



European Union Politics

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EU Politics on Television News

A Cross-National Comparative Study

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ABSTRACT

Previous research tells us little about the ways in which the European Union is portrayed on main evening television news. We therefore content analyzed 11,722 stories broadcast in main evening television news in five EU countries over an 11-month period in 2000. There was an invisible importance to EU news: although the share of the news devoted to EU affairs was low, when EU news did appear it tended to be more prominent than other political news. We also found that the thematic structure of the EU news was similar across the countries and that EU coverage was not predominantly domestic in most of the countries. Evaluations of the EU were rare, but when they did appear they tended to be negative.

KEY WORDS

- comparative research
- content analysis
- European Union
- media
- news coverage

Over the past two decades, the European Union (EU) has become an important political force in Europe, despite varying support in its member countries. During the same period, the broadcasting systems in Europe have undergone enormous changes (Semetko et al., 2000) and it is often assumed that the media in general and television in particular shape public opinion about the EU (e.g. Hewstone, 1986). Although several studies have dealt with public opinion about the EU (e.g. Everts and Sinnott, 1995; Gabel and Palmer, 1995; Niedermayer and Sinnott, 1995), research focusing on the media coverage of the EU is scarce. The few existing content analyses of the coverage of the EU are confined to EU key events such as elections to the European Parliament (Blumler, 1983; Kevin, 2001; Leroy and Siune, 1994), the 1999 introduction of the euro (de Vreese et al., 2001), or summits of the heads of government (Semetko and Valkenburg, 2000). We know little, however, about the everyday coverage of the EU and its potential variation in various EU member states.¹ With respect to both formal and substantive characteristics, it is unclear how the everyday coverage of EU affairs can be described.

This study has two goals. The first is to learn more about the visibility of EU coverage in terms of its formal characteristics, such as the frequency, placement, and length of EU stories. The second goal is to analyze some essential substantive features of EU coverage, such as its thematic structure, domesticity, and evaluative tendency. We focus on television because the majority of EU citizens consistently refer to television as their main source of information about the EU (e.g. Eurobarometer 51–54). We investigate the main evening television news in five EU member countries: Denmark, France, Germany, the Netherlands, and the United Kingdom. Our study will provide some evidence concerning the EU's so-called 'communication deficit' (e.g. Meyer, 1999). From a cross-nationally comparative perspective, this article may also inform the discussion about the extent to which national public spheres have become Europeanized (e.g. Eder, 2000; Gerhards, 2000; Schlesinger, 1999). Our study also goes beyond previous research, which focused only on EU key events, to offer a more encompassing notion of how the EU is represented in daily television news.

Research questions and expectations

The field of research on the news coverage of the EU, though small, is not homogeneous. Thematically, the studies usually deal with highly prominent EU events such as those mentioned in the introduction. Methodologically speaking, quantitative content analyses (e.g. Blumler, 1983; Semetko and Valkenburg, 2000) are to be found along with more qualitative narrative

approaches (Kevin, 2001). Theoretically speaking, the focus is on the framing concept (e.g. de Vreese et al., 2001; Semetko and Valkenburg, 2000), on notions of EU affinity of EU member states (e.g. Leroy and Siune, 1994), or on Habermas's public sphere concept (e.g. Kevin, 2001). Although research has approached the news coverage of EU affairs from different angles, it is striking that to date no study has dealt with the simple, yet important, issue of the formal characteristics of EU television news coverage. We know little about the amount of EU coverage, or the placement and length of EU stories. A thorough account of these formal characteristics is important in order to put Europe into perspective on the broader map of news reporting. The amount, placement, and length of EU stories can provide insights into how much importance journalists ascribe to the coverage of European affairs. In what follows, we present research questions and specify our expectations concerning the results, wherever possible, by referring to the existing literature. All research questions are addressed in a cross-national comparative fashion.

Formal characteristics

Amount of EU coverage

Several European election studies suggest that EU coverage increases shortly before the election day and vanishes shortly thereafter (Leroy and Siune, 1994; Reiser, 1994; Siune, 1983). This pattern was also found for the coverage of the 1999 introduction of the euro (de Vreese et al., 2001), suggesting that the EU becomes visible only in the context of EU key events. Theoretical considerations may also support the expectation of a largely invisible EU coverage. Meyer (1999) found that it is generally hard for journalists to cover EU affairs because EU decision-making lacks transparency and is usually kept away from the public eye. Along with the EU's communication deficit, journalists themselves often consider EU affairs to be non-issues (de Vreese, 2001).

Apart from that, scholars have stressed that the idea of a European public sphere may be unrealistic and should be replaced with the model of segmented transnational public spheres that originate around particular issues (e.g. Eder, 2000; Schlesinger, 1999). However, in one of the few empirical studies on the issue, Gerhards (2000) recently demonstrated that even the less ambitious notion of a Europeanization of national public spheres is hardly tenable. We therefore expect the *amount* of EU news as a proportion of the main evening news program (which also includes non-political news) to be low. The share of EU news in political news will be somewhat higher. Relating EU news coverage to the entire news program on the one hand and to political news on the other is an acknowledgment of the 'softening' of news, which

allegedly pays less attention to 'hard' political issues (e.g. Blumler, 1997, 1999). In other words, the share of EU stories can look very different when related to the entire news program than when related to political news.

As to potential country differences in the amount of EU news, research from the past 20 years suggests that there are no notable differences between EU member states (de Vreese et al., 2001; Leroy and Siune, 1994; Siune, 1983). In most EU member states, little attention is given to the EU in daily or routine coverage. There is one striking exception, however: one study partly based on routine news found that Danish news programs devoted more time to the euro than British, German, and Dutch news programs (de Vreese et al., 2001). If this was purely the result of Denmark not having joined the euro zone, then one might have expected a similar pattern for British news, which was not the case. Consequently, we expect the coverage of European affairs to have a greater share in the television news on Danish television than in the television news of the other countries. In sum, our set of research questions concerning the amount of EU coverage in television news is:

RQ1a: How visible is the EU in the main evening news?

