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Practical Guidelines for Journalists

Reporting Europe – Rules and Context

**Guidelines Based on the Interview Series of
the AIM Project and Further Expert
Interviews, 2004-2007**

By Gerd G. Kopper

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Practical Guidelines for Journalists

Reporting Europe – Rules and Context

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By Gerd G. Kopper¹

Abstract

Based on an assessment of priority rules used in the reporting Europe the standard priority rules governing the daily European journalism have been collected and summarized. This manual is based on the three year study of professional journalism covering European matters within the traditional media sectors of newspapers, radio and actuality TV magazine in the countries of Belgium, Germany, Estonia, France, Finland, Great Britain, Italy, Ireland, Lithuania, Norway and Romania (2004-2007). Answers and material are, mainly, coming from the research project teams of these countries. The standard priority rules were, furthermore, related to important context elements of European journalism as found through the overall AIM project.

Introduction

During the stage of application of the overall AIM project (2002/2003) the impression among the relevant team of scholars and experts had been that one of the ultimate results of the project should be a direct and directly applicable relevance concerning the handling of information and news especially with regard to the sector of professional journalism. At that stage of insight the impression of a sub-optimal way of daily Reporting Europe within Europe was, still, largely attached to the kind of journalism and its seemingly evident shortcomings. It

¹ This paper is, in the part that outlines some guiding principles of reporting Europe, based on a survey among the members of the AIM project and their observations and conclusions drawn from their given national journalism culture. Substantial arguments would not have possible without the kind help of the directors and team members of the national projects within the AIM consortium. The author, therefore, should like to express his gratitude for this particular assistance. Answers to the survey were provided by: Sigurd Allern (University of Oslo), Olivier Baisnée (University of Toulouse), Aukse Balcytienė (Vytautas Magnus University, Kaunas), Farrel Corcoran (Dublin City University), Peter Golding (University of Loughborough), Liana Ionescu and Mirela Lazar (University of Bucharest), Risto Kunelius (University of Tampere), Karin Raeymaeckers (University of Gent), Mart Raudsaar (University of Tartu), Paolo Mancini (University of Perugia). Further assistance was provided through a number of interviews of the author aside from the major AIM project with journalists versed in European reporting, but also with target-oriented non governmental organisations working in close context with European reporters. Special thanks go to Brigitte Alfter (information, Denmark) who has opened insight into the non-institutionalised world of European reporting.

is within this set of hypotheses that one desirable end product envisaged had been a kind of manual of journalistic guidelines to summarize comprehensively the major insights in a way of a handout for the improvement of daily journalism covering European politics and decision-making. The major insight brought about by the AIM project, though, is the ulterior relevance of structure elements of the information and news processes involved. There are, only, limited areas of adaptation for the relevant actors on both side of the information bench. Without fundamental structural reform, again, on both sides of the institutional process of daily information and news management, there only be minor chances to optimize the existing ways and processes, and, hence, effects in terms of the wider European public.

What had been considered to be an easy handout and digest of clear results of the three year study of the information and news machinery of the European institutions and their partner organisations of the European media industry, turned out to rather complex and not in the least close to some practical guidelines. An interim project to replace the visionary practical guidelines for journalists by a collection of examples of best practice in the Reporting of Europe, eventually, turned out to be not very realistic as well. The most relevant insight through the AIM research process had been a total revalorisation of the veining concept of national journalism cultures in Europe. They exist, they are stronger than ever, and they, still, are the most relevant paradigm concerning the Reporting of Europe. On this background, it turned out to be of only accidental impact to have best practices of the Reporting of Europe presented packaged in the form of some guidelines. What might be considered best practice within this dimension in country A, is not at all relevant or appreciated in country B, and vice versa. And within country C completely different ways of handling a European item will be considered best practice. It is from this two failed attempts to consider journalistic and information practice under the auspices of Reporting Europe in a comprehensive and practical manner that the new approach was started which is, hereby, presented in a manner, as short as possible. We have digested all the relevant results available through the AIM project concerning the most relevant rules of the information and news management process within all of the participating European countries. We have particularly asked for the top three rules that govern this process under the auspices of the practice within every national journalism culture and in clear view of Reporting Europe.

