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'Europe' in the News

A Cross-National Comparative Study of the News Coverage of Key EU Events

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ABSTRACT

This study is a cross-nationally comparative investigation of the news coverage in Britain, Denmark, and the Netherlands of three major EU events: (1) the January 1999 first-step introduction of the euro, (2) the June 1999 European Parliamentary elections, and (3) the December 2000 summit in Nice. The visibility of the three events, the news agenda, and the role played by national news organizations in covering the EU events are examined. The study draws on content analyses of the most widely watched main evening television news programmes as well as interviews with news practitioners in the three countries. The results showed that news coverage of European affairs is cyclical, peaking during the events but hardly visible before and after. A number of cross-national differences were found: overall, Danish news devoted most attention to the EU events, followed by Britain and the Netherlands. News organizations differed in the editorial policy and the degree of effort invested in covering the events. Danish, and to some extent the British and Dutch, public broadcasters exerted more discretion in the choice of issues covered and assumed a proactive agenda-setting role compared with their private counterparts. The findings are discussed in the light of the role of news in public opinion formation processes about EU affairs.

KEY WORDS

- content analysis
- euro
- European Parliament elections
- journalism
- news
- Nice summit

Citizens across Europe rely on the media for information about the European Union (EU) and European integration. More than two-thirds of EU citizens consistently name television as the most important source of information, and a majority also identifies television as their preferred method for receiving information about the EU (Eurobarometer 53, 2000). Yet we have only limited knowledge about the type of information that citizens receive about the EU and European integration. A recent overview on the impact of Europeanization on political communication concluded that we 'know little about political communication and news organizations from a comparative perspective and even less about how news differs cross-nationally in terms of the reporting of domestic and European political affairs' (Semetko et al., 2000: 121).

News coverage of foreign affairs has been found to influence public opinion more strongly than news about domestic affairs, where citizens may have a larger contextual knowledge to draw on (Gavin, 1998; Page and Shapiro, 1992). A similar argument has been made with respect to the role of news in the formation of public opinion about European affairs (Norris, 2000). This provides a rationale for a systematic analysis of the diet of information available to European publics through the news. The aim of this study is to offer an initial overview of the characteristics of television news coverage of European issues and events and to explore the importance of various factors internal to journalism that influence the news agenda.

Previous research on the media coverage of European affairs is scattered. Although the EU is covered on television in current affairs magazine-style programmes, the largest audiences turn to national news programmes to learn about the economy and politics. In the news coverage of the EU, a distinction can be made between news dealing exclusively with EU affairs (such as summits, European elections, and European institutions) and domestic political and economic news with a European dimension. Within the first category, the most comprehensive study dates back to the 1979 European elections (Blumler, 1983). A cross-national analysis of the television coverage in both the run-up and the actual election campaign showed that 'Europe' did not surface on the media agenda before the actual campaign started. With some cross-national variation it was found that economic topics, comments about the elections, and the 'problems, strategies, and mechanics of waging the campaign' dominated television programming in nearly every country (Siune, 1983: 226–7).

In relation to subsequent European elections, a number of follow-up studies of the media coverage of the campaign have been carried out. Generally, it is noted that whereas the first elections received some media coverage because of the novelty of the event, from the second elections in 1984 onwards

the campaign was already 'nothing special' (Leroy and Siune, 1994: 52–3). One comparative study of the role of television in Denmark and Belgium in the 1989 European election campaign concluded that the elections were given low priority in the news and that most of the news coverage was of a domestic nature, with little reference to the European dimensions of the issues in question. Moreover, most news dealt with the campaign itself rather than substantive issues such as the economy or the Single European Act (Leroy and Siune, 1994).¹

The European Union provides two sources of information about media coverage of European affairs: a project monitoring two newspapers from each European country; and the monitoring of television in six European countries. Both projects are attempts at gauging media attention devoted to 'Europe' and they document the visibility of information about the European Union, give an overview of the focus of the media coverage, and provide indicators for the slant of news about the EU. For the press, it was suggested that coverage of European Union affairs was focused on economic and financial affairs along with specific issues such as 'mad cow disease', the enlargement of the European Union, and social matters (Fundesco, 1997). An analysis based on the television data from the period 1995 to 1997 found that European issues played a peripheral role on the news agenda in most countries (Norris, 2000). If the EU was covered, it was cyclical, peaking around EU summits. During routine periods the predominant topics were economic and monetary union and EU development. In addition, it was found that the news coverage during that period either was neutral or had a modest, but consistent, negative slant (Norris, 2000).

A recent study of the visibility and framing of news about the January 1999 first-step euro launch concluded that news organizations in Britain, Denmark, Germany, and the Netherlands devoted a comparable amount of attention to the event (de Vreese et al., 2001). The study supported the observation that media attention to EU affairs is cyclical, which meant that news about the euro vanished in the immediate aftermath of the launch. The coverage of the euro replaced other political and economic issues in the period around the introduction so that the volume of political and economic news stayed constant during the launch period and in a routine period (de Vreese et al., 2001). This suggests that major EU events have the ability to enter the national news agendas, but that this does not increase the proportion of political and economic news in total.

Beyond investigations of media attention to specific EU affairs, a number of studies emphasize the increasing importance of the EU/Europe in domestic political and economic news reports. In Britain, for example, it was concluded that although coverage of the economy largely takes place within a

'national narrative' the British economy within the EU is also an important news story (Goddard et al., 1998: 16–17). An analysis of television's coverage of the British economy during two periods in 1996/97 and in 1999 documented, on average, 11 stories monthly about the single European currency and, on average, 5 stories per month about the European economy. This means that 'Europe' accounted for about 18% of the economic news coverage on the two national networks, the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) and the Independent Television News (ITN) (Gavin, 2000). Studies of the news coverage of national elections also suggest an increasing importance of Europe as a topic in the news. Whereas studies of national election campaigns in Britain, Denmark, and the Netherlands in the 1980s and early 1990s showed that 'Europe' was on the periphery, in recent elections it has become a more central issue of the political debate.