RQ1b: How visible is the EU in the political coverage in the main evening news?

Placement of EU stories

The placement of EU stories has been investigated only by Leroy and Siune (1994) and Reiser (1994) in their studies of the 1989 election campaign. The scholars agree that EU stories were not prominently placed in the news bulletins. Moreover, the percentage of EU stories mentioned in the headlines introducing a particular bulletin was low. The fact that journalists describe EU affairs as lacking news value (de Vreese, 2001) also leads us to expect that, overall, EU stories will be placed in less attractive positions in the bulletins of the news program than other stories. Because scholars found similar patterns in the Belgian and Danish (Leroy and Siune, 1994) and German coverage (Reiser, 1994) of the 1989 European parliamentary election campaign, we further expect that, by and large, this pattern will hold in all countries. We ask:

RQ2: Where are EU stories placed in the main evening news?

The length of EU stories

Although it is a crucial indicator of the importance journalists attribute to a topic, the length of EU stories has not yet been investigated. However, research on news values generally suggests that issues that are low in news value are reported in shorter stories, if at all (e.g. Schulz, 1976; Staab 1990). EU affairs

are seen as lacking both news value and accessibility (de Vreese, 2001; Meyer, 1999). Owing to the additional fact that the length of a news story to some extent relates to its placement in a bulletin, we therefore expect EU stories to be, on average, shorter than other stories. Our research question is:

RQ3: How long are EU stories on average?

Substantive features

The second goal of this study is to describe essential features of the content of EU coverage. We focus on the thematic structure, the domesticity, and the evaluation of the EU in EU stories, thereby linking our study to previous research (e.g. Leroy and Siune, 1994; McQuail and Bergsma, 1983; Siune, 1983).

Thematic structure of EU coverage

The thematic structure of EU coverage is time dependent. For example, ideological conceptions of the future of a common Europe played an important part in the television coverage during the 1979 European election campaign (Schulz, 1983), whereas there were no such issues in the coverage of the 1989 campaign (Leroy and Siune, 1994). Consequently, it is impossible to predict a particular thematic structure for a certain period or for a particular country.

Rather, it seems important to assess whether, during the same period, the thematic structure of EU coverage differs between various EU countries. In previous studies, the thematic structure of EU coverage was found to be by and large similar across various countries during election campaigns (Leroy and Siune, 1994; Siune, 1983). It is unclear whether this extends to longer periods. As will be elaborated upon in the method section, this study investigates the routine coverage in 2000 in small and large EU countries.² In some of the countries (France, Germany, the Netherlands), the euro had been introduced as a common currency in 1999. We expect the size and euro-membership of a country partly to shape the thematic structure of EU coverage. The novelty of an event is an important news value (e.g. Schulz, 1976) and the euro may lack this news value in euro zone countries. We therefore expect euro-related issues hardly to surface on television news in countries that had already introduced the euro (France, Germany, the Netherlands), in contrast to television news in countries that have not joined the euro zone (Denmark and the UK). The size of a country may affect to what extent issues about the further development of the EU are reported. We assume that smaller countries in particular may be concerned about a loss of power in an ever closer

and ever bigger EU. Issues such as the reform of EU decision-making or EU enlargement are therefore more likely to be reported in smaller countries (i.e. Denmark and the Netherlands) than in larger countries (i.e. France, Germany, and the UK). Our general research question is:

RQ4: Is the thematic structure of EU coverage similar across EU member countries?

The domesticity of EU stories

Previous research shows that stories relating to European parliamentary election campaigns are predominantly domestic in character. The election campaigns were primarily linked to domestic concerns, typically portrayed in domestic locales, and the viewers were mainly addressed by communicators of their own nationality (McQuail and Bergsma, 1983; Leroy and Siune, 1994).³ The researchers also found some striking differences between the countries. Whereas the Danish and French news coverage of the 1979 election campaign was heavily domestic, German and Dutch news coverage tended to be more European. The classification of the British coverage as domestic or European depended on the operationalization used (McQuail and Bergsma, 1983). Leroy and Siune (1994) reconfirmed the strong domestic slant of the Danish EU coverage in the 1989 European election campaign.

The domesticity of EU coverage may be affected by a country's support for the EU. Denmark and the UK are EU-skeptic countries (Eurobarometer 51–54) and journalists in these countries may hence cover EU affairs by focusing on the domestic implications. Germany and the Netherlands, by contrast, are EU-supportive countries (Eurobarometer 51–54) and journalists in these countries may therefore emphasize the supranational, European aspects of EU affairs. Although France is traditionally EU-supportive, it is also known for strongly protecting its national culture (e.g. by setting a minimum proportion of French songs to be aired on national radio). As a consequence, French television coverage of EU affairs may also focus more strongly on domestic than on European aspects. In sum, we expect that Danish, British, and French coverage will be more domestic than Dutch and German coverage. Our research question is:

RQ5: Is the everyday coverage of European affairs predominantly domestic?

