Framing Europe: television news and European integration

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“It is difficult to ‘sell’ an EU story. It must either contain an exceptional scandal about the EU and how they once again exceed limits on spending, or it must be events that have an impact such as summits, and Finance and Foreign Minister meetings.” (Editor-in-Chief)

Introduction

Research in political communication has generally emphasized effects of news coverage on public perceptions of politicians, parties, institutions, and issues over the equally important question addressing the antecedents of such effects: the factors that influence news media content (Shoemaker & Reese, 1996). One important, but comparatively understudied question is: what role do news organizations play in shaping the coverage of political and economic events?

This chapter investigates the role of television news organizations in shaping the coverage of European affairs. The previous chapter argued that there is a close link between the selection of events for the news and the presentation and framing of these events in the news. The frame-building phase of the integrated process model of framing – in which the coverage is shaped by the interaction between, for example, politicians and news media, is currently underdeveloped, both empirically and theoretically, and investigations of the framing process from within the newsroom are virtually unrepresented in the literature (Scheufele, 1999). This chapter investigates the criteria applied by newsmakers in Britain, Denmark, and the Netherlands when selecting and presenting news about European affairs with the aim of enhancing our understanding of the framing-building process.

The study of the production process is not limited to investigating framing in the newsroom. The chapter also provides a baseline for understanding the organization of television news production in relation to European affairs and the constraints and challenges facing journalists when reporting about the EU. A main focus of the study of the production of news is the June 1999 European Parliament (EP) elections. Election campaigns are pivotal moments for democracy and the campaign provides a key event to study. Most of the issues raised,
however, are also discussed in more general terms beyond the specific context of the election campaign.

The production of news

What shapes the content of news? The answer to this question is found in a multiplicity of factors. News content is the result of a process involving influences from both within and outside the news organization. Previous research has approached the investigation of the production of news from political economy, ideological, and sociological perspectives while focusing on, for example, notions of the newsworthiness of events, issue management, and organizational routines (see Shoemaker & Reese (1996) and Schudson (2000) for overviews).

Factors internal to the news organization have been investigated in several classical studies (Breed, 1955; Ettema & Whitney, 1982; Gans, 1979; Tuchman, 1978; White, 1950). These studies explore the impact of attributes and activities of either individual journalists and editors or the impact of routines embedded in the organizational structures. This line of work is referred to as the sociological perspective on news production (Reese & Ballinger, 2001; Schudson, 2000). Factors external to the news organization include the financial control and ownership structure of media organizations as well as the relationship between, for example, news and the larger political and economic culture (Golding & Elliott, 1979; Schudson, 2000).

Both internal and external factors have direct implications for political journalism, the production processes, and the interplay between the institutional context, politicians, political parties, and intermediaries. While the assumptions and approaches vary in studies of the news production process, one important element brings them together, namely the observation that the news organization is a crucial player in the interaction between politics and citizens (e.g., Manheim, 1998; Tuchman, 1978).

COVERING ELECTIONS. In discussions of news organizations' approach to covering politics, Blumler and Gurevitch proposed a continuum between sacerdotal and pragmatic approaches (Semetko et al., 1991). The typology refers to the status attributed to political news. In a sacerdotal approach, political processes are perceived as the fundamant of democracy and politics is considered newsworthy per se. The attitude towards politicians is respectful, cautious, and reactive. In a pragmatic approach political news is evaluated against conventional news selection criteria and is not automatically given special attention. The pragmatic orientation implies that the "amount of time or space allocated to [political events] will be determined by strict considerations of news values, in competition with the newsworthiness of other stories" (Semetko et al., 1991, p. 6).
Based on research in Britain in the 1980s, four roles for political journalists were discerned: prudential, reactive, conventionally journalistic, and analytical (Blumler, Gurevitch & Nossiter, 1986; Blumler et al., 1989). The prudential approach prescribes an ‘invisible’ and minimal role for the journalist and refers to a concern to “ensure that television journalism is politically beyond reproach, perhaps even politically innocuous” (Blumler et al., 1989, p. 162). The reactive approach looks predominantly to the agenda of the political parties as evident in press briefings, press releases, political speeches etc. which television is believed to be obliged to cover. The conventionally journalistic approach suggests filtering election events and issues through professional criteria “looking for events that would be strongly laced with elements of drama, conflict, novelty, movement, and anomaly” (Blumler et al., 1989, p. 163). The analytical approach suggests that events and issues are analyzed and interpreted by reporters, leading to coherence in the reporting whereby journalists contrast arguments for the viewer.

Few studies have investigated the role of news organizations in covering politics and most of them focus on the role of news organizations during election campaigns. One study of the 1990 German election campaign helped to explain why so little news was devoted to the elections and why the incumbent chancellor was able to continue ‘governing as usual’ during the final days of the campaign (Semetko & Schönbach, 1994). Another study in Spain during the 1996 general election campaign compared competing news organizations and found the public service channel and its main competitor at the time to utilize quite distinct approaches in their election coverage (Semetko & Canel, 1997).

The series of interviews and newsroom observations by Jay Blumler and Michael Gurevitch at the BBC during general elections in Britain allows for unique over-time comparisons of the developments in the news. In a temporal comparative perspective it seems that journalists in Britain have become more assertive and that journalists have assumed a more central role in election news coverage at the expense of politicians. Blumler and Gurevitch (2001) conclude that in some respects political journalism in Britain has moved closer to an American model of political communication so that in the 1997 election “sacerdotalism was conspicuously absent from the approach to political institutions, parties and the political establishment” (Blumler and Gurevitch, 2001, p. 398).

Also in other European countries public broadcasters were found to adhere to a more sacerdotal approach in the 1980s (Meurs, van Praag & Brants, 1995; van Praag & van der Eijk, 1998; Semetko et al., 1991). Similarly, more recent studies suggest that public broadcasters increasingly make use of a combination of the sacerdotal and pragmatic approaches in their coverage of national elections (van Praag & Brants, 2000; de Vreese, 2001a).
Cross-national comparisons of this type of research are rare, with one notable exception. In an analysis of the 1983 British general election and the 1984 American presidential election, it was found that *BBC* journalists were prudential and cautious, concerned about ensuring that political journalism could not be reproached. In comparison journalists at the US network *NBC* were more analytic and committed to a conventional journalistic approach including searching for, for example, political conflicts and drama (Semetko et al., 1991).

