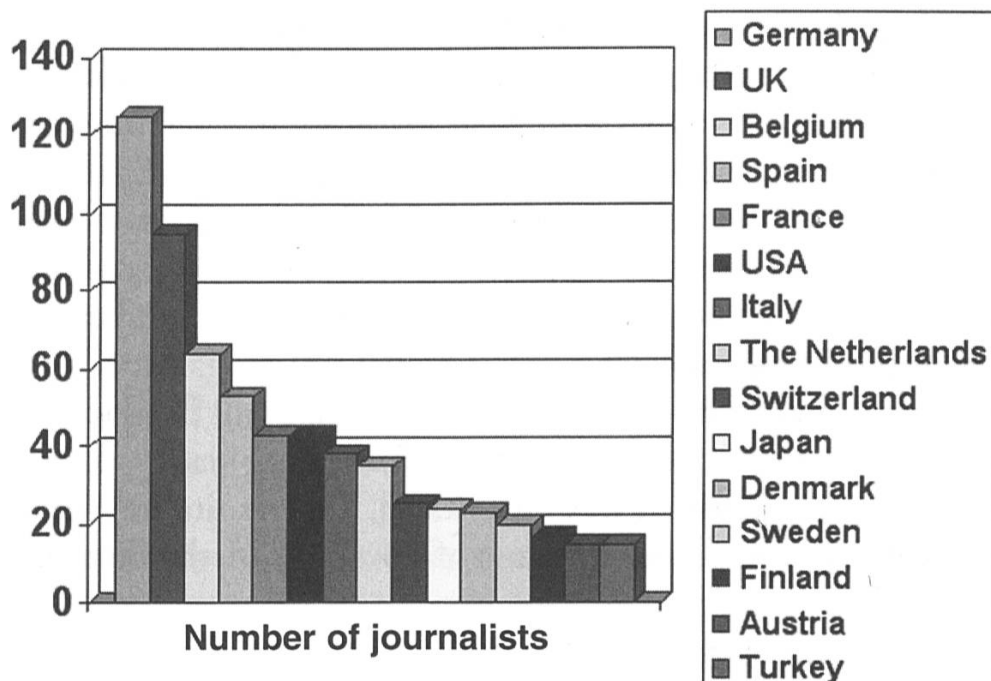
Press freedom seems to be also at risk in one of our immediate neighbouring countries. Journalists and even judges are intimidated there, a media mogul has turned into a powerful political leader, the prime minister. And he seems not to understand very well the checks and balances built into a democracy. To me, it is surprising how little the media in Europe have reported these developments. They should no longer be treated as the usual quarrels between the left and the right; democracy suffers severely if the first and the fourth estates are controlled by the same clan of politicians. This is why I truly hope that particularly conservative and liberal media in Europe finally become more aware of the threefold populist threat in that country.<sup>9</sup>

On the other hand, a common European history and culture as well as press freedom are only necessary prerequisites for a European journalism. They are certainly not the only precondition.

So: What kind of European journalism would be desirable? More urgently than any European journalism, we may need adequate media coverage of the European Union. Political power continues to shift from national governments towards Brussels. Therefore European politics and policies attract more attention from the national media. More correspondents from different European countries than ever are now gathering in Brussels: 800 of them are accredited, and many more are working as free lancers.<sup>10</sup> The press corps tends to outgrow the number of correspondents accredited in other European capitals and even in Washington, D.C.

<sup>9</sup> See [http://www.rsf.fr/article.php3?id\\_article=8240](http://www.rsf.fr/article.php3?id_article=8240) and, slightly differing: <http://www.freedomhouse.org/research/freeworld/2002/fitw2003.pdf>.