Evaluation of the EU

The study of evaluations in EU news coverage has consistently concluded that the coverage of EU affairs is predominantly neutral (Leroy and Siune, 1994; Siune, 1983). If there were evaluations of, for example, themes that concerned EU institutions, they tended to be more positive than negative during the 1979

European election campaign (Siune, 1983). This was true for all countries that had been members of the European Economic Community. During the 1989 European election campaign, however, Danish television coverage displayed a slightly negative evaluation of the European Economic Community (Leroy and Siune, 1994). Although more positive in its evaluation of the EC, Belgian television coverage took a slightly negative stance toward the Single European Act. This may be an indicator that the evaluations of the institutional configurations preceding the EU became less positive during the 1980s. More recently, Norris (2000) has suggested that EU coverage is predominantly neutral, but has a negative tendency when it is evaluative. This concurs with more general findings about negativity as a predominant feature of news reporting (Kepplinger and Weissbecker, 1991).

As to potential country differences, one can assume that a country's EU support may play a role. The coverage in EU-supportive countries might be less negative than the coverage in EU-skeptic countries. As a result of this and the aforementioned considerations, we expect the following: EU coverage will be predominantly neutral but, when evaluations occur, they will be negative. Danish and British coverage will be more negative than Dutch, French, and German coverage. Our last set of research questions is:

RQ6a: Is the EU predominantly depicted neutrally?

RQ6b: When evaluations of the EU appear, do they tend to be predominantly negative?

Method

Design and procedure

To investigate the television news coverage of EU affairs cross-nationally, we deliberately selected Denmark, France, Germany, the Netherlands, and the United Kingdom because these countries are relatively similar in their broadcasting systems. The broadcasting system in all five countries stabilized in the phase of 'dual broadcasting' with strong privately and publicly funded networks competing in the same national market (Siune and Hulten, 1998). The countries are also relatively similar in their reporting styles, particularly in comparison with South European countries (Heinderyckx, 1993). If it cannot be ruled out that characteristics of the broadcasting system or country-specific news styles affect EU coverage, then it is beneficial to select countries that are at least similar in these respects (or at least less dissimilar than other EU countries). In the case of differences between the countries, it leaves the

researcher with more confidence that such differences cannot be attributed to the characteristics in which the selected countries are similar, i.e. the characteristics of the broadcasting system or reporting styles (Dogan and Pelassy, 1990; Mackie and Marsh, 1995).

For the period between February 2000 and December 2000,⁴ for each country we content analyzed the main evening news outlet of the most widely watched public broadcasting and private news programs (see Table 1 in the technical appendix for further information).⁵ The main evening news programs we content analyzed are usually devoted to news reporting, and clearly opinion-oriented journalistic forms such as commentaries very rarely appear. For each month, we chose a natural week, which was rotated month-wise (i.e. first complete week in April, second complete week in May, and so on). Around the summits of the EU heads of government in 2000 (in Lisbon, Biarritz, and Nice), we included 11 days in the sample. Overall, 11,722 news stories were content analyzed.⁶ A news story was defined as a semantic entity with at least one topic delimited from another story by a change of topic, and the story constituted the unit of analysis.⁷

The news stories were coded by teams of native speakers from the five countries who had been trained several weeks before coding and were supervised throughout the entire coding process. All training and coding took place centrally at the University of Amsterdam. Because the coders were trained in country groups, we checked that the coder trainers sufficiently agreed in *their* understanding of the coding protocol in order to avoid artifactual country differences resulting from variations in the training. This is in line with suggestions from most recent fundamental research on cross-national comparative analyses (Peter and Lauf, 2002). Thus, before the coder trainers started training the coders, the coder trainers had to do an inter-trainer reliability test, which showed that the trainers highly agreed in their coding. After the trainers had trained the coders, the inter-coder reliabilities were assessed along with the reliabilities between coders and coder trainer on at least 31 randomly selected stories per country. The reliabilities of all measures used in this study are documented separately for each country in the technical appendix (Table 2).

Measures

The measure of length of news stories was straightforward. Coders were instructed to include the anchor's concluding remarks when stopwatching the length of a news story. The placement of a story was operationalized as the number of a particular story in a bulletin. For both length and placement, coders agreed in all their coding decisions. EU stories were defined as stories

in which EU policies, EU events, EU institutions, or EU decision-making were mentioned in at least two complete, independent sentences. The inter-coder agreement was 99% in Germany and 100% in the remaining countries. We operationalized political stories as stories in which regional, national, EU, or international politics and/or politicians and/or political institutions/organizations were mentioned verbally at least once and depicted at least once. In stories without film material, they had to be mentioned at least twice or had to be mentioned and shown in a picture. The inter-coder reliabilities for the pertinent categories varied from 91% in the Netherlands to 100% in the UK.

To assess the thematic structure of EU coverage, for each story the main topic was coded. We defined the main topic as the subject to which the story devoted most of its time. If two or more subjects were equally covered in one story, the subject mentioned first was coded. The inter-coder agreement ranged between 77% in the Netherlands and 86% in Denmark. To analyze the thematic structure of the coverage, we recoded the topics into six EU-related themes: (1) euro and economy (e.g. stories related to the euro and monetary union, EU budget, taxes, business); (2) future evolution of the EU and EU decision-making (e.g. EU enlargement, restructuring of EU institutions); (3) EU policies (e.g. common agricultural policy, common defense policy, food safety regulations, common judicial system); (4) EU sanctions against Austria; (5) conflicts and clashes surrounding EU events or decisions (e.g. inter- and intra-party disagreements and violent demonstrations); and (6) other EU-related issues (e.g. EU in general).

The domesticity of a story was gauged with two measures: (1) the location where a story mainly took place and in terms of its length in the story, and (2) the location depicted as being mainly affected (again in terms of length) by what the story was about.⁸ For the location where a story took place, the inter-coder agreement varied from 95% in Germany and the Netherlands to 100% in the remaining countries. For the location depicted as affected, the inter-coder reliabilities were between 83% in Germany and the UK and 93% in France and the Netherlands. The evaluation of the EU was assessed through explicit judgments of the EU in the news story. It was ensured that the EU was explicitly mentioned and that the evaluation clearly referred to the EU. The inter-coder reliabilities were between 83% in Germany and 100% in Denmark and the UK.