The rules that are outlined in this text, thus, depict the general rank, taken the sum of all eleven countries involved. These rules illustrate the present way of information and news management concerning the Reporting of Europe. These rules can be interpreted from three sides: (a) as a challenge to the informing actors on the part of the European institutions; (b) as framework and in some respect, also, barriers, to be overcome by professional journalism and its management, and, thirdly, (c) as impulse for further research within this area. A number of sectors for further questioning, still, miss even an initial amount of enlightenment: comparative studies of the European media systems under the auspices of information and news management; audience research under the auspices of Reporting Europe, case studies concerning the production, selection and distribution of European news items all over Europe etc.

We felt that the simple digesting and ranking of the standard rules of European information and news management would not be sufficient for a minimal introduction into the intricacies of this sector – as seen by all relevant quarters, i.e. the communicators on the institutional side, the journalists, and the analysts. We have added some initial analytical notes and remarks reflecting the essence and background of some of the rules outlined. These remarks are intended to promote further debate and analysis within this important sector of European activity.

Reporting Europe and European Reporting – Guidelines

1. A news item concerning activities and decisions of one of the European institutions will rank high in terms of the media news management if it relates directly to authorities, institutions, and/or events that have an actual high ranking within the national context of a European country. This holds true also for non-EU member countries. The clearest indicator of such an effect is its impact on an on-going national political debate. Examples of such types of discussion within some national context might be: immigration, public finances, counterfeiting, trade and importations from Asia, to mention just a few items.
2. A European news item will increase its chances to enter into a days presentation when an element of conflict regarding authorities, institutions, and/or events of EU institutions with relevance to a national context or with direct relation to authorities, institutions, and/or events in the national context is existing.
3. A news item has a high chance to be presented in certain media within the EU member countries – e.g. within radio shows – if it represents a clear and practical link to the daily life of the audience. The amount of such items is in the increase, taken the regulatory aspects of EU legislation on the consumer world. There are media in Europe that would value this type of news even higher than those mentioned at the very beginning with high ranks concerning traditional news values, like attachment to a high ranking authority within the national context.
4. A news item will increase its chance to be presented within the European media if journalists are provided, at least, with a clue, as to the practical relevance of the item in the daily life of European citizens. The technical handling of the journalistic transformation of a news item out of the terminology and setting of EU legislation into that of practical life and relevance does not have to exceed a very limited amount of time. This rule is of special relevance in the daily practice of the news agencies.
5. A news item with clear economic or political relevance for a particular country, a region, or even a district or a communal area will have a chance to be presented in one of the relevant news channels in a European country. A prerequisite, though, is its clarity and precision in terms of the localising specifics. A news item that remains packed into its originating legalistic abstractions and regulatory terminology loses its initial chance of being presented. Within different countries the ways and handling procedures differ among the various channels and services according to the prevalent media system. The main differences occur among national and local dailies, and among commercial and public service radio, and also among the printed press plus radio in general and television. There are high degrees of variance, though, among countries.
6. News item concerning conflicts within EU organisations, among those organisations and among leading personnel of EU institutions rank considerably high within a number of European news organisations. These items are considered of prime interest also among non-member countries of the EU.
7. News items concerning European affairs have to clearly confront the acting journalists with primary relevance for the national and or local media markets within given countries. The classic item coming out of European institutions which declares abstract progress on a given

measure – when this measure is, normally, one element within a context of many, already over a number of years – is non-selectable, given the systematic news machinery of the mass media systems in Europe.

8. News items that look beyond the European institutions and their decision making processes and enter truly European reporting have a chance to be presented if they provide additional attractiveness for the public, like e. g. elements of human touch, adventure, drama, background and come close to reportage formats. These items if they are not news priorities (major catastrophes etc.) require advance planning (space requirements within the media, cost allocations, scheduling etc.).

