



# News about the EU Constitution

## Journalistic challenges and media portrayal of the European Union Constitution

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### ABSTRACT

This multi-method study investigates how news media in Britain, Germany, and the Netherlands covered the Convention's preparation of the European Union Constitution. The study draws on interviews with Brussels correspondents and a content analysis of television news and national newspapers. Results show that the Constitution entered and vanished from the media agenda, the tone of the coverage was predominantly negative, and the issue was reported from a European angle. Explanations of these results come from journalists' relations with EU institutions, their home news organizations, and their perception of the audience.

**KEY WORDS** ■ Brussels correspondent ■ Constitution ■ EU Convention ■ EU news ■ media analysis ■ referendum ■ television news

As the European Union (EU) continues to integrate, communicative aspects of the integration process and the multi-level entity of governance have emerged on the scholarly communication research agenda. This has resulted in a variety of studies identifying distinct characteristics in the presentation of the EU in the media. By and large, the findings can be summarized as low to moderate visibility of EU issues, EU news being reported predominately from a national perspective and slightly negatively in tone (De Vreese, 2001a; Norris, 2000).

Previous studies, however, have provided little *explanation* for these characteristics. Initial evidence from within the newsrooms at various networks pointed towards institutional structures as an explanatory factor (De Vreese, 2003) but in this current study we aim to provide a better understanding of what other factors are involved in the process of covering EU issues. The study is a multi-method study drawing on in-depth interviews with members of the

Brussels press corps as well as a content analysis of national news media covering the preparatory work leading up to the European Constitution.<sup>1</sup> The European Constitution is a key topic on the EU political agenda and one that symbolizes the idea of a union of European member states well. The Constitution was chosen as the core of this study to benchmark the coverage of this project with previous studies of, for example, European Parliament elections (Blumler, 1983; De Vreese et al., 2005), EU-related referendums (De Vreese and Semetko, 2004), and EU summits (e.g. Semetko and Valkenburg, 2000).

### **The Brussels press corps**

Little is known about the working conditions of the Brussels press corps. Previous research has investigated how the issue of Europe is dealt with in the newsroom of key broadcasters in Europe (De Vreese, 2001b, 2003). These studies identified that EU news is often perceived as a 'non-issue' by news editors which, in part, explains the low visibility of EU news in certain countries. Morgan (1995) and Gavin (2001) specifically analyzed the working conditions of EU correspondents. They identified the correspondents' working relationship with the EU institutions as problematic. Morgan (1995) interpreted this in the light of a lack of special orientation training for EU correspondents. However, research fails to *explain* the distinct journalistic style in which EU events are presented.

In terms of its proportions and function, the Brussels press corps can best be compared to the Washington press corps. In both places, a sizeable number of journalists report on decisions being made in the power center of a federation (see Tunstall, 1971). This type of journalism is labeled 'pack journalism' (Schudson, 2003). One can speak of 'pack journalism', when 'a single significant source brings the press together and commands their constant attention' (Schudson, 2003: 139). The Brussels press corps remains unique, however, because a majority of the EU correspondents do not report on internal or foreign affairs in the literal sense but on decisions being made by a supranational institution that have major implications for the country of their origin.

A further characteristic of 'pack journalism' is that 'reporters covering the same beat or same story tend to emphasize the same angle and adopt the same viewpoint' (Schudson, 2003: 139) but even though certain similarities in the style of the coverage have been identified for the latter, Brussels correspondents, in fact, tend to report on EU issues from a different perspective, namely their national ones. This difference derives from an act of balance that EU correspondents face when covering EU affairs. On the one hand, they have to

bear in mind their home organization's as well as their audience's attitude towards the European Union and, on the other, their own attitudes. This influence had already been identified in the coverage of the first European parliamentary elections where broadcasters were found to 'have reacted to two influences; their own views were important, but so were their perceptions of the system within which they worked' (Cayrol, 1983: 222). In order to gather more information on what other elements influence the work of Brussels correspondents, this study investigated the factors that influence the way in which journalists report the European Constitution.