Results

How visible was the EU in the main evening news (research question 1a)? As can be seen in Figure 1, the share of EU stories in the entire coverage did not

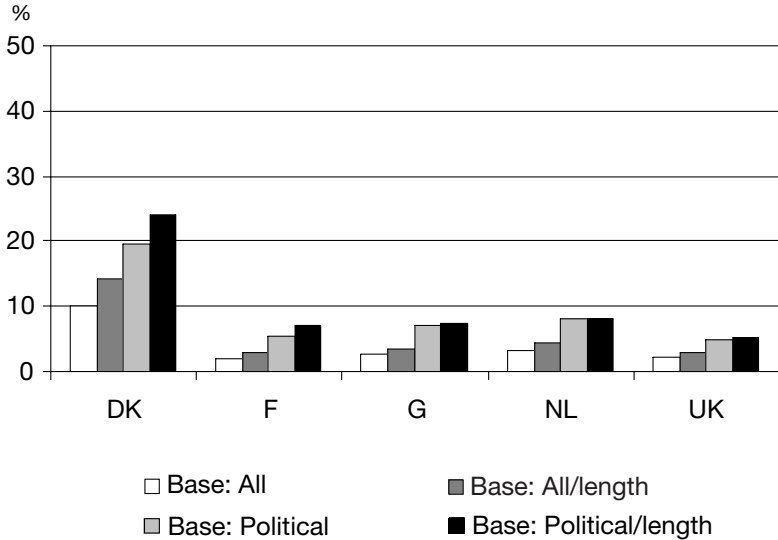


Figure 1 Percentage of EU stories in all stories and in political stories.

exceed 4% in any country except Denmark (10%). What is more, the absolute number of EU stories was low: 216 in Denmark, 71 in France, 64 in Germany, 57 in the Netherlands, and 38 in the UK. However, because the various outlets generally differ in their total length, we also computed the share of EU stories in the entire coverage based on the length of the stories (Table 1 in the technical appendix provides information on the total time devoted to EU and other stories). Even then, however, the share of EU stories did not exceed the 5% level, with the exception of Denmark. When taking the political coverage as the base (research question 1b), the share of EU stories increased to 20% in Denmark, with the other countries remaining below the 7% margin. Computing the share of EU stories in political coverage based on the length measure also did not lift the proportion of EU coverage above the 8% level, Denmark again being the exception with 25% of political news time devoted to EU affairs.

Given that Danish news displayed a much higher amount of EU coverage than the other four countries, it is interesting to see whether EU stories were more prominently placed in Danish news than in the news elsewhere (research question 2). Because the various news outlets differ in the average number of stories in a bulletin, we divided each bulletin into thirds according to its average number of stories (see Table 1 in the technical appendix for further information). This renders a comparison of the placement of EU stories across countries more valid. Figure 2 shows that Danish EU stories

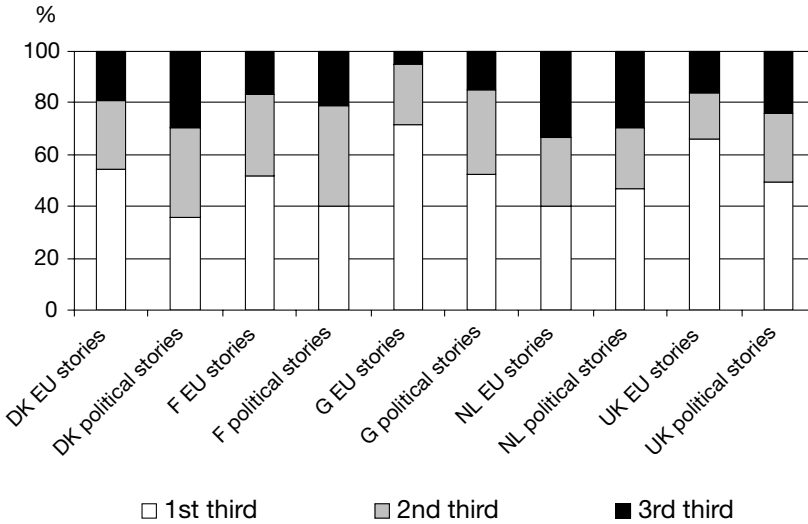


Figure 2 Placement of EU and political stories in bulletins.

were not more prominently placed than EU stories broadcast in other countries. With the exception of the Netherlands, more than 50% of all EU stories were broadcast in the first third of a bulletin and more than 80% of all EU stories could be found in the first two-thirds of a bulletin. In the Netherlands, on the other hand, more than 30% of the EU stories were placed in the last third of a bulletin. If one compares the placement of EU stories with the placement of other political stories, relatively more EU stories than political stories were to be found in the first third of a bulletin. Conversely, political stories appeared more often in the second and third thirds of a bulletin. This unexpected pattern holds for all countries except the Netherlands, where political stories were placed slightly more frequently in the first two-thirds of a bulletin than were EU stories.

Research question 3 dealt with the average length of EU stories. Because the bulletins vary in length, we computed a relative length measure by dividing each story length by the total length of a particular bulletin (see Table 1 in the technical appendix for information on the average length of an outlet). The resulting measure varies between 0 and 1 and renders the length of European stories better comparable across outlets and countries. As can be seen in Figure 3, EU stories were on average longer than other political stories in Denmark, France, and Germany. The length of Dutch and British EU stories did not differ from the length of other political stories.