In Britain, topics such as 'Europe' and the European Union along with Britain's relation with foreign countries were much more visible in the news during the 1997 general election compared with 1992 (Norris et al., 1999). This trend continued in the 2001 general election agenda with the battle between Labour and the Conservatives over the euro. The Dutch national elections of 1998 also had a strong focus on Europe, in particular via the French–Dutch powerplay surrounding the nomination of Dutchman Wim Duisenberg as the first President of the European Central Bank, which received extensive coverage (van Praag and Brants, 2000: 70–1). In Denmark during the 1998 national elections, immigration and refugees were more prominent issues in the media coverage. These issues, however, were inherently 'Europe related' because much of the debate on immigration centred on the impact of the EU-based Schengen agreement (Andersen et al., 1999).

Although the evidence from national election studies suggests an increase in the importance of European issues in national politics, one fundamental problem when examining the visibility of 'Europe' in the news is the lack of a comparative perspective, in terms of both time and space. Little is known about how European issues are covered in the news in a longitudinal perspective and little is known about the ways in which news coverage may differ or share similarities between different European countries.

The European integration project is a continuous process with a number of key events and defining moments that signify Europe and receive the attention of the news media. These include signing treaties, elections, and unique events such as the introduction of the common currency, the euro. The empirical studies discussed above suggest that news about European affairs peaks around key events and is visible in domestic economic coverage as well as during national election campaigns. The 'key events' are essential in shaping public opinion about European integration because they constitute some of

the few moments when the EU is visible in mainstream news that attracts a large audience. Other scholars have stressed the crucial role that the media play in shaping public opinion and creating a 'shared European identity' but have also acknowledged that collaborative pan-European media projects aimed at promoting a common communicative space and European identity have failed (see e.g. Schlesinger, 1997). National news media appear to be a more important forum for such processes.

Journalists play an important mediating role in communication about the EU. In the communication science literature, one area of research deals with the factors that shape and influence news content (see Shoemaker and Reese, 1996, for an overview). A distinction can be made between factors *internal* and *external* to journalism. External factors include, for example, the political system of a country. It may make a difference for the mode of political news coverage whether or not political conflicts and battles are fought in a two-party system or in a multi-party system. Additionally, in the case of the EU, it may matter whether or not a country is generally pro-European or rather EU-sceptic. Factors internal to journalism include the editorial policy of news organizations, the journalistic effort invested in covering an issue/event in terms of staff, resources, and research, and the application of news selection criteria. In the following, a number of dimensions internal to journalism are identified and subsequently investigated in the analysis of the news coverage of EU events.

Factors shaping the news coverage of the EU

Campaign coverage set-up This dimension addresses the structure of a news organization and the effort invested in the coverage of an event/issue. Important questions are: How is the coverage of the event/issue organized? Are special preparations made in advance? Is a special budget allocated? Is the political, economic, and/or specialized staff expanded?

Editorial approach This dimension addresses the formally defined organizational and editorial approach to an event/issue. Important questions are: What is the officially formulated policy on covering an event/issue? Does the news organization assume a reactive role or a proactive, initiating role? What is the policy regarding the coverage of issues brought forward by politicians and political parties?

News selection criteria This dimension addresses the application of news selection criteria in the campaign coverage. The most important news values

found in journalistic practice have been identified as (a) prominence/importance, (b) human interest, (c) conflict/controversy, (d) the unusual, (e) timeliness, and (f) cultural proximity (Shoemaker and Reese, 1996). Important questions are: Are standard criteria for the evaluation of the newsworthiness of an event/issues applied or are special criteria applied? Are special news segments implemented or does news about the event/issue compete equally against all other news?

These three dimensions – which are internal to the news organization – influence the visibility and priority given to an event/issue in the news. The three dimensions also give direction to the *news agenda*. In the media effects literature, an important theoretical framework for understanding the relationship between political actors, the media, and the electorate is the theory of agenda-setting. The process of agenda-setting was most succinctly formulated in the ability of media to tell people ‘what to think about’ rather than ‘what to think’ (Cohen, 1963; McCombs and Shaw, 1972). Consequently, it is important to know which issues media organizations consider to be salient and how this priority of salience emerges.

Most studies of agenda-setting focus on the relationship between the media and the public agenda (Protest and McCombs, 1991). An equally important but less developed field is the dynamics of how the media agenda is formed. In this process of agenda-building, the role played by news organizations and journalists is at the core. Lang and Lang (1991: 278) concluded that ‘the whole question of how issues originate is side-stepped, nor is there any recognition of the process through which agendas are built’. In news coverage of politics, one agenda battle is waged between politicians and the news media. Previous studies of election campaigns across Europe in the 1970s and 1980s have suggested that European broadcasters have traditionally covered elections in a respectful and cautious way, adhering largely to the agenda of parties and politicians (e.g. Asp, 1983; Blumler and Gurevitch, 1989; Hjarvard, 1999; Semetko et al., 1991; Siune and Borre, 1975). This role may be labelled ‘agenda-sending’. Recent research, however, has suggested that this may no longer be the case (see e.g. Blumler and Gurevitch, 1998; Hjarvard, 1999; Norris et al., 1999; de Vreese, 2001). News organizations have been found to be more proactive in their coverage of politics and to exert more discretion when choosing which stories to use and how to cover these issues. This role may more appropriately be labelled ‘agenda-setting’ and influences the choice of issues on the news agenda.