### **EU in the news – the emergence of a journalistic tradition?**

Previous research on EU news identified several distinct characteristics in the way in which the EU, its work, institutions, and policies are presented by the media. The most prominent refers to the presence of the EU in the media. Despite its increasing political importance, the EU has difficulties in bringing itself into the spotlight of the mass media's attention throughout Europe (De Vreese, 2002; Gavin, 2000; Meyer, 1999; Norris, 2000). Meyer (1999) frames this as a 'legitimacy deficit', which is embedded in the EU's inability to generate public support among European citizens deriving from that lack of attention. The mass media are the principal source from which Europe's citizens learn about EU issues (European Commission, 2003: 60). A Eurobarometer survey, however, concluded that the Convention and its work were barely known to the European public. The need for more information is apparent and, particularly in the case of the Constitution, public availability of information is vital given the national referendums on the ratification of the Constitution.

The limited presence of EU news and the fact that most citizens rely on the news media for cues about European integration also make it important to assess *how* the Constitution is portrayed in the news. Norris (2000) observed that the EU is presented in a negative – euro-skeptic – tone in European television news. She raised the concern that a strong trend in reporting negatively about EU issues 'could contribute towards a growing disconnect between European leaders and its public' (Norris, 2000: 184). When Prodi (2002) presented the first draft of the Constitution that the Commission had adopted, he emphasized in his speech his wish 'to avoid misunderstandings fuelled by the press'. He expressed his disappointment with the way in which the media portrayed and discussed the work of the Convention in the past. This statement exemplifies the problematic relationship between the EU and

the media. It also illustrates the importance of investigating the tone in which news on the European Constitution is presented.

Almost four decades ago, Galtung and Ruge (1965) identified conflict as one of the most prominent news selection criteria. In this present study, conflict is defined as a state of disagreement between individuals, groups, organizations, institutions, or countries that results from the competition of different ideas. Such conflict is a commonly occurring element in EU-related media coverage (De Vreese, 2002; Norris, 2000; Semetko and Valkenburg, 2000). In an analysis of news frames in the coverage of the 1997 Amsterdam summit, for instance, the conflict frame was found to be the second most common frame in the Dutch news media (Semetko and Valkenburg, 2000). In the case of the European Constitution as a symbol of unity, it is interesting to see whether conflict still has such a high prominence in the news.

When investigating journalistic style and news coverage of a multi-level body of governance, the question of perspective emerges. Journalists reporting on EU issues tend to refer more often to their own country than to other EU member states or to the EU as an institution (De Vreese, 2003; McQuail and Bergsma, 1983). Morgan (1995: 338) put it more precisely by describing the way in which the British media cover EU decisions: 'Union news is no longer foreign news within member countries but has been nationalized and treated accordingly'. Therefore, one can assume that journalists regard the effects that EU decisions have on the national political system to be of greater importance than union-wide effects and that 'the European Union still does not have enough importance to generate news that is of interest in itself' (Conde, 2000: 2). However, in the case of the Constitution, it is conceivable that the symbolic meaning behind the EU Constitution might lead to a shift from a domesticated coverage towards a more Europeanized one.

### **Research questions and methodology**

This study centers upon studying the *factors which influence news coverage about the EU Constitution and the features of the news coverage*. We investigate the work perceptions of members of the Brussels press corps and link these to characteristics of the news coverage of the EU Constitution such as the visibility of the news, the tone of the coverage, the presence of conflict, and the domesticity of the coverage. The study, therefore, focuses on both *how* news is reported and *why* it is reported in this way. The study is designed with Shoemaker and Reese's (1996: 28) comment in mind: 'a study of content alone is not sufficient . . . to understand either the force that produced that content or the nature or extent of its effects'.

Given the limited research in this field, we consider our study provisional. We rely on a multi-method design in which the subject of this study is approached from two different angles: on one hand, through interviews with members of the Brussels press corps; and, on the other, by conducting a quantitative content analysis of national television news and newspapers. We focus on these media as they have repeatedly been identified as the most important sources of information to citizens across Europe (European Commission, 2003: 35–56). We additionally designed our investigation with a cross-national comparative component. Single-country studies run the risk of generating findings that are idiosyncratic to a context or country (Blumler et al., 1992). In the case of the EU, it is, for example, well known that the British tabloid press is notoriously anti-EU in its coverage (Anderson and Weymouth, 1999). Moreover, we know that journalistic cultures in Europe differ (Esser, 1998). We chose to analyze British, Dutch, and German newspapers and television news programs. These countries were included to ensure variation in our sample on perspectives on the EU. Britain is traditionally a euro-skeptical country and belongs to a minority of member states staying outside the European Monetary Union. News in Britain about the EU tends to be negative (Esser, 1999; Norris, 2000). In contrast, Germany is traditionally a pro-EU country. The Netherlands also belongs to the pro-European countries but the tone of the news coverage tends to be rather mixed (De Vreese, 2002).