9. Depending on the high elite rank and on the pertinent quality status of a medium in a given country news items that do not apply to the above stated criteria gain an increased chance of inclusion in the presentations of such selected media. Media of the highest quality and elite rank in most countries tend to favour a perspective of “European universalism”, i.e. to carry all the news that is relevant for Europe in general – and not only for the given national public. In all of Europe, however, there exist, not more than twelve of such clear exceptions to the general rules stated above.

10. Television coverage concerning Europe is invariably assailed by the overwhelming lack of visual footage and its the will not deter a public used to drama, fascination of personalities, contests and conflicts. This lack does not only determine difficulties on national TV programmes, but also – and even more so – on regional TV services. The quest for attractive visualization, given the TV programming that exists, applies, particularly, to the increasing number of projects where EU initiatives and projects reach for down into the European regions, and communal districts.

11. Direct reporting of European institutions will be optimised if relevant institutions, still, increase the kind of technical and organisational support (e. g. accessibility of sources, optimizing of databank transfers etc.). A clear barrier concerning pre-fabrication of material, public relation spins etc., though, is articulated by the overwhelming majority of journalists engaged in the reporting of Europe.

12. A news item will increase its rank of importance considerably within a national journalistic environment if within the established systems and networks that exist within any of the national journalistic cultures, e. g. at the correspondents’ pool at Brussels, there are enough numbers of individuals of established professional trust that rank the item accordingly. There exist mixed systems of trust and relevance within and among the various national journalism culture, e.g. with some high overlapping among nationals of the Nordic and Baltic countries.

13. The organisational rules of European journalism, as being played out among the Brussels press corps, have gained over the rules existing within professional journalism of a particular national journalism culture. The standards of information given out and being restricted based on the rules according to “on the record”, “off the record”, and “on background only” are non-existent in some European countries and would never be accepted within a given national context. The professional standardization with the context of reporting Europe, thus, increases, in many quarters of journalism, the distance between the roles of European expert, on the one hand, and representative of a specific public via a particular media channel, on the other hand. This increasing self-alienation from the very roots of practical journalism, of

course, has a long-term effect on the news management in general concerning the Reporting of Europe.

Context Elements of “Reporting Europe” in Europe

The following insights into relevant contextual elements concerning the reporting of Europe – and its guiding principles - combine general perspectives with insight drawn from the AIM project, in general.

No 1

Periods of “crisis” are periods when the information and news systems in Europe are full of European news. There exists a feedback cycle for information and news regarding the European institutions, with hardly any deficits in terms of details, precision, continuity, the presence of articulate political figures, their accessibility, the visibility of Europe etc. But such crises are rare. Which means that only in exceptional cases the European information and news management has a chance to arrive at an adequate functionality – taken its most pragmatic procedure. Even during such crises, the momentary reflection concerning the role of control, also of European politics through the media, is still an issue of debate and further questioning.

No 2

The daily practice of information through the European institutions, though outside of crisis times, is relying to a large extent on quantity, instead of quality. The AIM project has shown to what degree the journalists at Brussels feel inundated by hundreds and thousands of information particles that they feel unable to coordinate, analyse and effectively select. They, thereby, rely on secondary mediation, either through news agency account, through expertise in various knowledge quarters, through trusted colleagues etc. There exist national journalism cultures where the kind of frustration going with this practice of inundation has reached a stage of resignation: Individual activities to personally sort out something relevant for a given day, have been stopped altogether, in such cases. This attitude in combination with only modest interest concerning European affairs at the home desk, in the end, leads to a precursory gist of agency material on Europe in its most modest setting. This description of the news reality of reporting Europe has to be seriously taken into account, because it illustrates one extreme, though decisive position of a vast spectrum of professional attitudes being relevant.