Research questions

This study is a cross-national, comparative analysis of the television news coverage of major EU events. It investigates the structures in news coverage and links these to the factors internal to journalism that have been identified as influencing the production of news. Three member states of the European Union, varying in terms of size and support for advanced European Integration, were selected for the study: two smaller countries – one traditionally in favour of European integration and in the EMU's third phase (the Netherlands) and one EU-sceptic country that, by means of a national referendum in September 2000, decided not to join the EMU's third phase (Denmark) – and a large country (Britain, a rather euro-sceptic country that is yet to determine its future policy on joining the euro zone).

The relevance of the study has its starting point in the lack of systematically collected information about the content of the most important source of information for a majority of European citizens. Given the scarcity of previous research in this field, the aim of the study is to provide an overview of the characteristics of television news coverage of European issues and events.

To gain an initial idea about these characteristics in the different countries, the first research question was:

'How visible are major EU events in British, Danish, and Dutch television news?'

Second, to find out about the news agenda during EU events in the different countries, it was investigated which issues were covered. Given, on the one hand, the observation from previous studies that media attention to EU affairs peaks around special events and, on the other hand, the literature on news values, it was expected that events and issues selected for coverage would meet criteria such as presence of conflict/controversy, prominent actors, and relevance for the country of the news outlet. This led to the following hypothesis with regard to the news agendas in the different countries:

H1: The news agenda with reference to the EU – i.e. the events and issues selected for coverage in the national news – is a function of traditional news selection criteria.

Third, to explore the importance of the various dimensions internal to journalism that influence the news coverage, the second research question was:

'How do news organizations and journalists approach and cover different EU events?'

Method

Television news is the most important source of information for most Europeans on developments in Europe (Eurobarometer 53, 2000), so the study is confined to a content analysis of the two most widely viewed main evening television news programmes in Britain, Denmark, and the Netherlands – one from a publicly funded broadcaster and one from a private network. The relevant networks are the BBC and ITN in Britain, DR and TV2 in Denmark, and NOS and RTL in the Netherlands.²

Period of study

Three major EU events were selected for analysis: the January 1999 first-step introduction of the euro, the June 1999 elections for the European Parliament, and the December 2000 summit in Nice. For each of the three events a period of news that includes both the actual event and time before and after the event was analysed. For the introduction of the euro, a total of 12 days was included in the content analysis (28 December 1998–8 January 1999). For the European elections, held on Thursday, 10 June 1999 in all three countries, a period of two weeks prior to Election Day – previously defined as the campaign length in European elections (Leroy and Siune, 1994) – was included; this means 27 May–9 June 1999. For the European summit in Nice in December 2000, a period of 10 days was chosen. This period ran from 4 December to 14 December 2000, including the actual summit days of 8–11 December 2000.

Three key events were chosen to ensure that news coverage would most likely be present in all countries and therefore comparable. Events were selected that signify European integration (such as the euro) and recurring events (such as the EU summits and the European parliamentary elections) rather than isolated case-studies such as coverage of the BSE issue.

Content analysis

All news programmes were analysed by the principal investigator and trained MA students at the University of Amsterdam. The unit of analysis and of coding was the individual news story. A total of 36 days was coded in all three countries during the three periods. With two news programmes per day per country, this means that 216 programmes were screened to identify news about the EU events.³ To investigate the visibility of the EU events, the length of the news stories was measured. Length is a more appropriate measure of the visibility of topics than the number of stories because the length of the news programmes and of the news stories varies. In addition to the length,

the topic of each story was listed to determine news agendas. A total of 163 EU stories was coded, with Britain accounting for 39 (BBC 22, ITN 17), Denmark 82 (DR 52, TV2 30), and the Netherlands 42 (NOS 24, RTL 18).

Interviews

To explore further the approach taken by news programmes in covering the EU events, a second data source was used: structured interviews with senior political and economic correspondents, senior editorial staff members, editors, and editors-in-chief. A total of 15 interviews (7 in Britain, 5 in Denmark, and 3 in the Netherlands) lasting 1–1.5 hours on average was conducted. The number of editorial staff involved in formulating and implementing policies about EU news coverage is limited. The sample of interviewees includes the majority of the total population of journalists and editors covering 'Europe'. Given the logistical constraints of cross-national research, interviews were restricted to the public broadcasters (BBC, DR, and NOS) and were conducted in conjunction with the 1999 European elections.⁴

The interviews followed a common interview protocol, with questions pertaining to the degree of organizational effort, the editorial approach, and the application of news selection criteria. Themes such as priority of and approach to news about the EU and the 1999 European elections were addressed in each interview.

Results

Visibility of EU events

The first research question addressed the visibility of the three EU events in Britain, Denmark, and the Netherlands. Table 1 provides an overview of the number of stories and their share of the total coverage for each of the six news programmes during each event. Table 1 shows that the Danish public broadcaster (DR) devoted the most attention (17% of the total broadcast time in the period) to the introduction of the euro. The two Dutch news programmes were comparable (around 12%) with the British around 6%. The June 1999 elections for the European Parliament received only limited coverage in the three countries. The news programmes of the two Danish networks TV2 and DR paid most attention to the elections (9 and 14% respectively). The BBC spent around 5% of the news during the campaign on the elections and ITN spent 3%. The Dutch networks NOS and RTL4 mentioned the elections only once, on the evening prior to Election Day. The December 2000 EU summit

in Nice received by far the most coverage of the three events included in the study. Again, Danish news covered the event most extensively, with 17–22% of the total news coverage during the period devoted to the summit. As also shown in Table 1, British news spent 7–14% and Dutch news 10–14% of the news on the summit.