<sup>10</sup> Teichert (2000:10-14, 12). "Laut Angaben der für die Akkreditierung zuständigen Beamtin sind bei den EU-Institutionen in Brüssel über 900 Journalisten und Journalistinnen akkreditiert. Das grösste Kontingent stellen wohl die Deutschen, gemäss Angaben des deutschen Botschafters bei der EU sind es über 130. An EU- Gipfeln, die entweder im Präsidentschaftsland oder immer häufiger auch in Brüssel stattfinden, können es schon mal 3000 werden, da dann auch noch die Heimredaktionen anreisen (inkl. Fernsehteams mit Technikern). Speziell hier ist, dass sich zumindest der harte Kern täglich an den Briefings der Kommission (meist sind nur die Sprecher dort, manchmal aber auch die Kommissare) trifft. Theoretisch lässt sich die EU- Berichterstattung auch von zuhause aus (mit Internet oder TV EBS) machen, aber die direkten Kontakte, auch mit den anreisenden Ministern, sind hier leichter möglich als an anderen Korrespondentenposten, z.B. USA, wo mit Ausnahme der privilegierten grossen Medien der



Source: *Journalist* 4/2001, p.12

Fig. 2: Accredited Journalists at Brussels (UE and NATO). Except freelance journalists without accreditation

At least some national and regional newspapers, some special interest magazines and websites emphasize particularly the coverage of European politics, policies and issues. But so far, very little comparative research has been done on EU coverage. These few results show clearly how much it differs, quantitatively and qualitatively, from country to country.

In most national quality newspapers and newsmagazines, we may find a tendency towards the “european-ization” of journalism, for example, an increasing coverage of EU. In this market segment, the media address a well-educated, cosmopolitan target group with high earnings and aspirations. But even in this segment, it’s the *national* papers playing the music. At least – as Gianfranco Fabi pointed out explicitly for his newspaper *Il-Sole-24Ore*<sup>11</sup>, most of these national quality papers are united by a basic pro-European consensus. For example, we might mention *El Pais*, *Corriere della Sera* and *La Repubblica* in the South, *Le Monde* in the West, *Dagens Nyheter* in the North of Europe, the *Neue Zürcher Zeitung*, the

Grossteil der Korrespondenten auf Sekundärquellen angewiesen ist. (E-Mail from Marianne Truttmann, correspondent of the Basler Zeitung in Brussels, to the author, as of Jan. 29, 2003).

<sup>11</sup> Fabi (2002: 32).

