

Mimicry, Fragmentation, or Decoupling? Three Scenarios for the Control Function of EU Correspondents

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Abstract

In this article, we explore three possible scenarios for the role of EU correspondents in a post-pandemic media landscape that is marked not only by the mainstreaming of misinformation but also by an EU regulatory turn that aims to support media in the post-pandemic era and to stamp out the culture of ‘fake news’. EU correspondents are best placed to function as translators of EU technocratic and differentiated governance. Such a function is a prerequisite to critically assess the content and quality of decision-making, when demands of national EU readerships for EU news are limited and resources for quality journalism restricted. We submit that whether this function of EU correspondents will materialise in the (post-)pandemic era hinges not on their capacity to contribute to the elusive ‘European public sphere’ but on how the EU’s action plan for the recovery and transformation of media organisations will interact with the multiple challenges journalists are already facing in the digital era. We propose three scenarios on how such an institutional settlement of EU journalism may play out: mimicry, fragmentation, and decoupling. The aim is twofold: Firstly, to set out a research agenda for empirical investigation of the EU correspondents’ role in European democracy under constant transformation. And secondly, to argue normatively the case for safeguarding the independence and viability of specialist and/or transnational professional journalism bodies, even if these appear increasingly irrelevant from a commercial perspective.

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EU Journalism: Between Expertisation and National Segmentation

The case for support and protection of journalism in the digital era – often labelled as ‘post-truth’ – as a core element for national, European, and global democracy has been clearly and loudly argued both by scholars and government. Building on institutional approaches of professional journalism (Deuze and Witschge 2018) and normative arguments for universal standards of journalistic conduct (Auman et al. 2020; Frey et al. 2017; Ward 2008 and 2016), we focus here on the rather overlooked Brussels Press Corps. We discuss the function of high-quality professional journalism as a guarantor of democracy in the face of EU differentiated integration and growing complexity of governance. Caught between demands for expertisation and national segmentation, the Brussels Press Corps makes an ideal case not only to empirically examine the transformation of journalism work standards, funding pressures and role expectations at the transnational level, but also to normatively argue for the need to safeguard the independence and viability of specialist and transnational professional journalism bodies, even if these appear increasingly irrelevant from a commercial perspective.

EU technocratic governance and differentiated integration have challenged the capacities of EU actors and institutions to build the type of public understanding that is needed for democratic legitimacy. The complexity of EU governance (Batora and Fossum 2019; Radaelli 1999; Stie 2015) cannot easily be translated into public parlance. Communicating the European Union poses an epistemological challenge of what could be called a *meta-translation problem*: new concepts need to be developed, but the explanatory force of the new vocabulary remains uncertain and is often incongruent with the familiar terminology and imaginary associated with the nation state and with national democracy. Understanding the EU presupposes reflexivity, which however is inextricably related to unequally distributed social competence, power and opportunities for learning (Kauppi 2010). Communicating the EU further poses a pragmatic challenge of what could be called an ‘every-day translation problem’: With high levels of governance complexity, the language that is used by the EU bureaucratic apparatus in their every-day communication becomes more and more encrypted. Understanding the EU thus presupposes high specialisation and expertise in various policy fields.

At the same time as the overall complexity of the EU institutional set-up and policies increases, the public communication capacities of the system decrease. Not only has the EU not delivered on its own goal to invest in better and more efficient public communication (Rauh et al. 2020). The available media and communication infrastructures that could provide translations are also weakened by the general

decline of quality journalism (Picard 2018) with direct consequences for the availability and quality of EU news. To create a public understanding of EU governance, journalists are needed as specialists with expert knowledge in their daily monitoring of the performance of the EU and its institutions and with critical capacities to relate differentiation, dominance, and democracy. Journalists and especially, EU correspondents further play an important role as agents of unification of EU journalism in the way their news-coverage relies on collaborative schemes and shared interpretative frames that bridge national media systems and languages.