One could argue that this finding results from the fact that EU stories are

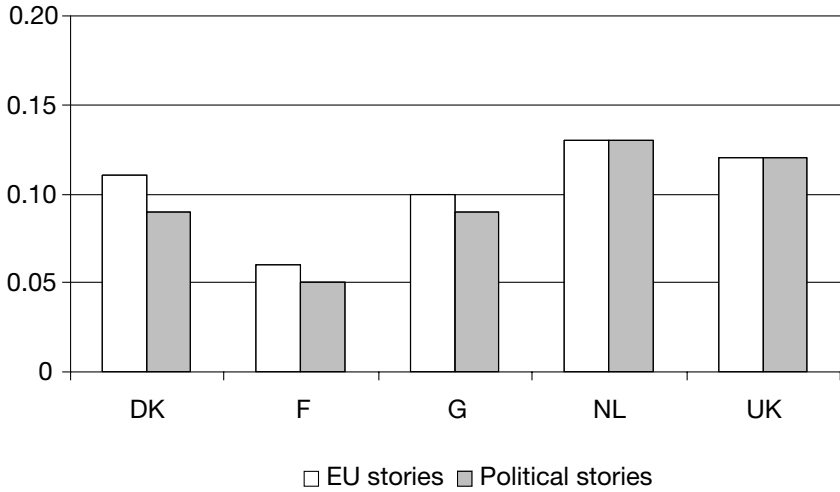


Figure 3 Average relative length of EU and political stories.

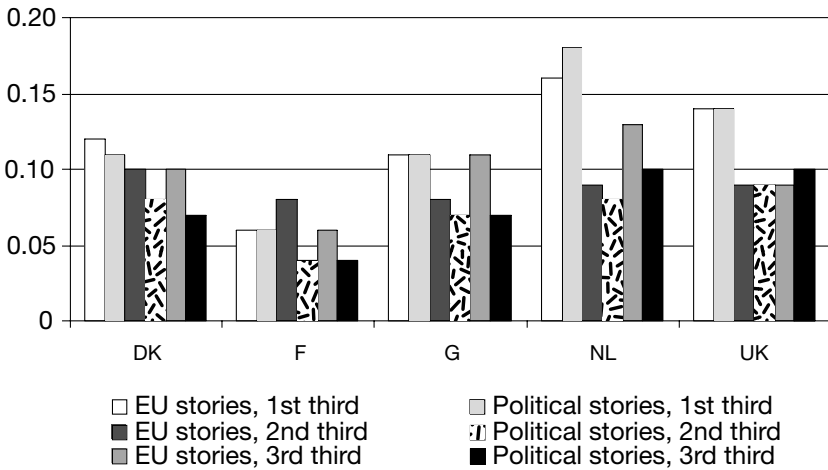


Figure 4 Average relative length of EU and political stories controlled for placement in the bulletin.

better placed than political stories. Because more prominently placed stories tend to be longer, the differences (or similarities) in length between EU stories and political stories should disappear when controlling for the placement of EU stories. Figure 4 shows that this was indeed the case for stories in the first third of a bulletin. EU stories and political stories were equally long in France, Germany, and the UK when placed in the first third of a bulletin. In Denmark,

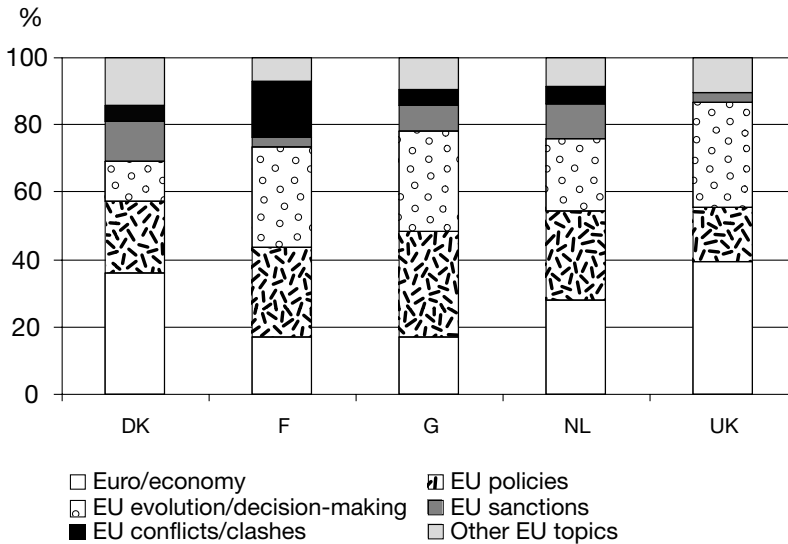


Figure 5 Share of various topics in EU stories.

EU stories in this segment of a bulletin were longer and in the Netherlands they were shorter than other political stories. In the remaining two-thirds of a bulletin, EU stories were generally longer than political stories (with the exception of the UK).

Research question 4 centered upon the similarities or differences in the thematic structure of various countries. Figure 5 shows that all countries to some extent covered the six themes outlined in the previous section. In all of the countries a group of three themes dominated the coverage: the euro and economic issues, the future evolution of the EU/reform of the decision-making processes, and the various EU policies. Another group of three themes seemed to be less frequently covered in all of the countries: the EU sanctions against Austria, conflicts and violent clashes surrounding EU events, and other EU-related themes. The UK was the only country in which the theme 'conflicts and clashes surrounding the EU' never appeared as a *main* topic of an EU story (these conflicts were covered in the UK but not as the primary topic in the story). Thus, the overall thematic focus of the EU coverage was largely comparable across the five countries.