In addition to the Europe-US comparisons one comparative study in Europe investigated the role of broadcasters in relation to the 1979 *EP* elections. Noël-Aranda (1983) conducted the presumably only cross-national study addressing the attitudes of broadcasters towards their role in the campaign. Based on a survey of broadcast journalists in the then nine member states of the European Community, it was found that about half of the broadcasters saw no need for them to play a part in defining the issues of the European elections. The study concluded that many of the broadcasters were adhering to the agenda proposed by politicians and that they “appeared fearful of advancing into a territory they considered to be reserved by the politicians” (Noël-Aranda, 1983, p. 97), suggesting the presence of ‘sacerdotal’ sentiments among the journalists.

Taken together, there is only fragmented evidence available about changes over time in news organizations’ approach to national elections. The evidence from cross-national comparisons is virtually absent (Schudson, 2000) and turning to *EP* elections, the 1979 campaign is the only baseline from which to compare. As Blumler and Gurevitch (2001) acknowledge their findings may generalize and be part of an international trend, but their data do not allow for such inferences. Without formulating formal hypotheses, however, based on evidence from single-country studies it seems reasonable to expect that European broadcasters today would approach European elections differently than in 1979, so that sacerdotal attitudes and prudential approaches have been replaced by pragmatic attitudes and analytic stances.

**Covering ‘everyday’ politics.** Outside the campaign context we know little about the way journalists approach and cover European politics. A recent study succinctly concluded that “little or no work has been done on how television journalists deal with European issues” (Gavin, 2001, p. 305). For the press, studies have examined the role of journalists and their interaction with key European institutions, referred to as the ‘Brussels beat’ (Morgan, 1995; Slatatta, 1998). The notion of a ‘beat’ in journalism is well established and the ‘Capitol Hill’ and the ‘Supreme court beat’, for example, are institutionalized in American journalism (Shoemaker & Reese, 1996). The Brussels beat is organized as a bureau with many large news organizations having permanent correspondents assigned in Brussels.
Morgan’s (1995) profile sketch of the British press corps in Brussels reported frequent clashes between members of the British press corps and, for example, EU information officers over the negative and ‘agnostic’ approach taken by the Britons. A different type of tension was found in the relationship between the Brussels bureau and the London editors. Journalists stated considering what the London headquarters would accept rather than what they wanted to convey to the British public and found themselves in a position of writing and rewriting “to suit changing London demands” (Morgan, 1995, p. 324).

The scope of the Brussels bureau is dependent on the state of the on-going European integration. In Norway, outside the EU, it was found that in 1996/97 only three newspapers had permanent correspondent presence in Brussels (Slaatta, 1998, p. 217). In the wake of the 1994 national referendum on joining the EU, when the Norwegian public voted ‘no’, two-thirds of the permanent correspondents were pulled back from Brussels (Slaatta, 1998). Reporters from the political, economic, and domestic desks were expected to cover the EU when news was in their respective fields. This suggests that news organizations and journalists redefine their considerations of newsworthiness according to the political and institutional context. In sum, however, studies to date have primarily focused on the press and the Brussels beat and have not addressed the editorial policies and production processes in television news.

Elements of the production study

The goals of this chapter are to establish a baseline for understanding the news coverage of European affairs, to extend previous research on the approach of television news organizations to European politics with a cross-nationally comparative dimension, and to investigate the frame-building process in the newsroom. This is investigated both in relation to pan-European events, such as the European elections, as well as during ‘everyday’ politics. The organization of EU coverage and general constraints and challenges in the telling the ‘European story’ are identified. The editorial policies and the application of news selection criteria are investigated. The notion of ‘balance’ in news reporting is discussed as this is a key feature of political communication, particularly in the news coverage of election campaigns (Beck, Dalton, Greene & Huckfeldt, 2002; Blumler et al., 1986; 1989; Gurevitch & Blumler, 1981; Semetko, 1996).

The organization of coverage of European affairs. The first dimension addresses the organizational structure and efforts invested in the coverage of European affairs. Logistics is a key component of political news with activities in national campaigns often taking place simultaneously in various locations. Previous studies have noted the tension that can emerge between the
‘periphery’, the field where political actors operate, and the ‘center’, where news is produced (Gurevitch & Blumler, 1981). For European politics this challenge is even greater because of the additional level of European governance (Siune, 1983). To assess the organization of the coverage of European affairs, the set-up of the coverage within the newsroom, the degree of advance preparations for stories, the allocation of budgetary means, and the staffing of the political unit is investigated.

**Constraints and challenges.** The second dimension addresses the challenges and potential constraints that television journalists perceive when covering European affairs. So far there is only speculation about how television journalists think about and deal with ‘Europe’ (Gavin, 2001). When it comes to the press, however, a clearer picture emerges, at least in the British case. The strongly partisan British press is overly skeptical about the EU and advanced European integration and is often exaggerated and stereotyped in its coverage (e.g., Anderson & Weymouth, 1999; Morgan, 1995). No comparable studies are available in either Denmark or the Netherlands and for television journalism such studies are entirely absent. It is interesting to consider what journalists consider challenging and potentially different when reporting European affairs since answers to this question may help understanding actual news output.

**Editorial approach.** The third dimension addresses the formally defined organizational and editorial approach to covering European affairs. Here a distinction should be made between editorial policies concerning European elections and policies concerning the daily coverage of European politics. The essential question at stake is the degree of discretion that news organizations and journalists exert when covering European affairs. Key indicators for evaluating the editorial approach include officially formulated policies, the use of reactive or pro-active strategies by the news organization, and the policy regarding coverage of issues brought forward by politicians and parties. The editorial policy can be placed in the sacerdotal–pragmatic continuum and the journalistic approach can be discussed in terms of Blumler and Gurevitch’s role typology of political journalists (see above).