Regarding these two complementary functions of European journalism as experts of differentiated governance and as a unified voice of the public interest, the expectation has long been that European integration would lead to a convergence of national media and the public sphere media in the service of EU democracy (Fossum and Schlesinger 2007). What we witness instead over the last two decades is an increasingly tense and opposing relationship between EU institutions, journalism, the news media, and audiences (Frangonikolopoulos and Poulakidakos 2017; Michailidou et al. 2014). We thus observe two mutually reinforcing trends at work, which both shape and challenge the public communication capacities of the EU: the growing complexity of the EU political system, on the one hand, and the systemic crisis of quality journalism going hand in hand with the fragmentation of the field of news production and consumption, on the other.

In the remainder of the article, we proceed by first identifying the deficits of nationally segmented and commercialised journalism in dealing with the complexity challenge of EU differentiated integration. We then introduce three scenarios anticipating the role of EU correspondents as translators of EU technocratic and differentiated governance: fragmentation, decoupling and mimicry. The plausibility and desirability of these three scenarios are discussed based on previous trends and evidence of journalism development and in light of the normatively driven expectation for EU journalism as a critical watchdog of EU differentiated governance. Subsequently, we look at first evidence for the materialisation of these scenarios in the current context of the Covid-19 pandemic and assess the most recent EU policy initiatives in support of EU journalism, plural media landscapes and informed news.

Journalism in the EU: Between National Segmentation and Global Standardisation

The EU is a distinct system of governance between the national and the global. Such a system has been described as distinctly differentiated (Batora and Fossum 2019; Fossum 2019). This unique type of governance through divided sovereignty and differentiated authority also comes with unique requirements for journalist coverage – embodied in the EU Press Corps – that differs from the work of international correspondents as observers of sovereign states and governments. The EU Press Corps is simultaneously international and a case of a regionally integrated professional

journalism body that responds to the specific requirements of a regionally differentiated system of governance based on shared sovereignty with its member states. Nevertheless, the mere existence of such a transnational journalism body between the national and the global is not – yet – an indicator, let alone the embodiment, of a similarly transnational (European in this case) mode of media governance, with shared rules but also professional norms and operating in response to shared public expectations.

Certainly, cross-border collaborative journalism is increasingly becoming the answer to global crises and challenges (Alfter 2016 and 2021; Grieves 2012; Heft et al. 2017; Weaver and Wu 1998) and digitalisation facilitates the formation of transnational public spheres and grassroots movements on an unprecedented scale. However, national political systems continue to provide the political and legal framework within which professional news journalists operate, while language and local/regional collective identities continue to underpin the transnationality of both journalism and audiences (Chalaby 2005; Hallin 2020; Heft 2021; Mattoni and Ceccobelli 2018; Meyer 2019; Nölleke-Przybylski et al. 2019).

Broadly speaking, and without wishing to wash over the multiple nuances that characterise the different media systems found in Europe and beyond, we encounter three types of public understandings of the role of journalists in European media systems: (a) partisans, as in the polarised-pluralist model in Southern Europe and subsequently in some of the post-communist Central and Eastern European countries; (b) defenders of the public good, as in the corporatist-democratic model in Northern Europe; and (c) fact-checkers and critical but distanced watchdogs, as in the British or Anglo-Saxon system, that lies somewhere in between the liberal and democratic-corporatist ideal types of media systems identified in Hallin and Mancini's seminal 2004 work (Allern and Pollack 2019; Goodman and Boudana 2019; Hallin and Mancini 2004 and 2017; Jakubowicz and Sükösd 2014; Schudson 2001; Williams 2006; Örnebring 2013).

EU correspondents – with their work often ranking low in priority across most European media – frequently have to balance one or more of these roles whilst covering often technocratic or procedural aspects of EU affairs (e.g. Siapera 2004; Lecheler 2008; Martins et al. 2012). Such balancing acts create tensions that can be traced in the journalistic content produced by EU correspondents, as in the case of British journalism that has historically been strongly nationalist vis a vis the EU – in line with the strongly Eurosceptic stance of the British political system, but in contradiction to the long tradition of fact-finding journalism in the UK (Galpin and Trenz 2019). More broadly, a critical-distant attitude towards the EU has been unfolding mostly among journalists within the corporatist-democratic tradition, which is also represented by those countries who send, on average most correspondents to Brussels and open spaces for EU and international news as part of national news coverage (Hepp et al. 2012: 85-143).