The distribution of news stories per day during the three events (see the table and figures in the appendix) gives an overview of the pattern of the coverage. This day-to-day breakdown shows that for the first event, the January 1999 first-step introduction of the euro, news attention peaked around the official launch (1 January 1999) and the introduction of the euro on the stock exchanges world-wide, which was the first official trading day (4 January 1999). For the European elections, coverage was most visible during the final days of the campaign. For the Nice summit, most news in all countries was centred on the days of the summit itself, but Danish television in particular also aired stories about the summit in advance of the event itself.

The news agenda

With respect to the composition of the news agenda, it was hypothesized (H1) that the selection of events and issues would be influenced by conventional news selection criteria.

Table 1 Visibility of television news about the January 1999 introduction of the euro, the June 1999 European parliamentary elections, and the December 2000 EU summit

		<i>Introduction of the euro</i>		<i>European elections</i>		<i>Nice summit</i>	
		<i>n</i>	<i>%</i>	<i>n</i>	<i>%</i>	<i>n</i>	<i>%</i>
Britain	BBC	6	6.7	6	5.2	10	14.8
	ITN	6	5.2	4	2.9	7	7.6
Denmark	DR	17	17.0	15	14.2	19	22.0
	TV2	6	8.0	9	9.6	15	17.2
Netherlands	NOS	11	12.5	1	1.5	12	14.4
	RTL	11	11.6	1	0.9	6	10.3

Note: *n* refers to number of stories. Percentage entries refer to the share of news about the EU events in the total coverage of each news bulletin per period. The three periods include the following days: introduction of the euro: 28 December 1998–8 January 1999; European elections: 27 May–9 June 1999; Nice summit: 4–14 December 2000.

During the introduction of the euro, all programmes devoted attention to the novelty of the event and followed the introduction of the currency through the different time zones of the world on the first day of trading. British news referred to the future role of the pound sterling as a world currency and to the domestic political battles over the euro. Danish news focused on the implications of the new currency for Danish businesses and consumers. Dutch news centred its coverage on the considerable workload imposed on the financial sector to complete conversion for the introduction of the new currency.

During the campaign for the European elections few issues dominated the coverage. The elections were by and large neglected in the Netherlands; only one, rather obligatory story was carried on 9 June 1999 by both channels. As Table 2 shows, the British news agenda was dominated by the expected low turnout at the elections. ITN in particular chose to cover the anticipated apathy by the British electorate, whereas the BBC placed the elections in the context of the ongoing political disagreement on the euro issue. In Denmark, the agendas of the two broadcasters differed substantially. Whereas TV2 focused on the expected low turnout and the fact that more and more celebrities were running as candidates in the elections, public broadcaster DR devoted time to long-term EU evolution plans and election polls. Most coverage, however, was devoted to the issue of fraud and corruption in the EU, which was still salient in the election campaign after the resignation of the European Commission earlier in 1999.

The television news coverage of the Nice summit was diverse and included different themes. As Table 2 shows, the controversial nature of the summit was at the core of the coverage. All networks devoted attention to the demonstrations in the streets of Nice prior to the summit. Dutch television focused in particular on the distribution of votes in the European Council. This issue included reports about the difficult relationship with neighbouring Belgium, the negotiation and charring qualities of host country France, and the French–German power play over the vote distribution. Danish television focused in more detail on the pre-summit meetings with the heads of government of the future members of the EU. The enlargement issue was used as a platform to discuss the evolution of the EU and the decision-making procedures. The question of a permanent or rotating Commissioner system was covered extensively (as in the case of Ireland). In the immediate aftermath of the summit attention was paid to the question of whether or not elements in the Treaty of Nice would be in conflict with the Danish constitution, which would trigger another national referendum to ratify the treaty. During the first days of the summit, British news devoted most attention to future pan-European defence operations and a defence

Table 2 Key issues on the television news agenda during three EU events

		<i>Euro introduction (January 1999)</i>	<i>European parliamentary elections (June 1999)</i>	<i>Nice summit (December 2000)</i>
Britain	BBC	British economy Economic repercussions Stock exchange launch	Euro Proportional representation	EU defence policy Riots Veto on tax and social security Vote distribution in Council Domestic political implications
	ITN	Stock exchange launch	Expected low turnout	EU defence policy Riots Veto on tax and social security Domestic political implications
Denmark	DR	Danish economy Danish consumers/companies The currency Stock exchange launch	Fraud/corruption EU evolution Polls/rallies	Crisis in European integration project Enlargement of European Union One Commissioner per country Vote distribution in Council Riots German–French power play Referendum required to ratify Nice treaty?
	TV2	Stock exchange launch Danish consumers/companies	Celebrity elections Public disinterest	Crisis in European integration project Enlargement of European Union One Commissioner per country Riots German–French power play Referendum required to ratify Nice treaty?
Netherlands	NOS	Conversion work Stock exchange launch	Election reminder	Riots Crisis in negotiations; poor result Vote distribution in Council Conflict with Belgium France as host and negotiator
	RTL	Conversion work Stock exchange launch	Election reminder	Riots Crisis in negotiations; poor result Vote distribution in Council Conflict with Belgium France as host and negotiator

unit's relation to NATO. Towards the end of the meeting, coverage was concentrated on the right of veto in the Union and in particular on British interests in a veto on social security and tax issues.