However, the emphasis put on the particular themes within the two groups differed between countries. With respect to the most important group of themes, more than 35% of all broadcast stories dealt with the euro and economic topics in Denmark and the UK. This topic played a less important role in France and Germany. The Netherlands was in between. Conversely,

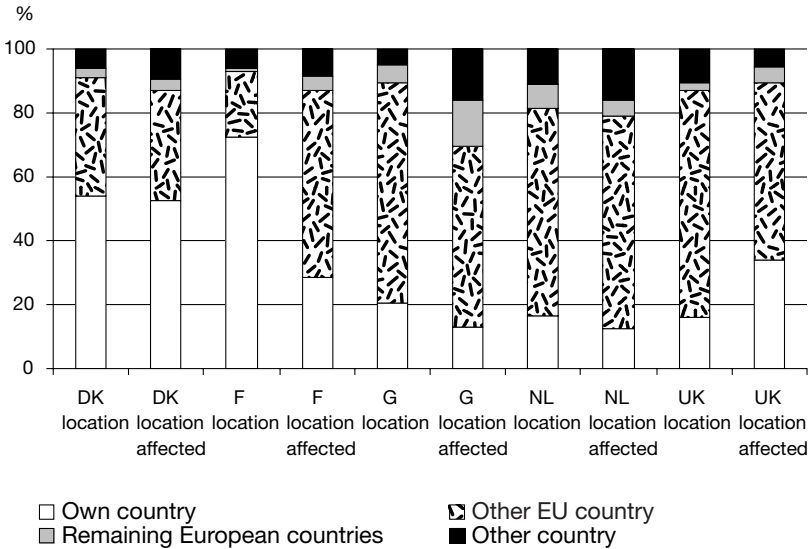


Figure 6 Domestic focus of EU coverage.

Danish and British journalists devoted less attention to the various EU policies such as food safety and common agricultural policies or EU foreign policy activities. Such issues were more prominent in France, Germany, and the Netherlands, with more than a 25% share in the total EU coverage. The smaller EU member countries (Denmark and the Netherlands) covered the future evolution of the EU and the reform of its decision-making processes less frequently than did the bigger countries (France, Germany, and the UK). In the latter countries, nearly one-third of the EU coverage was devoted to this theme.

With respect to the less important group of themes, the countries again differed in their emphases. For the sanctions against Austria, we found a split between small and large countries: the theme had a share of more than 10% in Danish and Dutch news but was hardly visible on French and British news; German news was in between. Conflict and violent clashes surrounding EU events figured prominently in French coverage. This theme was also covered in Danish, Dutch, and German news, though less often, but it never figured as main topic in the British coverage.

Whether the coverage of EU stories was predominantly domestic (research question 5) can be seen in Figure 6. There was a clear split between Denmark and France on the one hand and Germany, the Netherlands, and the UK on the other in the location of EU stories. The majority of Danish and

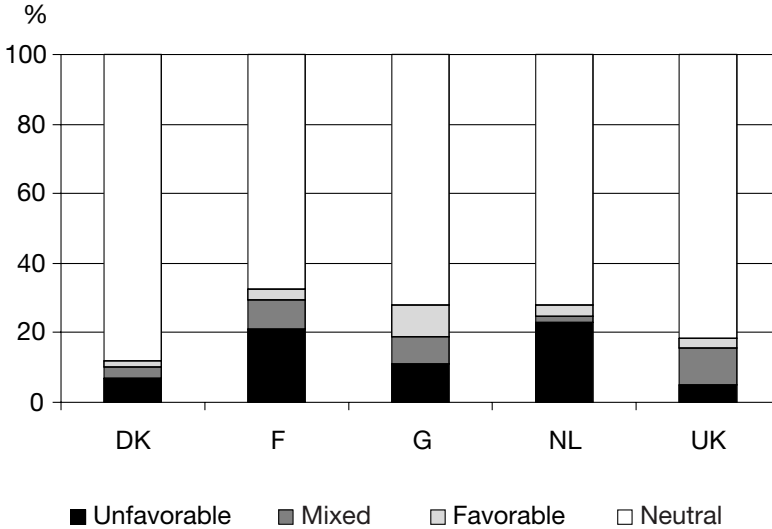


Figure 7 Explicit evaluation of the EU.

French EU stories took place in Denmark and France, whereas the majority of German, Dutch, and British EU stories were located in *another* EU country. Contrary to our expectations, this pattern even remained stable when analyzing the location that was depicted as affected by the story topic. The majority of EU stories in Germany, the Netherlands, and the UK depicted another EU country as being mainly influenced by what the story was about. Interestingly, this was also the case for French news. Only Danish news focused predominantly on the consequences of a particular topic for Denmark.

In most of the stories, the EU was depicted neutrally, as Figure 7 shows (research question 6a). This was in line with our expectations. However, there were some noteworthy country differences. In the UK and, particularly, in Denmark, the EU was more frequently depicted neutrally than in the other three countries. In other words, explicit evaluations of the EU were more frequent in France, Germany, and the Netherlands than in Denmark and the UK. The valence of the evaluations, however, was by and large the same in all countries (research question 6b). If the EU was explicitly evaluated, then negative evaluations outnumbered positive evaluations. This pattern was especially strong in Dutch and French coverage. Danish evaluations of the EU also had a negative slant, but it was less pronounced than in the Netherlands and in France. We found the least negative evaluation tendencies (in terms of the *difference* between positive and negative evaluations) in Germany and the UK.

Discussion

Although TV news is the main source of information about the EU for most people and although news is assumed to shape public opinion about the EU (e.g. Hewstone, 1986), descriptions of EU coverage are often based on dubious assumptions or premature generalizations. This study provides first evidence of how the EU is covered in non-election or routine periods in television news with respect to both formal and substantive characteristics. Using a broader empirical base, our study also confirms some aspects of EU coverage that have been found in studies confined to very specific EU events and periods of time. The study also challenges several intuitively held assumptions about EU coverage.