If journalism professional differentiation according to different areas of expertise is not new, and, in a way, can be considered a universal feature of media systems, which internally specialise and externally delimit themselves against others (Marcinkowski

and Steiner 2014), the concern now is with the rapid increase of the number of media producers, the content they provide and the audiences that pay attention to it. This enhanced differentiation is partly related to the mediatisation of society, when virtually anyone can produce media content, channels for the diffusion of content multiply constantly and audiences can choose on-demand from a variety of products (Hjarvard 2013). Instead of differentiation, the magnitude of this new challenge seems to be captured better by the term ‘media fragmentation’, which combines a long-term trend towards commercialisation with the development of new media and the Internet.

Media fragmentation is discussed within the context of digitalisation of communications; it comes in different shapes, and it has been found to correlate with the segmentation of media audiences (Mancini 2012), although recent studies (Bright 2018; Fletcher and Nielsen 2017) do not corroborate the extent of the ‘echo chambers’ effect that many scholars predicted or adopted in earlier years (e.g. Sunstein 2007). In contrast to media differentiation, which allows for internal divisions of work and specialisation within the media system, media fragmentation comes with various disruptions of the communication flow (Blumler and Coleman 2015). As such, it poses some severe challenges to democracy, potentially threatening ‘the common meeting ground ensured by the mass media and putting at risk the very cohesion of the nation-state’ (Mancini 2012: 45, referring to (Katz 1996). Niche providers of information meet on niche audiences; they might draw the attention of selected news readers for some (short) time, but they rapidly switch topic and address different audience segments another time. At the same time, media fragmentation and further concentration of media power are not mutually exclusive. Big media players like Google or Facebook have developed strong monopolies and are at the same time responsible for the fragmentation of media content and reception (Chadwick 2013; Simpson 2014). Consequently, we have increase of political polarisation and sharpening of the national political/partisan angle, but for all other non-national political news, one gets very similar news feeds whether they are in Athens, Oslo, Washington, or Sydney.

The Covid-19 pandemic has brought into sharp relief precisely these vulnerabilities of news media systems – and by extension of the democratic public sphere they underpin – that are shaped by ‘deep mediatisation’, as Couldry and Hepp (2018:1) put it, and ‘deep marketisation’, to paraphrase slightly the terms both Couldry (2016) and Murdock (2017) have used pre-pandemic to highlight that the processes of mediatisation and digitalisation are inextricably linked with market capitalism.

Yet, the surge of fake news concerning all aspects of the pandemic – from how to avoid getting infected to the origin of the virus and possible cures (Brennen et al. 2020; Naeem et al. 2021) – has been met with a (re)turn of publics to professional news media, and particularly public broadcasters, as reliable sources of information concerning the pandemic (Trenz et al. 2020). This is certainly a positive development. However, this seeming restoration of the public’s trust in news media risks to be a brief interlude in the continuous decline of news media’s credibility, as the pandemic continues to rage across the globe (Edelman 2021). As Davis, Fenton, Freedman and

Khiabany (2020: xiii-xiv) warn, examples of Covid-19 ‘hard-hitting journalism do not signify a durable or profound radicalisation of our political communications systems, but instead simply illustrate the depth of the social and economic crisis today’, whereby professional news media have across different countries failed ‘systematically’ to question government responses to the pandemic, instead consistently putting forward official statements and government narratives. If digitalisation, marketisation, and the added pressures of a global pandemic pose an existential challenge for professional news media within established national media systems, what happens if we throw the EU as a complex multi-level system of governance in the mix?