In the coverage of the European summit in Nice, all networks emphasized the crucial nature of the event for the future enlargement and development of the European Union. The news agendas were driven by the presence of conflict and controversy and the attendance of all EU prime ministers, on top of the seriousness of the matter. BBC and ITN both opened their coverage by focusing on the tension.

With riots on the outside and tension on the inside, European leaders are preparing themselves for a summit on the biggest rebuild of the Union since Maastricht. . . . The differences in interpretation between French president Chirac and Tony Blair today was a telling reminder of how difficult it is going to be to reach an agreement here. (BBC reporter, 7 December 2000)

ITN echoed this by referring to 'Riots on the Riviera' (7 December 2000) and 'it is nice in Nice, but the summit is in troubled water. With power and national pride at stake, reaching agreement will be more than difficult' (ITN, 10 December 2000). Danish news was not much different: DR (9 December 2000) concluded that 'crisis unravels in Nice as compromise seem further away than ever', and TV2 (9 December 2000) placed responsibility with the French hosts:

Serious crisis in Nice as Germany and France enter row over power distribution in the Union. . . . The nice weather in Nice did not indicate a better climate inside the congress hall. Chirac is asking of all to give in a little, but refrains from doing so himself.

Dutch television reported in similar vein, with NOS (7 December 2000) highlighting 'tension in Nice as European leaders gather to reform the Union and redistribute the power' and RTL (7 December 2000) concluding succinctly that 'we will see a compromise to save the EU, but the summit so far has been bad for the image, bad for the enlargement, and bad for France'.

The editorial approach

The second research question addressed the approach chosen by the different news organizations in their coverage of EU events. In terms of the set-up, the different broadcasters displayed many similarities. None of the news programmes used special segments in their bulletins for any of the three events, which has been traditional during, for example, national election campaigns. The coverage was organized within an existing triadic structure

for political and economic EU news production. The studio headquarters and central newsroom cooperated with political units (at Westminster in Britain, The Hague in the Netherlands, and Christiansborg, Copenhagen, in Denmark) and the news organization's Brussels desk. Prior to the three events, additional funds were allocated and advance planning in special units staffed with political and economic reporters and correspondents was initiated.

In Britain, the EU events were more visible on the BBC than on ITN. The BBC *9 o'clock News* can commission stories to be produced by the Brussels bureau by making use of an allocated budget per BBC news outlet. Prior to the introduction of the euro and the European elections, the editor-in-chief of the *9 o'clock News* commissioned a few stories dealing with Europe. These stories about the introduction of the euro were eventually aired, indicating that the event was upgraded and to a certain extent overriding conventional news selection criteria. For the European elections, the editor-in-chief said the following:

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 centre-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. (BBC editor-in-chief, 23 September 1999)

Table 3 summarizes the editorial approach and application of news selection criteria by news outlet. In Britain, the BBC on some occasions initiated stories of its own and actively set the agenda, e.g. educational stories about interest rates, mortgages, and pound–euro price comparisons at the launch of the euro (BBC, December 1998). ITN on the other hand was rather reactive in its approach, adhering more to the established scheduled agenda. The events were not given extra attention and they were evaluated against conventional news criteria. With reference to the European elections, the editor-in-chief of ITN's *Evening News* indicated that the political arena was inadequate in providing a stimulating and enticing campaign environment:

We did not cover the European elections in as much detail as we planned to. It was overshadowed by the war of Kosovo . . . The whole political class and professional politicians were focused on Kosovo and not the elections. They turned to the European elections as a sort of secondary issue. They did not create the sense of excitement, importance, and relevance to the elections. The campaign was very short and there were only two issues in the UK: The currency, which the Conservatives successfully made their issue . . . and the lack of voter interest which was very noticeable. (ITN editor-in-chief, 26 September 1999)

Table 3 Overview of the editorial approach and application of news selection criteria by British, Danish and Dutch broadcasters

		<i>Editorial approach</i>	<i>News selection criteria</i>
Britain	BBC	Agenda-setting Somewhat proactive	Some extra attention
	ITN	Agenda-sending Reactive	Normal criteria applied
Denmark	DR	Agenda-setting Proactive	Extra attention
	TV2	Agenda-sending Somewhat proactive	Some extra attention
Netherlands	NOS	Agenda-sending Somewhat reactive	Normal criteria applied
	RTL	Agenda-sending Reactive	Normal criteria applied

Danish news, in particular public broadcaster DR, provided the most coverage of all the events, comparatively speaking. The events were given extra priority and were upgraded somewhat at the expense of other political and economic news. DR additionally employed an active and agenda-setting approach by, for example, bringing the issue of fraud and corruption to the forefront during the campaign for the European elections. The editor-in-chief noted the following on the choice of a proactive and agenda-setting approach:

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. (DR editor-in-chief, 7 June 1999)

DR's proactive, agenda-setting approach also translated into a number of historically focused stories aired prior to the December 2000 Nice summit. Here, DR provided an introduction to contemporary French domestic politics (5 December 2000) and to the historical German–French power play in Europe (8 December 2000) in order to establish a context in which to interpret the agenda of the summit. The second Danish channel, TV2, overall

gave somewhat less priority to the European events compared with its national competitor. The choice of stories largely followed the political agenda and, though the news programme at times gave extra attention to the events by lowering the threshold for getting into the news, most of the time the news channel was fairly reactive to the real life events. The editor-in-chief commented on the evaluation according to standard selection criteria:

It is tough 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. (TV2 editor-in-chief, 26 September 2000)

In the Netherlands, news about the introduction of the euro, the European elections, and the Nice summit was largely evaluated against conventional news values and selection criteria. For the parliamentary elections, NOS 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. (NOS vice editor-in-chief, 11 June 1999)

In the coverage of the Nice summit, NOS carried more stories, including some features dealing with the historical development of the EU and the relationship between France and Germany. RTL generally exerted more discretion in choosing the events. Its coverage was dominated by reactions to the scheduled agenda and the events were evaluated against conventional news selection criteria, resulting in a fairly low visibility, particularly of the European elections.