European broadcasters have traditionally covered national elections in a cautious way, adhering largely to the agenda of parties and politicians (e.g. Asp, 1983; Blumler et al., 1989; Hjarvard, 1999; Semetko et al., 1991; Siune & Borre, 1975). While this journalistic role may be labeled ‘reactive’, recent research suggests that this may no longer be the case (e.g., Blumler & Gurevitch, 1998; 2001; Hjarvard, 1999; Norris et al., 1999; Semetko & Canel, 1997; de Vreese, 2001a). News organizations and journalists have been found to be more pro-active in their coverage of national politics and to exert more discretion when choosing
which stories to bring in and how to cover these issues. This may, in Blumler and Gurevitch’s terminology, more appropriately be labeled ‘conventionally journalistic’ and ‘analytical’. It remains an open question if this development also applies to European-level elections where the only available benchmark is the 1979 EP elections when broadcasters were found to be primarily reactive and adhering largely to the agenda of the political parties (Noël-Aranda, 1983).

**NEWS SELECTION CRITERIA.** The fourth dimension addresses the use of news selection criteria. These criteria have a dual function. They are criteria for selection of material available and they are guidelines for the presentation of the news by “suggesting what to emphasise, what to omit, and where to give priority in the preparation of items” (Golding & Elliott, 1979, p. 114). News selection criteria are linked to the frame-building part of the integrated process model of framing as discussed in Chapter 2. Key indicators to assess the application of selection criteria are editors’ and journalists’ formulations of the qualities that events and issues must have to make it into the news. An important question is then also whether standard criteria for evaluation of the newsworthiness of events and issues are applied or whether special criteria are applied for evaluation of European stories. In other words, does news about European affairs compete equally against all other news?

**BALANCED REPORTING.** The fifth dimension addresses the notion of impartiality and balanced reporting. Though there is no single definition of bias in television news (Gunther, 1997) and impartiality is operationalized and applied differently in different countries (Semetko, 1996), fairness and balance are crucial concepts in political journalism, in particular during election campaigns. During the late 1970s it was concluded about the BBC that ‘fairness is all’ (Hardiman-Scott, 1977 c.f. Gurevitch & Blumler, 1981). Producers of news were determined to achieve an appropriate balance when reporting the activities of the principal election contenders. The BBC, like other European public broadcasters, is legally obliged to present issues with ‘due impartiality’. One interpretation dominating previously is the quantitative interpretation of fairness, the so-called ‘stopwatch culture’ (McQuail, 1992; 1994). The balance obligation is translated so that the allocation of time in the news is distributed according to the size of political parties in a country.

Today the fairness concept is typically applied less rigorously. However, balanced reporting is still important to the work in the newsroom (Semetko, 1996; Semetko & Canel, 1997). In the case of European integration, impartial reporting of the election campaign applies not only to striking a balance between exposure of different political parties, but also between pro- and con-EU arguments in the debate about European integration.
Research Questions

With the five dimensions outlined above as the interpretative background, the general question that guides the investigation is: How do television news organizations approach the coverage of European affairs? This question is addressed by studying the 1999 European elections as well as more general aspects of the coverage of European affairs. The study (1) maps how the coverage is organized, (2) identifies specific constraints and challenges related to ‘covering Europe’, (3) analyzes and locates the editorial approaches along the sacramental – pragmatic continuum, (4) investigates how news values are applied, and (5) explores how the notion of balanced reporting is interpreted. In the next chapter (Chapter 4) the ‘outcome’ of the choices made by the news organizations, the actual news coverage, is analyzed.

Method

The study draws on structured interviews with senior political and economic correspondents, senior editorial staff members, editors and Editors-in-Chief. Given the logistic constraints of cross-national research, most interviews were made with representatives from the public broadcasters (BBC, DR, and NOS). A total of twelve face-to-face interviews (five in Britain, four in Denmark, and three in the Netherlands) with a duration of 60-90 minutes on average were conducted with members from these three organizations. In addition, five interviews were conducted with representatives from the private networks (ITN in Britain and TV2 in Denmark) and two interviews with editors of news programs at Channel Four and Channel Five in Britain. The journalists and editors were affiliated with the following programs: BBC Nine o’clock News, ITN News at Ten, DRTV TV-Avisen, TV2 Nyhederne, NOS Journaal, and RTL4 Nieuws.

The total number of editorial staff involved in formulating and implementing policies about the coverage of European affairs at the sampled programs is limited. The interviewees therefore cover a significant part of the total population of journalists and editors covering ‘Europe’. The interviews followed a common interview protocol with questions pertaining to the organizational structure and effort, interviewees’ role perception, perceived constraints and challenges, the editorial approach, and the application of news selection criteria. The interview protocol was designed to address, on the one hand, the role of the news organization in covering the European elections in 1999 specifically, and, on the other hand, more general features of the coverage of European affairs.

In the interviews, individual perceptions and interpretations of the campaign coverage policy were investigated and the editorial strategies elaborated.
Themes such as priority of and approach to the topic were addressed in each interview. In addition, the role of the political agenda, changes in policies over time, and differences between coverage of national and European politics were explored with senior news executives and reporters.

Results

The organization of European news coverage: the daily logistics.

Turning first to the organization of the news production, it is important to note that all television news programs included in this study broadcast several bulletins a day. Television news is continuously updated which has implications not only for the production routines, but also poses new demands for journalistic skills. Television journalists are increasingly stakeholders in multimedia production modes and some produce news not only for television news, but also for radio and on-line outlets (Bierhoff, Deuze & de Vreese, 2001).