There is an EU parlance constructed around the concept of pooled sovereignty and multi-level governance that develops in parallel to the parlance ‘of the people’; that is, a vernacular built on the trinity of popular sovereignty, undivided rule and national identity, the grammar of which is simple and easy to sell, but also, as Brexit has shown, deeply divisive too (Fossum 2019). As EU integration unfolds in a differentiated manner, EU institutions have limited capacities to understand publics and segmented publics do not understand EU institutions. What then ensues is a spiral of politicisation against perceived dominance, which fuels strategies of fundamental opposition against the EU (the salience of Euroscepticism) and is countered by de-politicisation and a further retreat of differentiated governance from the public arena (Kauppi and Trenz 2021). The perverse effect of such a development is that hyper-complexity of EU governance might engender even more differentiation, because participating political actors, but also publics and electorates, in lack of oversight and critical understanding will develop preferences to opt-out as an escape from the hyper-complexity of EU governance. Once we have such a spiralling effect, differentiation is likely to turn into disintegration at both polity and policy level.

This dual process of media differentiation and EU democracy homogenisation has led several scholars to argue that what we would call a genuinely European journalism sphere cannot emerge. Such an institution would presuppose not only a state-like organisational structure that supplies it with regular news but also an audience with linguistic and cognitive capacities that demands such news (Statham 2010). In lack of the latter cultural prerequisites, a European journalism sphere has thus been presumed non-existent (Baisnée 2003). Yet the would-be drivers of such an institution, the EU correspondents, are present, if not well-institutionalised through the EU Press Corps. We approach their capacity, or lack thereof, to control the holders of power, to inform and potentially also to empower EU citizens with reference to the classical functions of journalism in democracy (McNair 2000; Michailidou et al. 2014):

Information: EU Correspondents Should Act as Translators That Provide the Facts, Select What Is Relevant and Make EU Governance Transparent

Control: EU correspondents should be sensors of dominance, detecting arbitrary forms of rule, abuses of power or the spiralling of differentiation into disintegration.

Democratic empowerment: EU correspondents should provide inputs that enable citizens to assess the performance of the EU, allow for critical judgement, and shape opinions that may be informed to various degrees, but that are nevertheless decisive when people vote.

Taking into account the challenges that media differentiation and EU democracy homogenisation present for EU journalism, but also the challenges that quality journalism is facing more broadly due to the transformations of the public sphere in the digital era, we anticipate that these key functions of journalism in the differentiated system of EU governance are often in conflict. For instance, EU correspondents would seek to maintain neutrality and distance, but, at the same time, are expected to explain the EU to its citizens applying criteria of newsworthiness to make the EU relevant for their audiences. Added to this comes a loyalty conflict in the democratic control and empowerment function, which is traditionally situated within a national political system and does not foresee the possibility of journalism serving but also controlling two different masters. EU correspondents would thus potentially find themselves caught between acting as promoters of EU democracy or as guardians of national democracy. In news coverage of European Parliament elections, for instance, some see it as their mission to empower EU institutions and promote EU-wide campaigns. Others, instead, express preferences for the re-delegation of competences to national institutions (Galpin and Trenz 2019).

In light of these challenges, what would be possible development paths of a differentiated system of EU journalism? In the following we introduce three scenarios that locate EU correspondents in the field of differentiated journalism and governance.

A Differentiated System of EU Journalism: Three Scenarios

Fragmentation

A first possibility is that journalism differentiation distracts from the complexity of EU governance and does not provide any framework for the articulation of aggregated and targeted critique of the EU, its institutions and policies. The more journalism would differentiate into news segments, the more EU news would become marginalised. Differentiated journalism would focus on random details but not provide the overall story or narrative of European integration. The EU news landscape would be fragmented by diverging news agendas or randomly selected news. Storylines would be lost. The attention of electorates would be dispersed at the price of a loss of power of control. The capacities of the Brussels Corps of EU correspondents to monitor EU governance would be diminished as their home offices would require them to apply news selection criteria, such as negativity and scandals that respond to fragmented audience taste.

Ultimately, if fragmentation persists, EU correspondents would become irrelevant, as neither their home office nor national audiences would pay attention to their inputs. The fragmentation of journalism and the corresponding dispersion of EU news could however also easily be reverted if EU policies gain relevance and focus public

attention. Such a reversal can be introduced by external events such as the Covid-19 pandemic with de-differentiating effects on both EU governance and journalism.