Discussion

This study was a cross-national, comparative analysis of the television news coverage of major EU events, investigating how factors internal to journalism may influence coverage in Britain, Denmark, and the Netherlands. The findings support the notion from previous studies that media attention to genuine EU events/issues is cyclical (Norris, 2000; de Vreese et al., 2001). 'Europe' was only marginally visible on the television news agenda prior to

the events and vanished almost completely after a peak of varying intensity. In terms of the visibility of the three key events, important patterns and differences emerged. Within each country, the public broadcasters on all occasions covered the events in more detail than their private counterparts did, albeit at times the difference was marginal and coverage was at a low level. This finding is in line with research in each of the three countries suggesting that the public broadcasters, in general, devote more time to political and economic topics than do their private counterparts (see, for example, Hjarvard (1999) for Denmark, McNair (1999) for Britain, and Semetko and Valkenburg (2000) for the Netherlands).

When comparing the relative amounts of coverage of the different events, a similar pattern was found in all three countries: the Nice summit was covered most intensively, followed by the introduction of the euro and the European elections. News practitioners themselves offer some explanations for this priority of the election campaign in their recognition of the highly competitive news environment. Additional explanation can be found in literature on news values in which conflict/controversy and the prominence of important persons/actors are consistently listed as important values (e.g. Galtung and Ruge, 1965; McManus, 1994; Shoemaker and Reese, 1996). The introduction of the euro happened pretty smoothly and predictions of crashing stock markets or technology failures remained thoughts rather than realities. The absence of turbulence surrounding the event – with the negligible exception of a pie smashed in the face of the Dutch Minister of Finance, Mr Zalm, when opening the Dutch stock exchange – may explain why the euro was not covered more intensively. The Nice summit, however, was loaded with tension and conflict. The tension was found both in the streets in terms of demonstrations and in the negotiations in terms of national power plays and the psychology of marathon negotiations.

In the cross-national comparative perspective, Danish news, on average, devoted more attention to the EU events than did British and Dutch news during all three periods. This difference was most distinct for the European elections, but was also found for the introduction of the euro and the Nice summit. At the launch of the euro, Danish news covered the event most intensively, followed by the Netherlands with Britain third. One explanation for this cross-national difference may be the fact that Denmark was outside the euro zone though still dependent on the EU economy. When looking at factors internal to journalism, Danish news organizations invested more effort in advance planning and in the allocation of resources and staff. Prior to the European elections, the public broadcaster even conducted a national survey to determine the most important issues on the public agenda concerning Europe and consequently gave these issues priority in the news. Factors

external to journalism that may explain the cross-national differences include the fact that a public debate is taking place about the direction of the evolution of the EU and the role played by Denmark in this process. Additionally, at the launch of the euro Denmark was facing a national referendum on the issue, and at the Nice 2000 summit this referendum had just taken place. In comparison, the Netherlands is dominated by a generally supportive consensus on the EU and public opinion trend data show a stable and high level of support for EU membership, which minimizes public deliberation on the issue (Eurobarometer 53, 2000). This is in line with observations made about the 1979 European elections where it was concluded that television coverage reflected and confirmed what was already known about the relationship between countries and the European Community (McQuail and Bergsma, 1983).

In terms of the news agenda in the three countries, both similarities and differences were found. In general, there was a tendency to respond to the political agenda and to cover European issues when, for example, summits actually take place and all European leaders are gathered. However, some programmes, most notably the public broadcasters DR and the BBC, initiated their own stories, lowered the threshold for the EU for making it into the news, and consequently played an active part in deliberately setting their own agenda. A shared pattern was found in the degree to which domestic interests influenced the coverage of the three EU events. During the European election campaign in Britain, the national political battle over the euro was at the forefront. At the Nice summit, Dutch news played up the relation with Belgium in the negotiations on the distribution of votes in the Council. Danish news focused on the attempt to keep its Commissioner and speeding up the enlargement process, as well as the question of the necessity for a national referendum to ratify the treaty. British news was centred on the defence issue and the veto right, which was interpreted with domestic politics as the backdrop. 'Had we given away on tax and social security, Tony Blair would have walked straight back to the Mother and Father of all rows in the House of Commons. At a point not far from an election this would have been a losing decision', the BBC concluded (9 December 2000) and both BBC and ITN provided domestic political reactions from the then Tory leader Hague on the result in Nice. This tendency to domesticate international events has been observed for both EU and other areas of foreign news coverage (e.g. Cohen, 1996; Hjarvard, 2001; Leroy and Siune, 1994) and is in line with the 'cultural proximity' news value (Shoemaker and Reese, 1996). These observations call for more research on how news media put a local or domestic spin on international events and how national political actors either take credit or give blame on the European political stage.

Theoretically, a lesson to be learned from this initial investigation of the

news coverage of EU events is the important role played by media organizations in defining the scope and content of the attention devoted to European affairs. The identified cross-national differences in terms of visibility and the composition of the news agenda are, at least in part, the result of different editorial policies and varying degrees of effort invested in the coverage. Public broadcasters in particular appear to devote more time to key EU events, which implicitly provides them with more discretion in setting the agenda. Danish DR and the BBC, and to a lesser extent Dutch NOS, assumed a more proactive and agenda-setting role than their private counterparts. This finding dovetails with recent studies of election campaign news coverage that suggest that public broadcasters exert more discretion in setting their agenda, apply more selective editorial policies, and provide more analytical and interpretative coverage (Norris et al., 1999; de Vreese, 2001).