To give an example, NOS Journaal daily produces several short morning bulletins, two lunch-time editions, early evening bulletins and in addition to the 8 o’clock flagship they also have bulletins at 6 p.m., 10 p.m. and a late midnight edition. Typically, individual crews are assigned to produce one of the main news bulletins and a few shorter ones. These crews work simultaneously towards ‘their’ bulletins throughout the day. The ‘workday’ is therefore still scheduled towards deadlines, but these have become multiple and rolling. At DR in Denmark, for example, bulletin editors meet in the morning after having scanned the dailies to start preparations for the main thirty minutes 9 p.m. news program. They are briefed by the early crew, survey the agenda, and make a ‘short list’ of potential stories that are discussed at a central editorial morning meeting. The afternoon is spent with continuous updates with reporters and coordination with the editors of other bulletins as well as meetings with, for example, the news graphic department. Towards the end of the afternoon, when reporters return from the field, the editing process commences, and the final news bulletin script is made.

The other news programs have schedules that resemble this pattern though, for example, NOS and the BBC have their most important newsroom meeting in the early afternoon where the topics of the day are discussed and yesterday’s program evaluated. A key task for a BBC bulletin editor is to coordinate with the large number of other news outlets. The BBC newsroom is centrally organized and all BBC-gathered material, both for radio, television, and on-line is available (via a large server) to all journalists in the newsroom so that, for example, a quote collected by a television reporter can be used on the radio.

The proliferation in daily outlets also has implications for the work of reporters and correspondents with European affairs in their portfolio. In most
organizations it is the exception rather than the rule that EU correspondents join the meetings via teleconferencing. The bulletin editors brief the Brussels crew while the Head of the political unit briefs members of the domestic political unit.

**Brussels, London, Copenhagen, The Hague and Hilversum.** The coverage of European affairs is organized very similarly at all programs studied here. All news organizations operate with a *triadic organization* with respect to EU coverage. The studio headquarters and central newsroom work together with the political unit (at Westminster in Britain, The Hague in the Netherlands, and Christiansborg, Copenhagen in Denmark) and the news organization’s Brussels desk. This set-up is more complex than the traditional set-up for news coverage of domestic politics where the central headquarter works together with the parliamentary unit only (Blumler et al., 1978).

Most of the coverage is organized from the central newsroom at the headquarters of each program. Here the selection of news stories most often takes place. Reporters at the Brussels desk conversely pitch their stories at the central newsroom. If a European theme has domestic political and economic implications, these aspects are typically covered by members of either the central newsroom or the domestic political desk. Reporters at the political desk more often communicate directly with the central newsroom and less frequently with the Brussels bureau. Some organizations also have ‘EU reporters’ in the domestic political units (such as BBC, DR, and NOS). The structure of the EU coverage is represented in the figure below.

*Figure 3.1.* Organization of production of news about European affairs. Full lines represent the most significant communication lines.

![Diagram](image-url)
The *BBC* has a fairly large bureau in Brussels with a Bureau Chief and four full-time correspondents employed. They are permanently covering the 'Brussels beat' for the whole range of *BBC* outlets (BBC1 and 2, BBC World, BBC 24, BBC Radio). The central London-based *BBC News Gathering* automatically covers large events such as European summits to meet the demands of the different outlets. The 9 o'clock News, along with the other programs, can commission stories to be produced by the Brussels bureau by making use of an allocated budget per program. As discussed above, the scope of a Brussels bureau may change and its size is defined on the basis of a continuous review of the political context. As the Editor of the *BBC 9 o'clock News* put it:

"Earlier we compared ourselves to America, today we are much more likely to compare ourselves to another European country such as Germany or France [...] We now have bureaus in Brussels, Frankfurt, Paris, Berlin and Rome, and we can tap onto BBC World's correspondents in such places as Warsaw and Vienna".

Danish *DR* has two correspondents in Brussels, one that primarily follows the news beat of the institutions (e.g., the Parliament and the Commission) and one that covers EU news from various locations in Europe, but operates out of Brussels. The correspondents work together with the newsroom in Copenhagen and a Parliament-based political reporter who covers the potential domestic political consequences of EU news.

Very similarly *TV2, NOS,* and *RTL* all have one correspondent in Brussels who works primarily with the Odense and Hilversum-based headquarters and, often indirectly, with the political units in Copenhagen and The Hague respectively. *ITN* has an integrated bureau in Brussels with correspondents also working for Channel 4 and 5. As the Editor of Channel 5 news said:

"When setting up the program, we had to decide whether to have a bureau in Washington DC or in Brussels. We opted for Brussels as almost anything that comes out of there has importance, directly, for Britain, much more so than what comes out of Washington".

The planning of European news takes place within this triadic structure. Prior to larger events, ad-hoc groups and teams are formed often consisting of members from the Brussels bureau, the political and economic units, and the central newsroom.

During the fall of 1998, prior to the introduction of the euro, *DR* and *BBC*, for example, created special units specifically designed to prepare the euro launch coverage. The *DR* group consisted of members of the economy desk, the foreign news desk, the political unit and included reporters from television, radio, and the *DR Online News* group. Similar preparations took place at the *BBC* with
members of the Brussels desk preparing the coverage of the launch with members of the economy desk and political unit in Britain.

For the European elections, none of the news programs implemented a special daily campaign segment in their bulletin which has been tradition during national election campaigns (Blumler & Gurevitch, 1998). The elections were covered within already existing structures of political and economic coverage. However, all programs allocated additional budgets for covering the elections and all initiated advance planning in specialized ad-hoc units. Prior to the European elections, a few stories dealing with Europe were commissioned by the Editor-in-Chief of 9 o’clock News:

“I chose thematic issues rather than saying 'let’s go to Germany and see what they think about the European elections'. I had two issues basically: Where was Europe heading politically now with all these center-left governments in power, so different from a few years ago? And similarly for the economy: The economy of Europe, by then nearly six months into the euro, what conclusions could be drawn on that relatively short time scale?”.

As acknowledged by the BBC Editor-in-Chief these stories eventually played only a marginal role in the actual coverage:

“Without Kosovo I might have done more. I would certainly have done more in Europe, I would have sent more people around, maybe to Greece capturing the world outside the currency [...] I would have done more under normal circumstances, but I scaled it back a bit”.