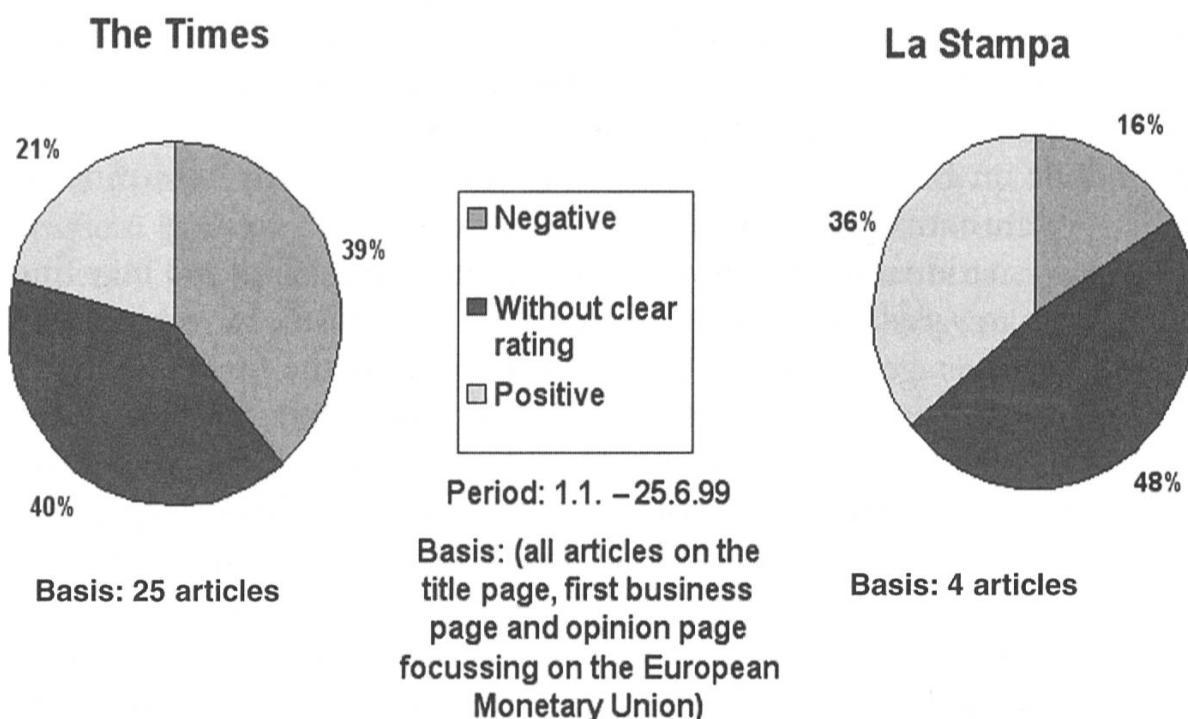


*Süddeutsche Zeitung* und the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* in the middle as well as Eastern newspapers like the Polish *Gazeta Wyborcza*. This consensus helps; it supports European integration.

But whenever issues are dealt with in more detail, the pro-European consensus rapidly fades away. National cultures and ego-trips are extremely strong. Even newspapers which, for ideological affiliations should stick close together, differ extremely in their reporting, for example, about the European currency.

The American think tank *Media Monitor* and its German counterpart *Medien Tenor* have analyzed how four leading national newspapers covered the Euro before it was introduced. The results are shining – be it the differences in the sheer amount of coverage, or the diverging biases and overtones.

One content analysis dealt with the liberal-conservative newspapers *The Times* and *La Stampa*. In the first half of 1999, the British *Times* reported approximately six times more frequently on this issue than the *Stampa* – and besides this, with a much more negative bias.<sup>12</sup>