No 3

The traditional media systems in Europe (newspapers, periodicals, commercial and public service television, and commercial and public service radio) are managed, maintained and innovated within their existing national frameworks. Within these national frameworks, comprising a wide span of differences among each other, the diverse media sectors and singular companies are to a high degree determined by their specific history of institutional and commercial success, their specific periods of distress and conflict, including the political history of the specific country. There is a high degree of institutionalizing such particularities of national media systems into systematic fundamentals of reference, foremost within the legal systems for the media, into competition legislation, and into codes of conduct for the press. Up to now, the measure of truly European interference and standardization is, still, proportionally small. TV markets and measures for TV advertising and some financial instruments, e.g. concerning sponsoring, have been regulated through the European Union. European jurisdiction has become relevant in some cases of personal rights and possible

infringement by the media. And, of course, European competition laws, have a bearing on media companies and their ways and degrees of expansion and the types of acquisition and mergers.

No 4

The lowest common denominator, thus, in terms of a common European characteristic are given by some similarities concerning market structures and demand patterns within the grand publics, and by some intrinsic value preferences within the institutions and within the national publics. Some of such basic patterns are e.g. determined by the relevant factors of existing subscriptions systems for dailies, of patterns of licensing systems to finance public service broadcasting etc. The particular selection of news, the formats of presentation and many other factors that define the continuous performance of a medium are based on provisions reflecting a given demand, i.e. one particular audience. In many cases it has become possible to measure certain aspects of this type of demand quantitatively. Methodologies to better understand audience demand have diversified and intensified during recent years and due to the increase of competition within the entire media industry. The demand for European information within the audiences is something, so far, only being measured in superficial ways.

No 5

During the course of the trans-national interview series of the AIM project and through further analysis within the media spheres of the countries involved in this project it became evident that the vision of a unique and singular standard of reporting Europe among the various systems, media, organisations and sectors of journalism in Europe will remain utopian for some time to come. The ultimate decisions on a day to day basis on the type and kind of news item concerning European politics, on the formats and the establishment of necessary routines and on the guiding perspectives are set through the management of particular companies, agencies, and services. These decisions are made explicitly on the specific grounds of those organisations – and not on some general principles inherently valorised and determined by a positive consciousness of being European.

No 6

The AIM project has clearly shown, as have several other studies already existing, that, within the segment of professional journalism that covers European affairs determined by the European institutions, there exists, of course, a high degree of affinity among the working journalists in terms of their value judgments concerning news priorities, the kinds and degrees of contextualizing particular items, the ways of evaluating sources etc. The measure of homogeneity that one finds in terms of the instrumentalism, the technical skills, and the methodological knowledge employed could lead to an insight that there, already, exists a kind of European core journalism to be signified by the specifics of this particular dimension of professionalism. A closer look, however, shows that each activity within this core sphere of “European journalism”, be it a Brussels or within the home offices, is from the start determined by the national journalism culture existing and by the particularities of the channel, the medium and the service that an individual or a group is working for. The very fact, thus, of the obvious nature of the necessary similarities of instruments, tools, and elements of knowledge being put to practice and being involved within this particular sector of journalism, might constitute the most misleading factor in understanding the very nature of the information and news management processes concerning Europe. Its major determining elements are those of the national media systems and of particular media organisation.

No 7

It has, furthermore, to be seen that within each national media system there exist specific patterns, professional reference systems and a structural presetting that determine the ways and effects of singular news items entering into the system. These unique elementary structures determine e.g. the degrees of influence between national elite media channels and those of local and parochial attitude. The determining factors within each of these systems would exceed a scale of well above one hundred points of empirical reference in order to align all the European media systems within a, still very gross comparative model qualified to position the singularity of each system within the total European scope. The factual and active degree of variance among the media systems, thus, is enormous. And in view of this kind of background the inherent variants of daily approaches concerning news management might become more pinpointed. When one is talking about “European journalism” in terms of reporting Europe one talks about a spectrum of complex and systemic media aggregates that, so far, have never been fully made visible in terms of their variance and complexity.

No 8

There are number of mass media in Europe who follow an outspoken perspective and management rule to increase the chances of “Europe” to be understood by their grand publics. These media tend to explain abstract background elements, they care for explicatory addenda, they try to turn boring items into practically interesting ones. On the other hand, there exist media that simply follow traditional rules of their trade, i.e. to find out whether an item is of relevance to a given audience, and to drop it, if this is not the case on first sight, be it European or of any other background. And there are mass media that tend to include items even if they require special knowledge and contextual insights on the part of their public. These are media catering to particular segments, like e.g. business elites. – Within every member country this kind of tri-polar distribution of interest elements within the media system exists with the effect that a clear feedback concerning the adequacy of the preparation, production and the distribution of some particular information coming out of the European institutions will not be clearly developed. The fact of the matter being that there is a high chance for most every item spilled out of the information system to be placed somewhere in some medium – and be it, in the end, one catering to a specialists’ sector.

