
ANALYZING THE UNION HOW BRUSSELS-BASED JOURNALISTS REPORT 'THE EUROPE STORY'

BY LINUS TURNER AND ELVIRA EILERT PIGNAL,
BRUNSWICK, BRUSSELS

Brussels is not just home to civil servants and members of the European Parliament; the EU's de facto capital also houses one of the world's largest press corps.

After the EU expanded to 27 countries in 2007, there were said to be 1,300 accredited journalists working in the city, more than in any other single location. Since then, cost pressures have trimmed that number to just under 900, slightly fewer than in Washington, DC.

But the real numbers are hard to track. Newspaper correspondents, wire services, online-only media offices and TV and radio journalists are being supplemented by a growing number of freelancers, bloggers and other commentators. "It's clear that the traditional media have been feeling the pinch and are having their thunder slightly stolen by online media," says Michael Mann, spokesman for Maroš Šefčovič, Commission Vice-President for Inter-Institutional Affairs and Administration.

In spite of the size of the Brussels press corps, most of its journalists are generalists and most media outlets are represented by small offices or individuals. Agence Europe's *Daily Bulletin* and the weekly *European Voice*, owned by *The Economist*, are the most significant print publications devoted entirely to institutional and political issues.

They face competition from online media, including *EurActiv*, which covers most policy areas, and specialist outlets such as *MLex*, which began by concentrating on competition issues but has expanded into financial services, energy and environment. Despite cutting back in recent years, the wire services have larger offices, with journalists able to specialize and gain sector expertise.

The largest of the international dailies, the *Financial Times*, has a staff of four. "It's still an accepted fact that the *FT* is the journal of record here," says Mann. "It's a vital business newspaper on an international front and more widely read, because it's in English."

But most journalists cover a wide range of sectors – if not all of them – on their own, as well as EU institutional issues, which leaves them thinly spread. The result is that only the biggest stories get broad coverage in the national newspapers of each member state. And when Brussels



correspondents for those titles get to write on a topic with wider implications – the EU’s response to the banking crisis, for example – they have to compete for space with specialists back home. Brussels journalists, therefore, often concentrate on “internal” issues – institutional and treaty changes, European elections or activities at the Commission – which may exacerbate the perception that the EU is inward looking and fails to connect with its citizens.

Meanwhile, the Commission’s communication with reporters has become formalized, with set-piece briefings and a centrally controlled team of spokespeople – partly a reaction against internal squabbles that often made their way into the press. “Overall, we have a closer relationship with journalists than you would in London, Paris or other member state capitals,” says Chantal Hughes, spokesperson for Commissioner Michel Barnier.

Working with the media is imperative for businesses trying to get their message across to EU policymakers and other influential parties. So how do they navigate this difficult territory?

First, it is important to establish exactly who a company is trying to reach and which media are best suited to carry their message. The media in each member state report on European issues in different ways – some factually, while others are critical of bureaucracy or perceived heavy-handedness. Of course, it is also useful to know the background of journalists before their Brussels posting. Most importantly, though, European issues and the policymaking process are often complicated and difficult for outsiders to penetrate; the most effective communications campaigns will be those that can incorporate key messages into a simplified account of the issues.

EU business stories, particularly in national newspapers, have long focused on competition issues – state aid cases and Commission investigations into mergers, cartels or market abuse. This has changed recently though, with interest shifting to other areas of regulation that have a broader impact on industry, which include climate change, consumer protection, security of energy supply and pan-European rules to ensure financial stability, including measures to limit bankers’ bonuses.

Because the trend is for the official flow of news to become controlled and standardized, journalists are interested in alternative stories and new angles on existing ones, sometimes based on gossip and rumor. In pitching a story, businesses must be conscious of the need for an EU perspective on the issue, or provide genuine insight into the implications of EU policy.

Because of the EU legislative process, Brussels journalists follow issues for long periods. “One issue they face is their editor determining that a Brussels story is ‘today,’ when in fact, there are multiple key moments in legislative drafting, such as proposal, adoption, debate, votes, and so on,” says Hughes. One tactic is to arrange background briefings, which allow you to raise a policy issue informally with a correspondent. Whilst not always leading to an article, building these relationships can help to deepen understanding of the issues and ensure journalists turn to those spokespeople when news breaks.