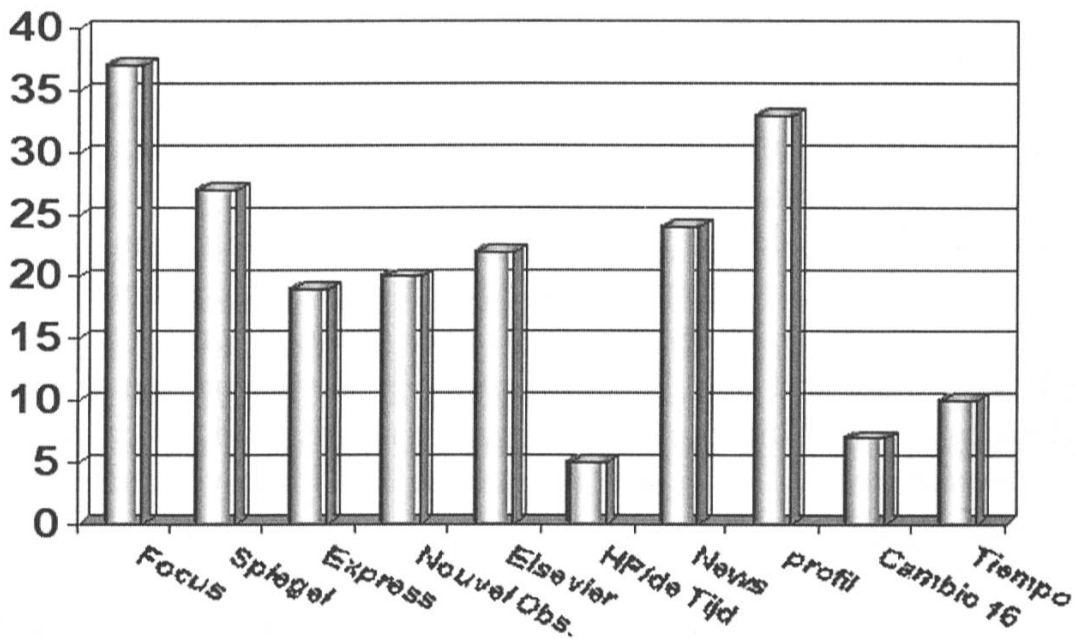
*Fig. 3: Coverage of the Euro*

<sup>12</sup> *Media Monitor*, No. 3, (July 1999: 1). It remains dubious how the researchers could arrive at these percentages, given a basis of only four articles analysed.

The second analysis compared newspapers leaning more to the left: In the second quarter of 1999, the French *Liberation* rarely mentioned the Euro (4 contributions), while the German paper *Frankfurter Rundschau* reported ten times more frequently (39 contributions); *Liberation* made clearly positive or negative statements, while its German counterpart reported in most cases without any positive or negative connotation.<sup>13</sup>

Thus it is not the partisan political leanings we know from national or local coverage - once again the national and cultural differences are reflected by the media. The media are mirrors; they reflect European diversity,<sup>14</sup> which so frequently seems to block or to reduce the speed of unification.

To give another example: A German researcher, Holger Sievert, analysed how the major news magazines are covering the EU quantitatively. The picture is extremely surprising: The mere quantitative differences are enormous, while in principle, the news values<sup>15</sup> do not differ that much in different European countries.



Source: Holger Sievert, *Europäisches Journalismus*, Wiesbaden 1998, p. 282.

Fig. 4: Number of articles about the EU in different European news-magazines

<sup>13</sup> *Medien Tenor*, Forschungsbericht Nr. 86, July 15, (1999: 37).

<sup>14</sup> *Medien Tenor* (1999: 36).

<sup>15</sup> Schulz (2nd edition, 1990).

It is sad that I cannot present more recent data. But European journalism research itself lacks continuity. For example, only five of the 57 links which the *Medien Tenor* offers on its website point to research and stories done in the years 2001 and 2002 – the other 52 date further back.

Thus, media coverage of the EU has certainly improved and enlarged – but there is still a long way to go in order to arrive at common European norms and professional judgements.

On the other hand, a unified mainstream European journalism may not even be desirable. We may not even need common norms and professional standards. As the former head of corporate communications of Volkswagen, Klaus Kocks, has pointed out: It is a “fateful error” to believe that we are looking at reality if we are looking through the window of the media. “We rather look into a show case – a show case which is being decorated by the media. We don’t look into real life, we gaze at different window displays.”<sup>16</sup> Though I disagree with the – implicit – comparison of a journalist with a window dresser, I very much like Kocks’ idea from another angle: Why shouldn’t we, the European readers, listeners, and viewers, enjoy window shopping by looking at different and manifold displays?

As the economist and EU expert Roland Vaubel emphasizes, we should try to stimulate competition, and he points out, such competition should not only be restricted to companies in the marketplace, it should also include governments in Europe.<sup>17</sup>

I would like to add: competition might also stimulate and improve work in newsrooms. In this particular case, it is not the economic competition for audience or advertisers. It is rather the intellectual competition which we could and should stimulate – by observing our European neighbours, by looking out for innovative trends, and by encouraging more *benchmarking*. The goal is to increase and improve understanding and cooperative forms of communication between the many small, large, partially overlapping communication spheres of the continent.<sup>18</sup>

Particularly, the intellectual exchange and discourse among media professionals and communication researchers all over Europe should be improved. To get this going, basically two challenges remain.

Challenge number one is to set up in all EU countries a *public broadcasting program* which truly contributes to European integration - by cov-

<sup>16</sup> Kocks (2001: 214).

<sup>17</sup> Vaubel (2001).

<sup>18</sup> Lünenborg (2000: 246).

ering the EU and the European nations more intensely, and by exchanging national programs more systematically.