No 9

One has to see that Reporting Europe is a glaxis within the European media industry, still, full of discoveries and always at the rim of some kind of reconsideration, re-planning and de nouveau conceptualizing. The ways of organising news management have been under close scrutiny within the media industry under auspices of audience impact, newsworthiness (in the particular sense of a given channel or service) and cost-effectiveness. The journalists focusing on European affairs, hence, feel a particular sense of being an element of something extraordinary, including aspects of some constant worry of possible reductions of positions altogether working in this field of activity. This structural and functional job background, of course, increases any tendencies to follow unwritten rules of the information and news game and not to become too experimental and to keep away from the most nervous spots in the editorial home office and its relevant desks. In one word, the energy and preparedness for change, for reform, for a turn-around within the existing management system of news and information in the acting segment of journalism, working at the front or at the home desks, is limited. And this is another reason why the existing rules are so prevalent, easy to follow, and most of the time - banal.

No 10

The European political process is based on specific organisational and legislative frameworks and requirements – which for outsiders are abstract, nebulous and render a fragmentary impression. Within this complex setting the decision-making process involves schedules and stretches of timing that do not conform with the interest spans of the mass media. Something that is most relevant in terms of the European legislative process at a given moment A will have its full measure of direct application within a given national context, only at e.g. a given moment A+600 days. It is for this misappropriation of timing and cycles of interest between the European institutions and the mass media that a consistent and consequent reporting of Europe takes place only within the elite and special market media. And it is because of this underlying structural problem of the information and the media system that a vast array of some type of micro-cosmos of political hindsight, legend-building, and popular politicising has a solid chance in Europe to gain, at times, upper hand: the dimensions of nil knowledge concerning European political matters within the grand public, and of only semi-knowledge within the better informed public is just too out-proportionate.

No 11

The stories of journalistic value that exist within the entire European context – and not only within the institutions and daily political practice – are paramount. There is a sense among journalists walking the European beat that this is obvious but that there are not many chances to work on such stories and to have them accepted within the home offices. Though there exist examples of the success of this type of stories, especially if they are attached to personalities, daily life and elements of human touch.

No 12

Up to now these types of stories that purvey a sense of the new dimensions that a unified Europe presents in the daily life of people within the member countries, still, constitute a rare exception within the daily information feed of the media industry in Europe. These types of stories tend to be a kind of ornament, very often, for special occasions, some of those being the presidency of a particular country of the European Union. The major drawback, though, concerning the lack of such stories, resides not only in the shortage of space and time within the media. There is, furthermore, a remarkable sense of unease among the decision-making personnel of the mass media in Europe to run risks concerning such stories and their possible acceptance among the audiences. One of the obvious implications of this sense of risk coincides with the fear that the possible non-attractiveness of such stories might invoke further anti-European feelings in a given population. Although journalism considers itself to be a segment in society of its own right and although it is set on constitutional independence, there exists in daily practice and with regard to Europe in particular a very unusual sense of osmosis of this sphere with that of the general polity.

No 13

There is an interesting contrast to the view predominantly based on the classical mass media and their role in reporting Europe. Lithuania, which like other of the Baltic countries has taken a crash start into modernisation has established a national medium which is uniquely web-based. The leading online portal of Lithuania, Delfi, and not to be compared with any other news portal in any of the other European member countries, publishes three to five European news items on a daily basis. Within the portal this presentation of European reporting constitutes a section of its own with a special section editor. The editorial perspective is to augment as much audience with special demand within this sector. The editorial practice, thus, is to a large extent a practical application of the statements outlined here at the very beginning with a high emphasis on consumer relevant issues.