It is worth remembering that many EU stories in member state newspapers will have a double byline, with reporting from a sector specialist as well as a Brussels correspondent. Pitching a story in Brussels should, therefore, be considered as another way to get an issue in the press. Equally, by not briefing in Brussels, there is a risk that only half of the journalistic team will pick up on your messages.

It is perhaps worth treating the EU media in the same way as Brussels policymakers. This means investing resources in building long-term relationships and offering more background and detail without expecting immediate results. Ultimately though, the impact of balanced and fair media coverage can be crucial in averting damaging regulatory change or improving a commercial operating environment. 

Linus Turner is a Director in Brunswick’s Brussels office with a background in policy and communications in both Brussels and London.

Elvira Eilert Pignal is also a Director in Brunswick’s Brussels office. She focuses on EU regulatory and public affairs, particularly in financial services.


MOST JOURNALISTS COVER A WIDE RANGE OF SECTORS – IF NOT ALL OF THEM – ON THEIR OWN, AS WELL AS EU INSTITUTIONAL ISSUES, WHICH LEAVES THEM THINLY SPREAD


JOSHUA CHAFFIN
— FINANCIAL TIMES

The European Union is a sprawling political and regulatory animal, both interesting and challenging to cover

IF A COMPANY HAS GOOD COMMUNICATIONS SUPPORT – ADVISORS WHO KNOW THEIR STUFF, AND CAN BE TRUSTED AS HONEST BROKERS – THEN THAT CAN BE ENORMOUSLY HELPFUL IN SORTING THROUGH THE MESS

The Brussels press corps strikes me as unique in its collegiality. Journalists here certainly compete – but not in the same way that they might in the US or Britain, where it seems that reporters sometimes relish professional combat.

Everybody here wants a scoop. But a key difference is that you have a press pool comprised of at least 27 different nationalities, each serving their own readers. Because, for example, German and French journalists are generally writing for different markets, they may be more willing to share insights and swap notes. This can be immensely helpful to round out a story – especially since the European Union is such a sprawling political and regulatory animal, with so many different facets to cover.

That variety makes the EU both interesting and challenging to write about. On a given day, a correspondent might have to look at everything from chemicals, food and financial regulation, to foreign policy and trade stories. Not only is the subject matter vast, but each issue tends to have its own complex history. (This burden only seems to be growing heavier for most correspondents as publications continue to tighten their budgets.)

This presents an opportunity for communications professionals. If a company has good communications support – advisors who know their stuff, and can be trusted as honest brokers – then that can be enormously helpful in sorting through the mess. The flipside is dealing with people who are not very good and don't know what they are doing. That just further clouds the picture.

Communications professionals should understand that many Brussels journalists need to clear an extra hurdle for their stories to make it into the paper. They have to report a political or regulatory story with a sharpened angle or some added flair to make it attractive to their editors. Also, while

many readers accept that the EU is significant and that decisions made in Brussels affect their business, they may not be familiar with its processes, institutions or key players.

That is one difference from Washington, DC, where I reported before. Another is that it seemed generally clearer to me what the main focus of a debate was in Washington on a given day. In Brussels, it can be more diffuse.

Generally speaking, I find Brussels to be more subtle than Washington. It is less overtly political, and less obviously driven by money. The one currency it truly craves is popular legitimacy.



Financial Times

The *Financial Times* is one of the world's leading international business newspapers. Although its headquarters is in London, 110 of the FT's 475 journalists are based outside the UK. There are four international editions of the paper, including a European edition. www.ft.com

TIFFANY YUAN

— 21ST CENTURY BUSINESS HERALD

Although Europe is China's biggest trading partner, many of the country's market-orientated media are silent on the EU

'What exactly is going on in Europe?' That is the question most frequently asked by our readers. Although Europe is China's biggest trading partner, to my surprise, most readers, even the elite, know more about its culture, history and tourist attractions than its political and business institutions. The Chinese always say Europe does not understand China. My feeling is that the reverse is also true.

European issues do feature in the mainstream, state-owned Chinese media and wire services. However, China's relatively independent and market-oriented media are generally silent on European issues, compared with the attention paid to the US. This is significant, as these media sources are important for providing people with objective, relevant and thoughtful analysis. The *21st Century Business Herald* was the first non state-owned media outlet to appoint a Brussels correspondent.

In contrast to capital cities such as Paris, London, Berlin or even Rome, Brussels is more like a stage – it is where the European Union powers compete to control the actors, or institutions. In this sense, Brussels is the perfect place to draw an overall picture of Europe.