The second challenge is to create layers of *European journalism infrastructures*: Trade unions, employers, editors, media watchdogs and communication scientists, journalism schools and midcareer educators - they all have already built some European networks. At least some of them have by now not only websites, but even a phone number in Brussels. A “Network of European communication”, trying to link journalists and media experts, was founded in Frankfurt recently.<sup>19</sup>

In both cases, I guess the EU could learn something from a much smaller country which is not even an EU member – from Switzerland. The way the Swiss Public Broadcasting works with its regional programs in German, French, Italian and Romansch may well serve as a prototype. And the way initiatives and institutions constituting the journalism infrastructures operate and co-operate in Switzerland’s multi-lingual and multi-cultural environment, might also serve as a case study. For example the Swiss Press Council; a couple of years ago, my colleague Roger Blum from Bern took me to one of its meetings. I was fascinated by how the members communicated in “Swiss” – which means everybody was talking in his mother tongue, and all the others would understand him. It is also impressive how visible the Swiss Press Council has become in public – compared to its sister in Germany, for example.

On the other hand, let us be aware that the Swiss example has its limits: “Small is beautiful”, and it remains beautiful. But recipes which work successfully in a small country like Switzerland are not necessarily adaptable to the much larger and diversified European context – with more than 25 member states, about as many different languages and 500 million people.<sup>20</sup>

Thus, the real breakthrough towards a European journalism culture will have come when we do not only demand and build European institutions, but also start to evaluate them. Not all of them work effectively and efficiently, so far - just because they are “European” initiatives. The real opportunity and challenge is to learn from each other. Given the broad diversity and variety of cultures in Europe, there is great potential

<sup>19</sup> Netzwerk Europäische Kommunikation, initiated by “european journalists e.v.” in Frankfurt/M., Feb. 6, 2003.

<sup>20</sup> [http://europa.eu.int/comm/publications/booklets/eu\\_glance/14/txt\\_de.pdf](http://europa.eu.int/comm/publications/booklets/eu_glance/14/txt_de.pdf); see also: Glotz (2002: 7).

for innovation and improvement by observing how our neighbours are handling journalism.

My conclusion is ambivalent, even contradictory: Yes, there is a common European heaven on the horizon, overarching the national, regional and local media landscapes in Europe. But there is also good reason for scepticism – regarding the EU as a political project, and regarding the concentration process in the media industry.

Looking at the political system as well as at the media conglomerates: neither in politics nor in business, is size everything. Being small and remaining flexible can be much more promising than growing and growing and being paralysed by ossification.<sup>21</sup>

There is also a far-reaching consensus among experts on political communication including Otfried Jarren, Hans Mathias Kepplinger, XXX Sarcinelli and Ulrich Saxer that political coverage is being “mediatized”<sup>22</sup>, and the media are more and more “commercialized”. Under such auspices, it will be extremely difficult to develop something which deserves to be called a “European Journalism”.

A couple of years ago, a bestselling book in Germany was titled: “Gute Mädchen kommen in den Himmel, böse kommen überall hin”. Good girls get into heaven, bad girls get everywhere. Replacing the Mädchen by the media, we might conclude: “Good media get into heaven, bad media get everywhere”. Unfortunately, today’s media want to get everywhere - instead of getting into the European heaven. This is probably the main economic reason why waiting for a European journalism may be like waiting for Godot.

On the other hand, there is some reason to be confident: the network of European initiatives and institutions serving the improvement of journalism can still become denser; we can improve the communication between researchers and practitioners; and thus we can contribute our share towards creating a more European journalism culture. I also believe that we can and will contribute to “europeanizing” media research, particularly media monitoring – in order to identify “best practices”, and to overcome innovation barriers in newsrooms. So, let’s not wait any longer for Godot. Let’s go to work, instead!

<sup>21</sup> Minter (2002).

<sup>22</sup> Jarren & Donges (2002); Kepplinger (1998).

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