Danish television (DR) started preparations for covering the elections six months prior to Election Day. Specifically, the two correspondents from the Brussels bureau, and reporters from the Copenhagen based political unit and the Domestic desk prepared the elections in a small ‘working group’. The Head of the Political Unit functioned as a daily coordinator for the election coverage. One important managerial and editorial choice guiding the coverage was to carry out a national survey with the Gallup polling institute. This survey was designed to investigate the electorate’s agenda for the elections. As the Editor-in-Chief put it:

“As the kick-off for our campaign coverage, we wanted to know what issues, what themes are interesting to the public prior to these elections. A very unambiguous answer emerged. What came back was that at the top of the agenda was fraud.”

The survey led DR to assign two additional reporters from the central newsroom full time during the campaign to investigate issues of fraud and malpractice in EU-related institutions.
In anticipation of the European elections the Dutch NOS Journaal also created a 'Europe Unit'. The group consisted of the program's Brussels correspondent, editors, and political reporters based in The Hague. Preparatory research was carried out for a number of issues, such as the competence of the European Parliament, fraud, the EU budget, and voter apathy. However, in the actual coverage of the campaign, these advance preparations were never used and the internal organizational structures developed to cover the campaign were not implemented.

In the daily coverage of European affairs the news is planned and produced within the triadic structure. The triangle also forms the backbone of ad hoc groups. NOS Journaal, for example, planned and broadcast historical pieces in advance of the December 2000 Summit in Nice where the enlargement of the EU was a key issue. Similarly, Danish DR and TV2 both formed units consisting of political correspondents and members of the central newsroom in their coverage of the 2000 national referendum on the euro.

**Constraints and challenges: complexity and inadequacy.** The second focal point of the study deals with the potential constraints and challenges experienced by journalists and editors when covering European economic and political issues. Based on the interviews with members of the newsroom at all channels, the following challenges were identified: (1) 'distance and time', (2) 'access and terminology', (3) 'internal disagreement', and (4) 'audience competences'.

The first challenge is inherent to the EU decision-making process. Despite the fact that Britain, Denmark, and the Netherlands are all geographically relatively close to centers of power such as Brussels and Strasbourg, the distance is experienced as a constraint when composing an EU story. In addition, the time frame in EU decision-making procedures is often longer than in domestic politics. As the Head of the Political Unit at DR said:

"The difficulty is that we are quite far from the decisions in the European system. Physically because it takes place in Brussels, but also because it can take years before you have a real decision".

The perception of the Parliament as an institution that is both physically and mentally far away from most voters and which requires a certain critical reflection was also found at the Danish DR. The Head of the Political Unit described the perception of the Parliament in these words:

"The difficulty of covering 'Europe' is that, in the eyes of our viewers, it is still something very distant. I do not believe that many people are too concerned about the competences of that Parliament. And throughout the years an image has been created that it is not a real Parliament, like the national one".
Time constraints are also perceived by newsmakers in their work when making stories dealing with European affairs. A senior political correspondent at the BBC noted:

“The more abstract, the more difficult, the more potentially ‘boring’ that a story is, the longer duration it needs in order for it to be clear […] You need more padding, more breathing space for people to take the point. But an editor fearing that you are putting in something that would be a turn-off for the audience will offer you less time. The you get ‘over compression’ instead of a nicely packaged story that somebody can find their way around.”

The time constraints are inherent to the news format of main evening news bulletins that typically have between 20 and 30 minutes available. This conclusion is supported by the Editor of Channel 4’s daily 50-minute news magazine who has more time available for ‘the European story’ and therefore sees less of challenge in covering European issues:

“I can’t think of an example where we said ‘no, let’s not do the story, it’s too complicated’. The stories are interesting, take Austria: the prospects of neo-nazis getting into Parliament in continental Europe. That is a good story by anyone’s yardstick. Clearly there will be a little to do to spell out the arithmetic of how the coalition in Austria works, but that is OK as long as the story is a good one”.

Another challenge perceived by the newsmakers is related to the institutions of the EU that are perceived to be non-transparent and bureaucratic. This impression of the EU institutions dovetails with both Meyer’s (1999) critical analysis of the Union’s ‘communication deficit’ and Morgan’s (1995) discussion of the tension between members of the Brussels press corps and the EU spokespersons. The Head of the DR Political Unit said:

“There is the terminology and the language used in the EU. The treaties are more complex than any Danish legislation […] There is a big difference in terms of culture when comparing Brussels and Strasbourg to Denmark. Take the Commission, it is virtually impossible to get access through the system of spokespersons to a Commissioner while we in Denmark have almost unlimited access to our ministers”.

A third challenge is internal to the news organization. Concurrent with the findings by Morgan (1995), journalists identified tension between their wishes for a story and the terms and conditions for a story defined by the central newsroom. A senior political correspondent noted this type of intra-organizational conflict while stressing that this was a personal rather than organizational point of view:
"The sad and embarrassing fact is that the biggest difference between reporting Westminster and reporting European politics, is actually not the audience, but my colleagues. I can approach an editor of a program with a Westminster story and they know what I am talking about. [...] But I am engaged in a much more detailed process of explanation and persuasion before I can get a piece, which is significant in European terms, through to my colleagues."

The view was echoed by an Editor-in-Chief who estimated to reject 75% of the 'offers' made to him by correspondents and bureaus: "They have to make a pitch and have it accepted before they can do the piece [...] it is kind of an internal market".

The fourth and final challenge emerges from the lack of audience interest in and knowledge about European affairs. The challenge was discussed both in relation to covering domestic politics and in more general terms as problem of inadequate audience competences. As a senior BBC political correspondent said about the difference between covering domestic politics and European politics:

"Here we have our 'Punch and Judy rows'. They are easy to cover because they fall into that 'British-wish-to-have-two-sides'. They are neat because they are told briefly, only need two bits of actuality, and require very little explanation, because people are familiar with the ideas, and you don’t have to explain too much. [...] Now things are more complicated and we are still learning to accommodate a more sophisticated story in relation with the EU".