We find that EU news is rarely visible in main evening television news. Our result confirms Norris's (2000) findings and extends to a routine period what was established in previous research on European election campaigns (Leroy and Siune, 1994; Reiser, 1994; Siune, 1983). Our study shows that the low visibility of EU affairs found in EU parliamentary election campaigns also applies to the non-election or routine news coverage of EU affairs. This was true for all countries in our study except Denmark and points to what Meyer (1999) has termed the 'communication deficit' of the EU. Extending Meyer's ideas, we would argue that the EU's communication deficit entails not only a lack of active communication, but also a lack of being communicated in the media. Moreover, our findings do not lend support to notions of a European public sphere. Rather it seems that, at least in mainstream television, even the notion of a Europeanization of national public spheres is far from becoming reality. Our study is the first to demonstrate empirically in a cross-national comparative setting that the Europeanization of national television news is considerably lagging behind the Europeanization of the economy and politics.

The Danish exceptionalism in terms of the routine coverage of EU affairs is in line with some more recent findings on the coverage of the introduction of the euro in 1999 (de Vreese et al., 2001). One could argue that the extraordinarily high number of EU stories on Danish television may result from the fact that a referendum on the introduction of the euro was held in Denmark in September 2000, during our period of investigation. However, although by Danish standards the coverage of EU affairs diminished somewhat in the months after the referendum, Danish television networks still broadcast more EU stories than the television networks in any of the other four countries.⁹ Thus, even in periods with crucial events, Danish news seems to devote more attention to EU affairs than news programs in other countries. Drawing on ideas first voiced by Gerhards (2000), we presume that the large

attention to EU affairs in Danish news may be related to a general contentiousness of EU matters in Denmark. This, in turn, leads to conflict, which ultimately is attractive for journalists to report on.

Contrary to previous research by Leroy and Siune (1994), we found that the majority of EU stories were prominently and better placed than political stories, with the exception of the Netherlands. It should be taken into account, however, that Leroy and Siune's study dealt with only two countries and a short period of time. Our study presents an analysis over 11 months in 5 countries. Therefore, we are confident that our findings present a more encompassing notion of the placement of EU stories in television coverage. However, our finding of the relatively prominent placement of EU stories seems to be at odds with our further result that EU stories broadcast in prominent positions were, except in Denmark, shorter or no longer than political stories. EU stories were longer than political stories only if they appeared later in a program.

Along with the already mentioned low share of EU stories in the coverage, these two findings point up a paradox that we will call the *invisible importance* of EU affairs. On the one hand, EU affairs do not appear frequently and are given less journalistic attention than political stories when in highly visible positions of a bulletin. On the other hand, EU affairs are obviously considered important because they are prominently placed. This puzzling finding may also challenge research on news values. If EU affairs indeed lack news value, it is difficult to explain why stories about EU affairs are prominently placed. It may be that the uncontested relevance of EU affairs is not matched by the possibility of transforming them into a catchy story. Our study draws on only five countries whose broadcasting systems are relatively similar. This limits the generalizability of our results. Future research will therefore have to investigate the question of whether the invisible importance of EU affairs also occurs in the television news coverage of, for example, Mediterranean EU countries whose broadcasting style is known to be different (Heinderyckx, 1993).

The thematic structure of the news in all countries was largely dominated by three themes: the euro and pertinent economic issues, the enlargement of the EU along with the reform of EU decision-making, and the various EU policies such as common agricultural and defense policies or food safety regulations. With respect to these broad themes, it seems justified to speak of an EU-related agenda that was broadcast in all five countries we investigated. Television in all of these countries conveyed a more or less similar picture of EU affairs. There are, however, some noteworthy country differences in the emphasis put on particular themes. As expected, the euro played a less important role in the coverage of the countries that were already members of

the euro zone back in 2000. In Denmark and the UK (i.e. in countries that have not joined the euro zone), more attention was devoted to the euro than to any other EU theme. This is in line with findings from news values research, which has pointed out that events that lack novelty are hardly covered (Galtung and Ruge, 1965; Schulz, 1976). In contrast to our expectations, it was the bigger countries (France, Germany, and the UK) that emphasized the further evolution of the EU and the reform of EU decision-making processes more strongly than the smaller countries did (Denmark and the Netherlands). It seems that issues inherently related to the distribution of power within a future EU are more relevant to already powerful countries than to arguably less powerful ones.

In contrast to previous studies (McQuail and Bergsma, 1983; Leroy and Siune, 1994), we did not find EU coverage to be predominantly domestic (with the notable exception of Denmark). To some extent, this new lack of domesticity in EU coverage may result from the fact that previous studies analyzed news during European election campaigns. The coverage of European election campaigns not surprisingly focuses on domestic candidates (McQuail and Bergsma, 1983; Leroy and Siune, 1994), who are likely to campaign in their home country. This, however, does not explain why Danish news displayed a domestic character even in the non-election period under study here. Moreover, Danish news was more domestic than news from any other country, which dovetails with the findings for both the 1979 and the 1989 European election campaigns (McQuail and Bergsma, 1983; Leroy and Siune, 1994). Keeping in mind that considerably more EU stories were broadcast in Denmark than in all other countries, an odd sort of affection for the EU seems to characterize the exceptionalism of Danish EU coverage. To validate our findings concerning Denmark further research is needed, especially in smaller EU countries and during non-referendum periods. We presume that the Danish exceptionalism is not confined to television coverage, but permeates public opinion as well.