The EU is a continuing political experiment – there is no textbook or manual to consult and often no precedent. I found it difficult to understand the EU decision-making process, as it is influenced by so many interacting powers. However, this process is the most interesting aspect of Brussels.

It is also one of the most important things I try to explain to readers, especially when covering issues with a direct Chinese interest. I try to explain how the final decision was made and who holds the decisive power. Trade disputes are a good example. Trade issues often involve Chinese small and medium-sized enterprises, which may not be familiar



with international laws. I try to explain how they might have input into an EU decision, who they might approach and the best way to do this.

Our readers in China usually have easy access to English language news. This means we are not only competing with Chinese wire services, but also foreign and English language ones. My reporting from Brussels is for my paper's daily edition, so I definitely do not aim to compete with foreign media and wires in terms of speed and volume. Our competitive advantage lies in our ability to provide a backdrop to the narratives of the European political process and an in-depth analysis of the issues.

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21st Century Business Herald

The *21st Century Business Herald* is an influential financial and economic daily newspaper, headquartered in Guangzhou, southern China. Published in the Chinese language, it has a daily circulation of more than 762,000 and some 2.6m readers. www.en.21cbh.com

PEPPI KIVINIEMI
— Dow Jones Newswires

Both reporting style
and pace of life changes
once you're based in Brussels

IN THIS TOWN
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I've worked as a competition reporter for Dow Jones in Brussels for a little over three years, covering topics ranging from cartels and monopolies to regulatory issues affecting mergers and sales agreements. Before Brussels, I wrote about the bond markets in London, also for Dow Jones.

While the company stayed the same, the move to the center of the European Union has had a big impact on the style of reporting, as well as the pace of life.

In Brussels, the news flow tends to start slightly later in the day but continues way beyond market closure. Although Dow Jones concentrates on financial stories, in this town politics is everywhere, and it is hard to cover a story without understanding the various motivations behind decisions.

The news agenda is run by politicians, civil servants, lobbyists and lawyers, most of whom famously enjoy long lunches and a good gossip. If you don't know the latest political twists and turns, you'll have little to talk about with the most casual contacts.

For a competition reporter, the European Commission is the main source of news, as cartels, abuses of dominant positions, and state aid cases are decided by Commission officials. The Commission tends to sit tight on upcoming decisions, but it has spawned a large industry of lobbyists and member state officials, who obligingly deliver Chinese whispers to the circling press corps.

Most of our news is edited in London by the beat editors, and stories that also look suitable for *The Wall Street Journal* get flagged in the process. Because Brussels is a hybrid bureau where Dow Jones Newswires reporters also write directly for the *Journal*, story ideas are often discussed in advance and coverage shared out between reporters.



In general, antitrust stories are in demand for both the newspaper and the newswires, as they tend to feature prominent companies and allegations that they are harming consumers by price fixing or displaying monopolistic behavior. The US edition of the *Journal* prefers stories with a strong US angle or some resonance for readers. Regulatory stories can be a harder sell, needing a clear industry emphasis. That said, in the current environment of financial services crackdown, stories about new regulatory developments often end up in the paper too.

Dow Jones Newswires

Dow Jones Newswires and *The Wall Street Journal* are both owned by the New York-based Dow Jones & Company. The wires provide global stock market and business news. The WSJ is a leading international business newspaper. www.dowjones.com, online.wsj.com

Technical topics and alarmist tactics there may be, but the Brussels beat is an attractive one

As a Brussels correspondent, you have to cover multiple topics, often very technical in their nature. European Union policy stories often need to be translated into clear and simple facts and analysis that are intelligible to FT Deutschland's target readers, who are mainly business and policy decision-makers. I have to judge whether something that happens in Brussels is a story that would interest them, which isn't always the case when the European Commission makes a formal proposal or when a European Parliament committee votes on a legal text.

Of course, the different European institutions try to influence their media exposure, particularly the Commission, with its tightly controlled midday media briefings. Ideally, I am looking to get a story earlier than this, perhaps writing about a draft proposal that I can put into context with comments from market players.

In contrast, the European Parliament can be unwieldy, with multiple press releases on the same day from MEPs in the same political group. But it's also the most transparent institution, which makes covering the Parliament worthwhile. I even quite like going to Strasbourg, the official seat of the Parliament, for plenary sessions – because you have access to a lot of people in a short space of time.