Decoupling

A second possibility is that journalism differentiation and EU differentiation are unrelated and do not speak to each other. Such a scenario is possible, because journalism differentiation follows mainly territorial lines, while EU differentiation follows sectoral lines. Consequently, the distance between the EU differentiated system of governance and the differentiated system of journalism would continue to grow.

Journalists would become more nationalists with less economic and professional capacities to monitor EU governance, and EU institutions and actors would find it more and more difficult to respond to news criteria and make it into the news. The capacities of the Brussels corps of EU correspondents to monitor EU governance would thus diminish over time, while their national segmentation increases. EU correspondents would be a niche followed by a small transnational elite audience, while mainstream national journalism would serve exclusively national audiences and make use of nationalist discourses and frames of interpretation. The impact on EU legitimacy could be an overall increase of support for differentiated integration or utilitarian approach of EU membership, if not of outright Euroscepticism, as previous research on the link between national framing of EU issues and public justifications suggests (e.g. de Vreese 2007; de Wilde et al. 2013).

Mimicry

A third possibility is that a differentiated EU journalism is an adaptation to EU differentiation in a way that journalists professionalise and specialise as experts of EU governance. This scenario would potentially enhance the control function of journalists who could carefully follow sectoral developments and monitor functions and malfunctions of EU-policy making.

Specialised EU correspondents could closely follow the activities of EU agencies, institutions and differentiated cooperation schemes (e.g. authorisation of vaccines by the European Medicines Agency, monetary policies by the European Central Bank, agrarian policies by the European Commission DG Agriculture). The capacities of the Brussels corps of EU correspondents to monitor EU governance would be enhanced by socialisation, professionalisation and specialisation. They would act as a body with an established system of work division. Their work would contribute to the building of EU legitimacy through their focused information and specialised news agendas that serve the needs of niche audiences. Yet, such as a differentiated EU journalism would contribute only little to the formation of an informed public opinion and would have only reduced capacities to re-establish trust in journalism. EU differentiated journalism would develop monitoring capacities of EU differentiated policies, but it would not provide adequate solutions to overcoming the information deficit of average citizens.

Consolidation Paths of EU Journalism

Which scenario comes to dominate depends on two factors: a) the driving force behind journalistic work and b) two commonly applied translation mechanisms of de-differentiation. For the former, we can generally anticipate three types of EU journalistic entrepreneurship: profit-driven; access-driven; and values-driven (Briggs 2012; Heft et al. 2017; Ruotsalainen and Villi 2018). These are not mutually exclusive, but where the weight is placed determines which scenario dominates as regards the role of journalists in the EU differentiation process.

Journalism entrepreneurship was borne out of the need for news-producing endeavours that can survive the effects of media differentiation, and particularly of media fragmentation. In the fragmentation scenario, then, we can anticipate that seeking to increase profitability and visibility by maintaining a negative stance towards the EU (as is the case with the aim/effect of the spiral of negativity; Galpin and Trenz 2019) mobilises publics across borders against the EU but does not bring them together in their critical stance, thus leading to further EU differentiation. The direct opposite act of defending EU decisions in all cases and circumstances (i.e. rescinding their critical control function) would perhaps maintain their status in Brussels (entrepreneurial spirit of survival) but would isolate them from the publics they are meant to inform, and again lead to further EU public sphere differentiation. Although profitability has been the main driver, maintaining (or reclaiming) quality of news and the safeguarding of professional journalism as a crucial component of democracies have also been driving forces of European reporting, as Heft et al. 2017 show in their research of less-studied cases of transnational entrepreneurial journalism within the EU.