The current study of the news coverage of EU events points to a number of practical implications. News is driven by well-defined news values as well as, on the one hand, commercial interests to maximize audience size and, on the other hand, the European public broadcasting ethos of providing information and education. The complex and lengthy decision-making processes within the European Union are not compatible with the demands for a rapidly delivered and preferably controversial news. The EU is a challenge for both politicians and the news media. First, it is a challenge for political actors to offer information about European integration in a manner that fits the format of important information sources such as television news. This task is implicit in the need to create public awareness (and ultimately support and legitimacy) for many of the issues on the EU agenda. Second, it is a challenge for news organizations and journalists to report adequately about complex political and economic matters that rank among the most significant changes in Europe since World War II.

This study investigates the structure of news coverage of EU events as the initial phase of a research trajectory that is in need of further development. It is a largely descriptive enterprise that is limited in that it focuses on television only, looks at only a limited number of events, and is confined to three European countries. Further research should address the nature of media attention to EU affairs during routine periods that are not dominated by key events as well as investigate systematically the role of the EU in domestic political and economic news. Once more is known about how the media deal with the EU, an important next step will be to link the news coverage to public opinion formation about European issues.

First attempts in this direction have, for example, compared monthly trends in the tone of press coverage of European issues with public opinion data and reported significant correlations between a negative tone of news

and low support for EU membership and disapproval of the euro (Norris, 2000). In an experimental study of the effect of press coverage of the euro, Valkenburg et al. (1999) found that the way in which news is framed might affect how the public perceives the issue. Using panel survey data and a content analysis of the news coverage of the campaign in the Danish 2000 euro referendum, it was found that exposure to public television was associated with voting in favour of the euro whereas exposure to private television was associated with voting 'no' (de Vreese and Semetko, 2001). More research, drawing on different methodologies, is required fully to understand the dynamics of the part played by news in public opinion formation about the EU. Pertinent questions are, for example, what key events contribute to the public awareness and understanding of EU issues, how summits affect the popularity of domestic political leaders, and how the news coverage of national referendums on European issues influences domestic politics. It is to be hoped that this study may serve as a baseline for understanding the structures and characteristics of news about the EU.

Appendix

Table 4 Daily overview of news stories

		Day	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	<i>n total</i>	
Introduction of the euro	Britain	BBC	-	1	-	1	1	-	-	2	1	-	-	-	X	X	6	
		ITN	-	-	-	1	1	1	1	2	-	-	-	-	X	X	6	
	Denmark	DR	2	1	2	-	1	2	2	5	1	-	1	-	X	X	17	
		TV2	1	-	1	-	1	-	1	2	-	-	-	-	X	X	6	
	Netherlands	NOS	-	1	1	2	1	1	1	3	-	-	1	-	X	X	11	
		RTL	-	1	2	3	1	-	1	2	-	1	-	-	X	X	11	
European elections	Britain	BBC	2	-	-	-	-	1	-	1	-	-	-	1	-	1	6	
		ITN	1	-	-	-	-	-	1	-	-	-	-	1	-	1	4	
	Denmark	DR	4	1	-	-	-	-	1	-	-	-	1	1	3	4	15	
		TV2	-	-	1	1	-	2	-	-	-	1	1	1	-	2	9	
	Netherlands	NOS	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	1	1
		RTL	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	1	1
Nice summit	Britain	BBC	1	1	-	2	1	1	1	3	-	-	-	X	X	X	10	
		ITN	-	-	1	1	1	1	1	2	-	-	-	X	X	X	7	
	Denmark	DR	1	1	2	2	2	1	3	5	2	-	-	X	X	X	19	
		TV2	1	-	3	2	1	1	3	3	1	-	-	X	X	X	15	
	Netherlands	NOS	-	-	1	5	3	1	1	1	-	-	-	X	X	X	12	
		RTL	-	-	1	1	1	1	1	1	-	-	-	X	X	X	6	

Note: The dates included for the three events are: introduction of the euro: 28 December 1998–8 January 1999; European elections: 27 May 1999–9 June 1999; Nice summit: 4–14 December 2000.