The Editor-in-Chief of BBC 9 o'clock News offered this view:

"There is always constraints of resources, money, and time. One eye is on the audience all the time and you don’t want to do anything that people find boring. The European stories are quite difficult to explain and to illustrate in television terms. [...] You need to infuse people. If you ask someone who watches the 9 o'clock news whether they wanted a piece on how the euro goes down in Bavaria, they would say 'no thank you very much, can we please get some football instead.'"

The complexity of the topic and the lack of audience knowledge were also stressed by the Editor-in-Chief of ITN:

"We believe in having specialist economics and political reporters. We have Europe correspondents working in Brussels and we turn to them to cover these stories, because they are complex stories. They require reporters who have got authority [...] who can use graphics, and 3D animations in trying to explain economic factors in a narrative. [...] People in Britain are not very well informed about European institutions and we devote quite a lot of air time to analytical pieces. To explain things: what is the euro? How is it going to work? What are the potential benefits?"
EDITORIAL APPROACH: WHITHER SACREDOTALISM? When the sacerdotal – pragmatic continuum suggested by Blumler and Gurevitch (in Semetko et al., 1991) is used to analyze the approach taken to European political affairs by the different news programs, we see that all programs cluster towards the ‘pragmatic’ end of the continuum. ‘Sacerdotal’ policies that suggest a cautious, respectful, and subordinate approach to politics are not found to crystallize in the policies of any of the news programs in covering the EU.

Turning specifically to the 1999 EP elections, the news organizations’ editorial policies were formulated in, for example, internal memos in which the role of the news program in initiating own stories and dealing with the advance scheduled political agenda was addressed. For the EP elections the editorial approach to covering the elections by the BBC, DR, and NOS varied considerably.

One observation, however, overrides other comments about the European election campaign. The period leading up to the EP elections was influenced by the conflict in Kosovo. During the course of the election campaign NATO carried out bombings, peace negotiations were initiated, and on Election Day, a peace agreement was reached. The highly unusual news environment had implications for the editorial politics concerning the European elections.

The BBC’s original pro-active plans of initiating a number of political and economic themes were only marginally implemented. In fact the BBC ended up following the political agenda to a greater extent than initially planned. According to a senior political reporter covering the EP elections this was a result of two things: the competitive news environment with Kosovo dominating and the pro-active Tory campaigning versus the passive government campaigning:

“We did attempt, before the campaign had really got rolling, from this unit, to sell ideas for features setting up what would be the main issues and main questions [...] . When it came down to it, that wasn’t really available to be done, so we ended up following the stories of the day. That also arose out of the fact that they [9 o’clock] really didn’t want to take any pieces they didn’t have to have, and ended up having to take a piece every day at the end of the campaign in order to feel that they had done the job properly. This means that they had to take the ‘story of the day’ out of the press conferences”.

A sacerdotal approach ‘prescribes’ a respectful perception of political institutions, including the European Parliament. At the BBC the EP was considered an institution in transition, but not a strong political authority. According to the Editor-in-Chief:

“The European Parliament is becoming a more powerful body, and had new powers this year. Therefore it is potentially more influential and therefore potentially more important who goes there. There was in the past a kind of
unwritten feeling that Members of the European Parliament were actually just kind going over there talking, declaring their expenses, doing not very much [...] It was a bit of talking shop and not totally relevant. Leading up to the European elections, because the Parliament had given the Commission a very bloody nose only three months previously, it was seen to have scored some kind of a victory and asserted its position against fraud, plus it was taking on the new powers.”

In line with the pragmatic approach DR assumed a distinct proactive and agenda-setting role in the campaign, which was a debated decision in the campaign. As the Editor-in-Chief noted:

“If you ask the politicians what the agenda is, then it is totally different. Then you get big, abstract things like the enlargement [of the European Union] to the East, very diffuse themes that in terms of news coverage have been extremely difficult to make some concrete political stories about ‘what is this election all about?’ [...] What you have here is a gap between what the voters think is interesting, what they would like to see addressed – corruption which we have done a number of stories on – and what the politicians want. This has meant that we have all the Members of the European Parliament criticizing us, saying that we have derailed the debate”.

In the Netherlands intended to assume an active role and initiate topics of their own in relation to the European elections. This policy was, however, never implemented, and Dutch news largely neglected the elections. The Deputy Editor-in-Chief elaborated:

“[T]here was no campaign. Even the political parties reduced their campaign activities to an absolute minimum”.

When comparing the editorial policies of the different news programs there is considerable variation. However, all programs took a pragmatic approach to covering the elections though this manifested itself in different ways. The pragmatic approach in the Netherlands crystallized as selectivity and neglect of the elections. In Britain, it was partly neglect, partly reporting the euro theme played up by the Tories in a distanced and reflexive manner. In Denmark it was by defining the fraud issue as the key agenda point at the expense of issues put forward by politicians.

The conclusion based on the European elections may hold also across other issues where most editors at the different news programs express the acceptance of a critical and analytical role that goes far beyond a ‘sacerdotal’ orientation towards political events. In response to the news coverage of a promotion event by
the European Parliament where a hot air balloon was launched to fly across Greater London, ITN Editor-in-Chief said:

“There is a great fondness in British politics to have the photo ops or ‘balloons’. Our view is that we should not take them too seriously, wherever they come from. [...] I think the European Parliament was perfectly entitled to try and interest people, but I do not think we should report it ‘straight’. It was a stunt like any other stunt and we are not taking it at its face value. It is a part of political marketing and we are not part of that, so we are objective and detached from it, and, if you like, a little skeptical and cynical and amused by it.”

The pragmatic approach is characterized by ‘conventionally journalistic’ and ‘analytical’ roles by political journalists. In the policy for covering European affairs, editors acknowledged this position and defined their role in distinct ‘pragmatic’ terms. As the Editor-in-Chief of ITN said:

“We analyze what they are doing far more than we used to. We analyze their tactics, who they try to appear to be. We try to deconstruct what is going on and try to explain to the viewer what is really happening”.