As regards the second factor, i.e. translation mechanisms of de-differentiation, we can distinguish two commonly applied practices of making EU news understandable and relevant for national audiences:

The first translation mechanism operates through media gatekeeping, filtering, and selection of news. There is a trade-off between complexity and limited capacities to channel and process information. Information and mediation capacities of media systems are limited and become even more restricted in times of financial recession. An increase in complexity generates at the same time, a necessity to invest in even narrower filters. At the same time, a decrease in audience attention and of journalistic capacities makes filtering even more essential. These two processes are mutually reinforcing. The more EU governance grows in complexity, the more superficial EU news coverage becomes. De-differentiation therefore often means that EU news are either nationalised and oversimplified or completely lacking context and retaining only technical characteristics (de Ruiter and Vliegenthart 2018; Frangonikolopoulos and Papadopoulou 2021).

The second translation mechanism operates through media framing. EU correspondents specialise as professional translators of EU differentiated government, but their interpretations carry specific biases. In that connection, media not only contribute to shaping public debates; they also instil distinct *biases*. Facing financial constraints and job insecurity, many EU correspondents may not want to upset their publisher's

often Eurosceptic narrative (as, for instance, in the case of British tabloids), or they may be drawn to more commercially viable reporting frames, simply to ensure more people read them. In this sense, biased reporting becomes a coping mechanism for EU correspondents to deal with uncertainty and their framing of EU stories is often found to be shaped by externally imposed biases (Chronaki and Frangonikolopoulos 2020).

The interpretative biases applied in mediated debates about forms of EU governance, and the way journalism selectively brings EU criticism to the attention of European publics are well researched in comparative content analysis of EU debates. For instance, journalists are often found to be nationalists, they are biased towards negative news, they dramatise, and they tend to give a cynical twist highlighting, for instance, Euroscepticism and easy solutions over complex problems (Galpin and Trenz 2019; Gkiola 2016). We could argue that there is a correlation between complexity and media negativity. The more complex EU governance, the more negative the EU news framing. At the same time, the more newspapers compete for the attention of audiences, and the fewer audiences are willing to pay attention to EU news, the more negative EU coverage (De Vreese 2007).

Considering the above constraints, EU correspondents have in the past partly adapted to the complexity of EU governance either through mimicry and decoupling, partly, and most recently, they have also amplified interpretative biases and thus contributed to a more fragmented news landscape. The EU system favours mimicry: To become a member of the professional group of 'EU translators' requires accreditation as an EU correspondent, which gives access to press conferences organised by the Commission, the Council and the Parliament. This accreditation does not mean, however, that EU correspondents are pre-selected based on their education in EU studies. Being sent to Brussels is also not necessarily their first choice, and their daily work rather requires them to have broad competences, instead of being specialised (for instance, Brussels correspondents are often also asked to cover Belgium politics). Consequently, there is a mismatch of needs and capacities between the EU and its press corps, as seen, for example, in the ethnographic study of the daily work of EU correspondents by Sobotova (2018). Nevertheless, the Brussels Press Corps remains a firmly established institution, providing for a constant flow of news about the EU, its actors and institutions (Preston 2009; Raeymaeckers et al. 2007; Terzis 2008). Early findings point at significant socialisation effects of correspondents, who work and specialise in Brussels and develop pro-European attitudes (Meyer 2002; Siapera 2004).

This socialisation process has changed, however, with the entry of new member states since 2004 (Heinderyckx 2015; Lecheler 2008). The initial – and expected – rise in the number of EU correspondents following the different stages of EU enlargement since 2004, which saw the Brussels Press Corps swell to over 1000 accredited members, coincided with the development of a new pattern of quick correspondence: shorter stays of journalists in Brussels and a new generation of younger correspondents who use their time in Brussels as a whistle stop for career planning, but not to get settled (Michailidou 2017; Terzis and Harding 2014). This new diversity of EU correspondents rather undermines mimicry and can lead to decoupling: EU journalism becomes more critical with the EU, but also less committed and knowledgeable

(Lecheler 2008; Martins et al. 2012; Sobotova 2018). Nevertheless, the seemingly perpetual state of crisis in the EU in the past 20 years (Eurocrisis, Brexit, Covid-19, to name but the most distinct junctures) has precipitated the decline of quality journalism – and professional journalism at large – aided by the democratic backsliding in several EU member states (Reporters Without Borders 2021).