I'm quite often taken aback by the lobbying strategies of corporations or trade associations. The usual tone is alarmist: energy-intensive industries trying to fend off auctioning in emissions trading walk around town, talking about the 'total deindustrialization in Europe.' Or bankers scare regulators by predicting that stronger capital requirements will lead to a '3 per cent GDP contraction and a loss of 10m jobs.'

Scaremongering destroys credibility even when there are legitimate concerns. My impression is that those who engage

positively with EU policy goals are much more influential. The hedge fund industry has experienced a steep learning curve in this regard. When the Commission first came up with its plans for regulating them, hedge fund managers were brash enough to tell policymakers not to 'politicize' their business. Nowadays, the Alternative Investment Management Association tries to be a good European citizen; for example, by publicly supporting the regulation of over-the-counter derivatives, saying the benefits will outweigh increased costs.

Overall, with its Brussels bureau, *FT Deutschland* provides a different perspective for German readers. Because decisions taken in Brussels are important, our EU stories often hit the front page – that's the beauty of reporting from here. Topics like climate change and, following the financial crisis, complex financial regulation, are at the top of the agenda, and the Brussels beat is therefore an attractive one.

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FT Deutschland
Now independent from the *Financial Times*, *FT Deutschland* is a German-language business paper based in Hamburg. Its website is Germany's second largest online business news source; its Brussels bureau has three journalists. www.ftd.de

BLOGGING IN BRUSSELS

WHAT EUROPEAN COMMUNICATORS ARE LEARNING FROM WASHINGTON, DC

BY LANE HUDSON AND ANTHONY APPLEWHAITE,
BRUNSWICK, WASHINGTON, DC
AND LEFTERIS COROYANNAKIS, BRUNSWICK, BRUSSELS

Political blogging has quickly become ingrained in Washington, DC's media culture. Some US political bloggers have achieved a level of influence, visibility and editorial quality on par with their traditional mainstream print counterparts. Now it is catching on in Brussels.

In the past decade, blogging has given anyone with a computer the potential to control a news cycle. With minimal barriers to entry, there are many influential voices in DC's blogging ecosystem, and the key challenge of navigating the blogosphere is understanding how, when and with whom to engage.

American bloggers include those in traditional media organizations as well as independent voices. Blogging originated outside of traditional journalism, but the lines have blurred, particularly with the emergence of mainstream media bloggers. With more people getting their news online, journalists must increase output to 'feed the beast.' Online readers are hungry for something new and news organizations are hungry for more page views, so bloggers have a constant need for fresh information and sources, providing businesses with a new opportunity to communicate.

Today it is much easier to get coverage of company news than it ever was, and an editor may not even see an item before a blogger posts it online. Publications such as *The Wall Street Journal*, *Forbes* magazine, *The Washington Post* and the *Financial Times* are accepting a wider range of content.

With more channels of communication, readers want quality news fast and preferably in real time. Given these pressures, journalists are asking for information on Twitter and Facebook. Others use subscription services such as 'Help a Reporter Out.' This creates an opportunity for communications professionals to become valued sources and to place news items. This is already happening in the US,

where media and business professionals follow journalists on Twitter and 'befriend' them on Facebook.

As the culture of political blogging in Brussels matures, we will see the same trends. Brussels already has a lively blogosphere and some blogging journalists have carved out a reputation as great sources of insider information, shedding light on decision-making dynamics that evolve behind closed doors. Jean Quatremer of *Libération* is one of the best known.

It is significant that those bloggers with most credibility in Brussels work for established, traditional media and focus on complex regulatory and institutional developments for a specialized audience. And the EU blogosphere is transient – several well-read blogs have disappeared as fast as they appeared. These are probably among the reasons why a more ingrained EU blogging culture has yet to emerge.

But, if the ever-improving quality, consistency and sectoral diversification of EU blogging is anything to go by, this will change. Some European institutions are already warming to social media, and those that do not currently acknowledge bloggers, including those who operate independently of traditional media, may soon have to take notice. ☺



Lane Hudson is a Director in Brunswick's Washington, DC office and has been profiled as a *Time* magazine Person of the Year for his political blogging.

Anthony Applewhaite JD is an Associate in Brunswick's Washington, DC office. He is a licensed lawyer and specialises in litigation, crisis, regulatory and new media.

Lefteris Coroyannakis is an Executive in Brunswick's Brussels office. He specializes in EU and international trade law and policy.