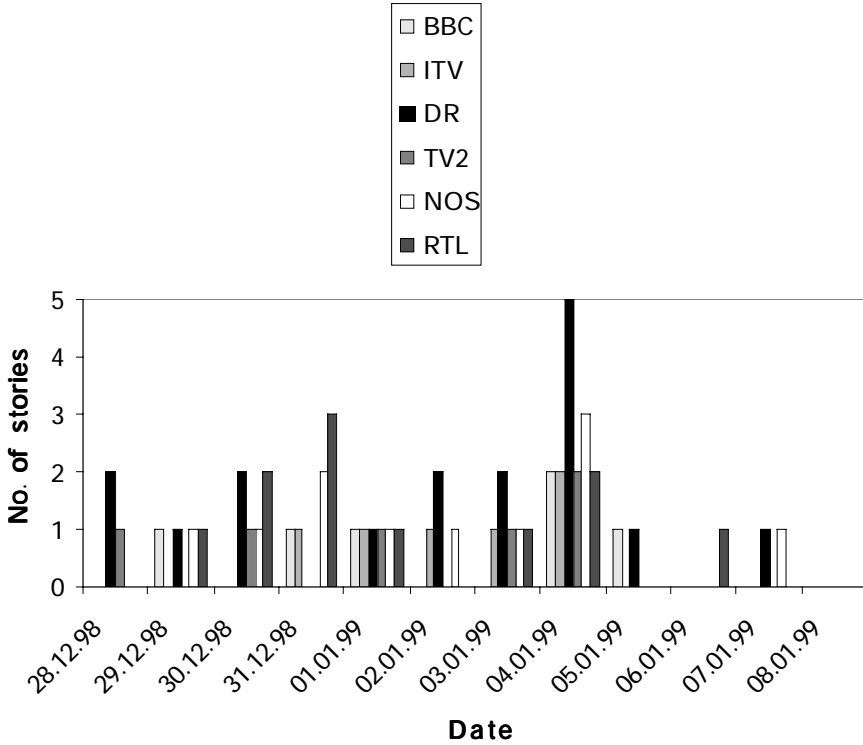


Figure 1 Visibility of news about the launch of the euro.

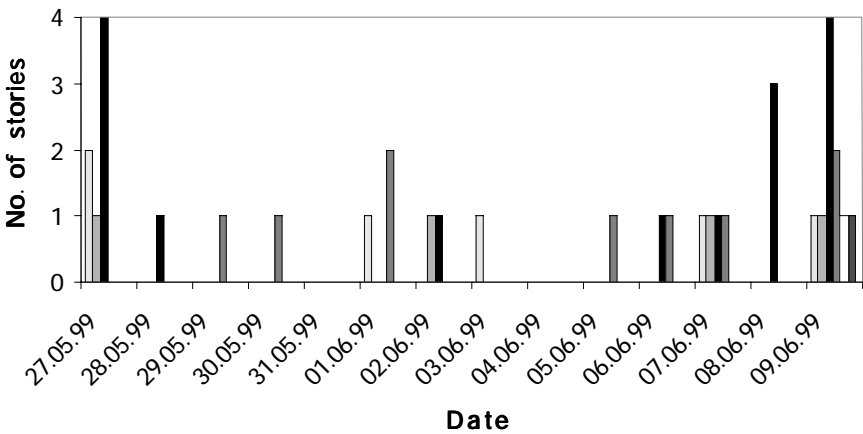


Figure 2 Visibility of news about the European elections.

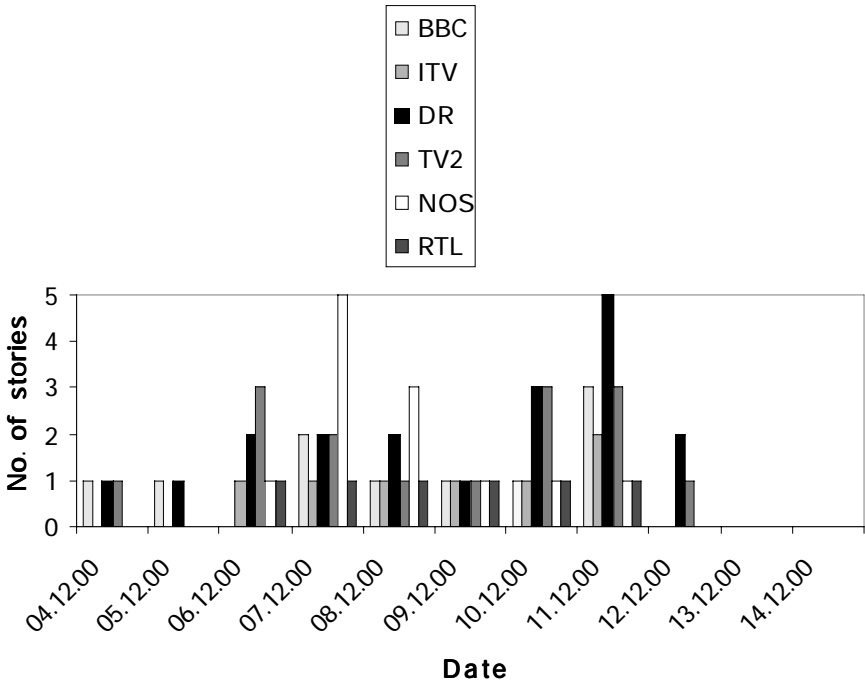


Figure 3 Visibility of news about the European summit, Nice.

Notes

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- 1 A research project currently under way at the Amsterdam School of Communications Research ASCoR, University of Amsterdam, analyses the news media coverage of the 1999 European elections in all 15 EU countries, and studies effects of media system differences on media content as well as the effects of news coverage on public opinion and voting behaviour.
- 2 The news programmes included in the study were BBC *9 o'clock News* (currently rescheduled at 10 p.m.), and the ITN *Evening News* (originally at 10 p.m., currently at 6.30 p.m.) in Britain, DR *TV-Avisen* at 9 p.m. and TV2 *Nyhederne* at 7 p.m. in Denmark, DR *Journaal* at 8 p.m. and RTL *Nieuws* at 7.30 p.m. in the Netherlands. TV2 in Denmark is a mixed revenue network (two-thirds funded privately and one-third funded publicly).
- 3 Owing to technical difficulties the following days are omitted from the analysis: BBC 13.12.00, 14.12.00; ITV 28.12.98, 29.12.98; TV2 31.12.98, 27.05.99; RTL 13.12.00, 14.12.00.

- 4 Because the European elections were held on 10 June 1999 in all three countries, the interviews could not take place on the same day. In Denmark, these were carried out on 7–8 June, with a follow-up round in September 2000. In the Netherlands, the interviews were held on 10–11 June. In Britain, the interviews were conducted after the elections (September 1999) and also included ITN. For more details about the interviews, see de Vreese (2000).

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