In all countries, the coverage of the EU had a negative slant. This slant was most pronounced in two countries usually considered to be EU supportive: France and the Netherlands. British, Danish, and German coverage, on the other hand, was less negative than French and Dutch coverage. We therefore conclude that it is not appropriate to draw any connections between the evaluations or tone of EU news and the level of support for the EU in the country. Journalists in the various countries may interpret their role differently and this may translate into a more or less evaluative coverage of EU affairs. For example, Köcher (1986) suggests that German journalists perceive themselves more as opinionated and less as mere transmitters of facts, and our results show that there were relatively many both positive and negative evaluations in the German EU coverage. British journalists, by contrast,

describe themselves as rather neutral, and British EU coverage did not have many evaluations. Clearly, more research is needed fully to uncover the reasons for our striking finding. However, because we still know little about what shapes the coverage of EU politics on television news, some of the questions raised in this article may provide interesting avenues for future research.

Technical appendix

Table 1 Characteristics of the coverage

	<i>Denmark</i>	<i>France</i>	<i>Germany</i>	<i>Netherlands</i>	<i>UK</i>
Entire coverage	<i>n</i> = 2,143 sec = 229,559	<i>n</i> = 3,575 sec = 329,823	<i>n</i> = 2,433 sec = 168,133	<i>n</i> = 1,826 sec = 187,504	<i>n</i> = 1,745 sec = 202,757
Political coverage	<i>n</i> = 1,066 sec = 132,394	<i>n</i> = 1,246 sec = 132,111	<i>n</i> = 952 sec = 78,323	<i>n</i> = 714 sec = 104,985	<i>n</i> = 756 sec = 111,232
EU coverage	<i>n</i> = 216 sec = 32,662	<i>n</i> = 71 sec = 9,595	<i>n</i> = 64 sec = 5,690	<i>n</i> = 57 sec = 8,454	<i>n</i> = 38 sec = 5,800
	<i>TV Avisen:</i>	<i>Journal, TF1</i>	<i>Tagesschau:</i>	<i>NOS</i>	<i>BBC</i>
Average bulletin length ^{a/}	sec = 1,340	sec = 2,070	sec = 845	sec = 1,224	sec = 1,351
average number of stories per bulletin	<i>n</i> = 12	<i>n</i> = 24	<i>n</i> = 13	<i>n</i> = 11	<i>n</i> = 11
	<i>Nyhederne:</i>	<i>Journal, F2:</i>	<i>RTL aktuell:</i>	<i>RTL nieuws:</i>	<i>ITN news:</i>
	sec = 1,314 <i>n</i> = 13	sec = 2,104 <i>n</i> = 22	sec = 1,054 <i>n</i> = 14	sec = 1,033 <i>n</i> = 11	sec = 1,106 <i>n</i> = 10

Note:

^a The computations are based on the length of the stories actually coded. The average length of a bulletin may therefore be shorter than what is announced in TV magazines.

Table 2 Inter-coder reliabilities in (%)

	<i>Denmark</i>	<i>France</i>	<i>Germany</i>	<i>Netherlands</i>	<i>UK</i>
Length	100	100	100	100	100
Placement	100	100	100	100	100
EU story	100	100	99	100	100
Topic	86	82	81	77	82
Regional politics	100	97	100	100	100
National politics	98	97	99	93	93
EU politics	98	99	98	100	99
International politics	95	100	98	91	97
Location	100	100	95	95	100
Location affected	90	93	83	93	83
Evaluation	100	96	83	93	100

Notes

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- 1 Norris (2000) refers to a content analysis of European newspapers and television outlets conducted by the Brussels-based company Report International and commissioned by the Unit for Public Opinion and Research of the European Union. It remains unclear, however, how the content analysis was designed and conducted.
- 2 Of the countries investigated, the small countries are Denmark and the Netherlands.
- 3 Involved in the same European election study as McQuail and Bergsma (1983), Siune (1983: 235) concluded that there was a 'predominantly European basis of the television messages.' It must be taken into account that Siune exclusively analyzed speech units. These speech units were heavily dominated by inherently European issues such as a United Europe, the European Parliament, and other European institutions. McQuail and Bergsma based their analysis on a more encompassing operationalization of ethnocentrism: the location of the analyzed events, the nationality of the communicators, the speaking time given to communicators, and the references to the own country.
- 4 For further information on events and issues during the period of investigation, see European Union online (2003).
- 5 We conducted a quantitative content analysis, which Riffe et al. (1998: 20) define as 'the systematic and replicable examination of symbols of communication, which have been assigned numeric values according to valid measurement rules, and the analysis of relationships involving those values using statistical tools, in order to describe the communication, draw inferences about its meaning, or infer from the communication to its context, both of production and consumption'.
- 6 Owing to unforeseeable alterations in the broadcasting schedules or country-specific holidays, the news programs on the following number of days were dropped from the sample: DR's *TV-Avisen* (1), TV2 *Nyhederne* (4), TF1 *Le Journal* (12), F2 *Le Journal* (8), ARD *Tagesschau* (1). The respective numbers for the Netherlands and the UK are: NOS *8 uur Journaal* (4), RTL4 *RTL4 Nieuws* (7), BBC *9 o'clock News* (10) and ITN *Evening news* (1).
- 7 If coders were in doubt about whether a new news story had begun, they were instructed to start coding a new news story whenever the anchor reappeared. This did not apply to interviews or talks in which the anchor was involved but which pertained to the previous story.
- 8 This operationalization is in the tradition of, for example, the seminal study by Galtung and Ruge (1965), who operationally define ethnocentrism via geographical proximity. Other scholars have investigated the nationality of originators of speech acts (e.g. McQuail and Bergsma, 1983). However, we think that there may be simple linguistic reasons why journalists may prefer people who use their own mother tongue, so we chose to operationalize domesticity via the location where an event takes place and the location that is affected.

- 9 In October, 39% of the EU stories in our sample were broadcast by Danish television. The respective numbers for November and December are 38% and 35%.

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