The Brussels Press Corps could not have been left unscathed: the number of EU correspondents has been decreasing, albeit slowly, since 2008, with the size of the Brussels Press Corps stabilised in recent years to about 900 members (ab Iago 2019). The near continuous state of economic and financial crisis of 2010s and early 2020s and the crisis of quality professional journalism thus appear to be interlocked in a downward spiral: fewer resources are put into public communication; public attention is increasingly dispersed through various digital and social media channels; and major media organisations withdraw from Brussels, instead of intensifying their efforts to cover the complexity of EU governance. And all this taking place just as a succession of crises makes such reporting more necessary than ever.

Yet, rather counter-intuitively, some of the most recent studies of the EU Press Corps and of journalists covering EU affairs more broadly, point to the emergence of a Brussels political journalism culture that cuts through national divides and no longer servers a priori fragmented publics (along national identity and linguistic lines). Nitoiu (2015), for instance, has looked at the Brussels bubble of EU correspondents in relation to climate change reporting and found that transnational media are very supportive of EU institutions' narratives regarding the role of the EU in leading climate change actions. Hepp et al. (2016: 39) point to a specific type of emerging EU journalism, which develops “new cultural forms of specific transnational political discourses”. Notably, such a transnational news culture with competence in EU political news reporting is gaining momentum in the current context of the Covid-19 pandemic.

Mimicry, Fragmentation and Decoupling in the Context of the Covid-19 Pandemic

The Covid-19 pandemic has truly driven home the message that independent, critical professional news media are paramount for the democratic functioning of the public sphere. Journalism and the news media have been given the status of ‘essential workers’ during the corona pandemic. As such, they contributed in various ways to the building of resilience capacities of society and democracy in lockdown (Trenz et al. 2021).

The common EU response to Covid-19 has further opened new opportunities for EU journalism, enhancing the public interest in EU affairs, while at the same time creating new demands to hold EU authority and expenditure accountable. The pandemic has simultaneously challenged established working practices and has put news organisations under heavy financial constraints. The European Journalism Observatory reports how news publishing was facing a rapid loss of advertising revenue in 2020 and journalists in many parts of the world were laid off (European Journalism

Observatory 2021). In many countries, the pandemic has also increased the political pressures on journalism, as emergency legislation has often had an impact on free speech and freedom of the press (European Journalism Observatory 2021). The response of journalists to these pandemic-driven challenges has been unequal across the EU. While local newspapers in Denmark, for instance, have profited from generous direct support payments by the government, newspapers in other countries which still largely depend on street sales made big losses (European Journalism Observatory 2021).

The European Commission has responded to these news challenges by publishing *Europe's Media in the Digital Decade: An Action Plan to Support Recovery and Transformation* (European Commission 2020b). The action plan is presented as aiming to ensure 'European cultural and technological autonomy in the Digital Decade' (European Commission 2021) and acknowledges not only the challenges that professional journalism is facing due to digitalisation and commodification of all aspects of the public (and private) communications, but also rightly identifies the Covid-19 pandemic as a bottleneck that has the potential to transform these challenges into an existential threat for professional journalism. The measures proposed are varied and aim in the first instance to facilitate news media recovery from the immediate effects of the economic crisis that the pandemic has brought about. The Commission further foresees measures to reinforce the presence of professional media in the digital era, while safeguarding their independence, both from government interference and digital giants (European Commission 2020b).

Crucially, the safeguarding of news media pluralism is placed centre-stage and linked explicitly with the EU's European Democracy Action Plan (European Commission 2020c), with both constituting integral parts of the Commission's renewed efforts to ensure – or at least strengthen – adherence to the rule of law within the Union (European Commission 2020a). Strengthening media freedom and countering mis- and disinformation are recognised as preconditions for maintaining the health of European democracy. The Commission's proposals for legal action on political advertising, recommended measures on journalists' safety and a revised Code of Practice on Disinformation have been drawn up with wide consultation with journalists and news media associations and businesses, as well as academics and policy experts, with the European Federation of Journalists – the umbrella organisation that represents 320,000 journalists in 72 journalists' organisations across 45 countries – welcoming the Action Plan and its embedding in the action plan for European democracy (European Federation of Journalists 2020a and 2020b).