At Danish TV2, a senior political correspondent was used as a commentator during the 2000 national referendum campaign on the euro. His role during the campaign was to interpret, bring coherence to, and comment on the broader implications of a day’s events on the campaign trail. This suggests a reflexive and analytical type of reporting. To the Editor-in-Chief at the BBC, the analytical mode of covering European affairs is also a function of the fact that many European news stories are highly specialized:

“Just telling what has happened or what somebody said is of no use to the audience at all unless you give them some background and context, a bit of explanation, where it all comes from and where it is all leading. [...] We employ journalists with specialist knowledge to give that sort of information and guidance. They lay out the arguments for you by saying why a person is saying this or that.”

News selection criteria: Business as usual. To explore the link between news selection criteria, such as conflict, proximity, and consequences, on the one hand, and the framing of issues in the news on the other, all interviewees were asked to identify qualities that a ‘European’ event or issue must have to select that event or issue for the news. In addition they were asked whether special selection criteria were applied during the 1999 EP elections. The application of news selection criteria is an indicator of the weight and importance given to elections. While broadcasters have traditionally extended the news bulletins or
designated daily campaign segments at national elections (Blumler & Gurevitch, 1998), this was not done by any of the news organizations during the 1999 European elections.

Turning first to the qualities that European events and issues must have to be included in the news, the Head of the Political Unit at DR succinctly stated that "the good story is one that has consumers. What does this mean for me?" Similarly, the Editor of BBC said that practical stories, for example, "what exactly are British firms doing to adapt the euro and why are they ahead of the political process?" would make for a good story. The key qualities mentioned by editors and journalists were: domestic relevance and political tension, either within the country of the news outlet or between European countries or actors. Bulletin editor at DR summarized these points in her characterization of what an issue or event must contain:

"Two things are important: First, what does this mean for ordinary Danes? That is to say, what are the consequences, financially, politically, personally? Second, who are the domestic political stakeholders? Do the EU countries agree? Is there unanimity? Any vetos, why and how?"

The presence of conflict, either domestic or international was also confirmed by the Editor-in-Chief of ITN who said a key aspect in the EU coverage was "to continue to look at the arguments both between the parties and within the parties". In the same vein, a senior political reporter at the BBC said about the conflict impediment:

"In political stories, domestic and European, we like to focus on tension between two sides. We have a bipolar, very confrontational Parliament, and that is the structure we use for our political stories. [...] Of course that means simplification, but you sometimes have to take decisions that it is easier to tell this as a 'nasty little stitch-up' between Germany and Spain".

On occasions, the 'European story' was upgraded and devoted additional attention. One reason, for the public broadcasters, was pedagogical and stems from the ideal (and obligation) of providing 'enlightening' civic information. DR's Head of the Political Unit put it this way:

"In the case of the euro, it would be perfectly legitimate, according to our news criteria to say: 'here is this euro, Denmark is not in, so we will make one or two stories'. But we chose very consciously to say that the euro is more than what happens once it gets here, so we gave the issue extra priority, almost a kind of pedagogical news provision".

Turning next to the application of news selection criteria during the 1999 campaign for the European elections, the networks varied in the degree to which
standard criteria were applied for evaluating the newsworthiness of events and issues.

The BBC applied fairly standard news criteria in evaluating the EP campaign news. Contrary to, for example, the coverage leading up to the introduction of the euro in 1999 and 2002, 9 o'clock News did not commission a series of stories focusing on the elections and important European themes. News about the 'euro-elections' was not given extra priority. DR devoted extra attention to the fraud issue during the campaign. This up-grade of the campaign pertained only to the fraud issue and not other issues such as candidates on the campaign trail. The Editor-in-Chief elaborated on this:

"Given the fact that we give European issues the same news priority as all other issues and given the fact that we had a period of Kosovo War and peace negotiations that largely influenced the news agenda, then our coverage of the European elections has to some extent been damaged [...] A news story about the European Parliament must compete equally with a story about peace or not in Kosovo. We cannot enter that process and say: we must have four such stories in the beginning of our program every day. We don’t do that, we select according to normal news values."

The Head of the Political Unit at DR elaborated on the rationales for the news program not to cover the campaign more closely:

"One reason is logistical. One can say ‘why don’t we go out and cover one of the election rallies / evening meetings?’ We have done that. But if you want to cover the content of such a meeting then you cannot bring it the same evening and already then it is ‘dead’ in terms of news. It is difficult to go on air and say to the viewers: ‘Yesterday evening there was a rally and this is what the candidates said...’. To be quite frank: not many people find that very exciting, it is old news. What we have done is to cover a couple of meetings, but within the time available to us, dealing with the interest for the election which is almost absent".

News about the EP elections was evaluated against conventional news values and selection criteria at NOS Journaal. The Deputy Editor-in-Chief noted that this policy was both an advance choice and a pragmatic function of the general news environment during the campaign:

"The threshold for the European elections to get in the news was extremely high. These Parliamentary elections are a ‘non-issue’. It means nothing to the voters. Added to this were a number of factors: the war and peace negotiations in Kosovo, our governmental crisis, the resigning Minister of Agriculture, and the elections in Indonesia and South Africa which in other countries may not
receive much attention but are important here in the Netherlands [...] Under more normal circumstances we would have covered the European elections more, but even then we would not have extended the coverage very far”.

In sum, conflict and tension between elites as well as events and issues with significant domestic political and/or economic consequences were among the key qualities that European events and issues according to the newsmakers should have to get in to the news. This pattern was found at all news programs in the three countries. A strong cross-national difference emerged between the different news programs in the way they applied news selection criteria in relation to the 1999 European elections. NOS, for example, was very selective and hardly mentioned the elections, while DR paid specific attention to the issues defined by the news program’s audience in a survey. Subsequently one would expect differences in the actual priority given to the campaign in the bulletins of the different networks. This is aspect is addressed in Chapter 4 that deals with the content of news.