Given the prominent positioning of media and journalism in the Commission's course of action, not only in the relatively narrow fields of business regulation and journalism standards, but also in the more fundamental field of rule of law and democratic standards, the 'decoupling' scenario seems unlikely in the pandemic and post-pandemic era. At the same time, however, the Commission's Action Plan does not break away from the 'deep capitalism' (Murdock 2017) model that is responsible for much of the contemporary public sphere's woes. There is hardly any mention of reinforcing public broadcasters or other less profitable formats of journalism, which is

precisely what the ‘genre’ of EU correspondents is. Instead, news media are recognised as ‘an economic sector as well as a public good’ (European Commission 2020b: 9).

In this sense, the spectre of fragmentation remains ever-present, although its effect is perhaps moderated by a renewed importance of the mimicry scenario, brought to the fore as EU correspondents gain importance in terms of their control capacities in the area of the newly consolidated EU public health policies. As the pandemic relates local with European and international politics, it also pushes these actors at the forefront who have credibility in defending a European and global agenda. This regards the authority of the EU as well as of international organisations such as the World Health Organization (WHO). It remains to be seen whether such pushing factors are sufficient to facilitate enduring communication across sectors and levels of governance and thus to allow reaching wider audiences. The common EU response to Covid-19 constitutes in this sense an important step towards the de-differentiation of EU journalism: the action plans place the independence of journalism at the heart of democratic government, formally and explicitly acknowledging the implications that the digitalisation of the public sphere has for democracy.

Conclusion

In this exploratory article, we have discussed the intrinsic relationship between EU differentiated integration and the emergence of a differentiated EU journalism. The challenges of covering the complexity of transnational governance require journalism to re-invent itself. Journalism is not only in need of new business model to make quality news profitable; it also needs to build new capacities to ‘go transnational’ and act as a ‘watchdog’ of what their governments do abroad. Transposing the normative requirements for the journalistic profession and also the challenges it faces globally on to the EU political landscape, we use the case of the Brussels Press Corps to discuss three possible scenarios of how this re-organisation of journalism depends on alliances between specialised correspondents and institutions. Such an alliance needs to be based on a concord that despite the indisputable evidence that the markets cannot support the type of journalism complex democracies need in our era of digitalisation and transnationalisation of government (Pickard 2019), the not-so-profitable type of journalism EU correspondents conduct ought to be preserved and allowed to thrive, as a guarantor of a healthy democratic public sphere. The question of how such EU journalism can consolidate in compliance with classical functions of journalism of information, control and political empowerment is still empirically open, but it is a question of institutional design and of normative choices that are taken by the various practitioners in the field: EU institutions, which build public communication capacities; and journalists, who build critical capacities to monitor the EU differentiated system of governance.

Our article sets out the conditions for an evolving EU journalism to assume either the role of catalyst of public sphere differentiation that develops in parallel with EU differentiation or of public sphere fragmentation in mismatch with journalism standards and principles of democratic control. On the one hand, experiences of an

increasingly pressured and challenged journalistic profession in the EU put constraints on EU institutions to claim public legitimacy and on publics to develop a critical understanding of the Union. On the other hand, experiences of an increasingly dysfunctional and undemocratic EU governance can provide strong incentives for a re-organisation of EU correspondents in response to the expectations of critical publics. The EU differentiated system of governance is not simply to be held accountable for its public communication deficits but might as well become an experimental field for the institutionalisation of a new type of differentiated EU journalism and its role for the promotion of new forms of democratic control beyond the confines of nationally segmented public spheres.

It is the subject of future research to empirically test the extent to which differentiated EU integration and the differentiation of public spheres driven by digitalisation and marketisation will converge to push the role of EU correspondents towards mimicry, fragmentation or decoupling. What is at stake in the case of each of these three possibilities is the capacity of EU correspondents to function as democratic entrepreneurs who provide a fair judgement of the performance of the EU differentiated system of governance, identify deficits, and bring EU publics together in support or opposition of European integration.

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