Balanced reporting: Sleaze on all. The final dimension addresses concerns about balanced and impartial news coverage. The notion of equal access and balanced reporting of different political parties prevails in Britain, Denmark, and the Netherlands. Editorial staff emphasized this when evaluating the 1999 election campaign coverage, but the interpretation of balance differed. At all programs, time was a key feature of the interpretation of balance, but while this was limited to monitoring by means of a stopwatch in Britain and the Netherlands, balance was also interpreted in terms of substance in Danish news.

With the shift to proportional representation in Britain, new challenges met the news organizations, and influenced the coverage of the elections. As a senior political reporter noted:

“At BBC we set our own guidelines that are more stringent than the laws demands. But all those rules we are familiar with are thrown up in the air by proportional representation. With this, all kinds of middle groups have to be taken a lot more seriously than they ever would have been under the old system. For television, it was a big nightmare to construct a piece because there were too many voices that needed acknowledging. And because the ‘Euro-elections’ were deemed to be intrinsically boring, they [editors] would be offering you 1 minute and 45 seconds, but ask you to include the viewpoints of six political parties.”
As mentioned earlier, 'balance' in the case of European integration also includes weighting and giving access to both pro- and con-European arguments. The Editor-in-Chief of ITN said:

“We believe Europe is important news and we report about it impartially. It is not our job to counteract the euro-skepticism in the press. But it is our job to ensure that we are not contaminated or tainted by the political prejudice or by others, whether they be pro or anti”.

At Danish TV-Avisen the notion of political balance was prominent. At editorial meetings, effort was made to structure the coverage to include the whole range of the Danish parties running for the elections (11 parties in total). During the making of a piece on fraud with salaries in the EU, aired only two days prior to Election Day, great caution was taken to criticize both ends of the political spectrum equally in order not do be accused of unbalanced reporting. In fact the story was ready to be broadcast one day, but was postponed until the next day so that ‘comparable sleaze’ would be available about the contending political parties.”

Discussion

This chapter explored the editorial approaches and role of television news organizations in the coverage of European affairs. The coverage of European affairs is organized in a very similar triadic structure in the three countries. The scope of, for example, the Brussels bureau is dependent upon the size of the news organization, the strategic alliances with other programs (such as between ITN and Channel 4 and 5 news), and an estimation of the political relevance of ‘Brussels’ which may change over time (see the example of Norway in Slaatt a (1998)).

Editors and journalists at the different news programs varied in their estimation of the ways in which reporting European news poses a challenge different from the challenge of reporting, for example, domestic political news. The most important constraints and challenges were along four areas: (1) ‘distance and time’, (2) ‘access and terminology’, (3) ‘internal disagreement’, and (4) ‘audience competences’. In particular, the perceived complexity of the issue, the lack of interest from peers and editors internally and the audience externally as well as the lack of background knowledge were considered key challenges.

The editorial policy of the different news programs may all be characterized as pragmatic and rather ‘conventionally journalistic’ and ‘analytical’ in Blumler and Gurevitch’s terminology (1989). However, the pragmatic approach took different forms. For example, during the 1999 EP election campaign Dutch news programs were highly selective and did not by any means consider the
political event of interest *per se*. British news programs devoted more time to
the elections than the Dutch, but they relied on 'auto-pilot' and took over the
issue of the euro put forward by the Tories as a key agenda-issue. However, this
topic was covered in a distanced and critical manner. Danish news programs
assumed a pro-active, highly analytical and even interpretative editorial policy
by focusing on the fraud and corruption issue. These findings suggest that the
approach taken by television journalists in the coverage of European affairs has
concluded that broadcasters during the 1979 campaign were cautious and
adhered largely to the agenda put forwards by politicians. This is no longer an
appropriate description when assessing the approach taken by broadcasters in
the 1999 elections.

With respect to the application of news selection criteria, conflict and ten-
sion between elites as well as events with significant domestic political and/or
economic consequences were among the key qualities that European events and
issues should have to get in to the news. In addition, some difference was found
in the application of news selection criteria at the different news programs in
the 1999 European elections. The political event was not considered to have
sufficient intrinsic importance or interest to yield coverage *per se*. The Euro-
pean Parliament was evaluated critically and did not enjoy any privileges as a
political authority. In general, the elections were not ‘up-graded’ and events in
the campaign were mostly evaluated according to normal news selection criteria.

The pragmatic approach and choice to opt for the application of conven-
tional news selection criteria in most instances did not negatively affect the no-
tion that television news, in contrast to for example the press, should remain
balanced and impartial. Despite the selective and at times assertive journalistic
style, editors and reporters at all programs were, according to themselves, still
concerned with balance.

The cross-national design of the study suggests a strong similarity in terms of
work routines, logistic organization of the coverage, and criteria for selecting
events to become news. However, the cross-national perspective also stresses
differences in the editorial policy defined by the different news programs. The
findings from the Netherlands illustrate this point since the approaches taken
by, for example, NOS and DR become interesting in a comparative perspective.
Both programs can be said to have been pragmatic about the elections by not
considering them relevant *per se*. However, one program as a consequence
decided to neglect the elections (NOS) whereas the other chose to set a different
agenda than the one put forward by the political arena (DR).

In future research to further elaborate on the ‘frame-building’ phase of the
framing process, an analysis of the efforts made by, for example, the EU and do-
mestic political parties and elites would be useful. This would shed light on the
frame-building in its totality by assessing the choices made by journalists when choosing from the issue and discourse made available to them. This chapter dealt with the production side of news about European affairs. First the contours of the coverage were outlined by discussing the organization of the 'Europe beat', the challenges and constraints facing journalists and editors when reporting Europe, and the editorial approaches taken by the various news organizations. The investigation of news selection criteria served to make a link to the integrated process model of framing. In the next chapter, the focus changes to the actual news coverage, i.e. the outcome of the efforts and choices made about Europe in the newsroom.