## Interviews

In-depth interviews were conducted with journalists working as correspondents in Brussels.<sup>2</sup> The interviews were conducted by the authors face to face, as well as via phone. They were semi-structured with a range of questions functioning as the pillars of the conversation. These questions ensured that the most central information was gathered. At the same time, the structure also maintained a certain openness in the sense that the interviewer could respond to those aspects of the interviewee's answers that were beyond the actual structure but yet of importance. The questions were formulated in such a way that they would 'permit the person being interviewed to respond in his or her own term' (Patton, 1987: 122). The set of core questions posed during the interview dealt with aspects of the journalist's work that can be categorized along four different dimensions: the journalist's relationship with (1) *EU institutions and their press work*, (2) the *home organization*, and (3) *audience/readership*. In order to prevent bias in the answers, interviewees were not informed that the European Constitution was at the core of this project. The fourth dimension, however, embraced questions dealing with the journalist's experiences with the work of the *Convention* as well as with that of the

*Constitution* itself. The different categories were of great benefit for the analysis of the interviews, since they helped to narrow down the answers ‘into some meaningful and manageable themes’ (Patton, 1987: 150).

### **Content analysis**

We designed a multiple-period sample that included the time around the EU summit in Greece when the work on the Constitution was presented (12–23 June 2003) and a routine period running from 8 July until 19 July 2003, which was the time when the Convention had its last working week. From each of the three countries, three daily newspapers and two television news programs were analyzed. From the German media landscape, the quality papers *Süddeutsche Zeitung* and *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, the populist tabloid *Bild Zeitung*, the private channel RTL *RTL Aktuell* (18:45–19:10) and the public broadcaster’s *ARD Tagesschau* (20:00–20:15) were chosen. From the British media, the two quality broadsheets *The Independent* and *The Times*, the tabloid *The Sun* and the BBC’s (public broadcaster) *Nine O’Clock News* (21:00–21:30) were included in the sample.<sup>3</sup> In the Dutch case, *Volkskrant* and *NRC-Handelsblad* were chosen as quality papers and the *Telegraaf* as the functional equivalent of a tabloid.<sup>4</sup> From Dutch public television, the *NOS Journaal* (20:00–20:25) and from the private channel RTL 4’s *RTL Nieuws* (19:30–19:55) were chosen. All coding was completed by students at the University of Amsterdam and yielded satisfactory levels of coder agreement. From our periods and outlets, a sample of 171 news stories and articles about the Constitution was identified.

### **Measurements**

*Visibility.* The visibility was measured by the amount of articles or news stories ‘about’ the Constitution during the sample periods. ‘About’ was defined as mentioning the Constitution in two independent sentences.

*Tone.* To assess the tone of the news, the stance of the actors (actor as person, group, institution) towards the Constitution was measured. We also looked at whether the effects of the Constitution were presented in a neutral, negative or positive light. This was done using a scale ranging from 1 (favourable), 0 (mixed) to –1 (unfavourable).<sup>5</sup> The overall tone of the stance of an actor or of the effects described in an article or news story was measured by summing up all evaluations of the Constitution. In a next step, the number of negative evaluations was subtracted from the number of positive ones. This sum was then divided by the total number of all statements that were made by a group of actors. This average tone was calculated per country.<sup>6</sup>

*Conflict framing.* The conflict frame was defined as emphasis on disagreement and other tensions that occur when the interests of individuals, groups, parties, organizations, and even countries are diverging. In order to investigate its presence in the media coverage, a set of predefined questions developed by Semetko and Valkenburg (2000) was used: *Does the story reflect disagreement between parties/individuals/countries? Does one party/individual/country reproach one another? Does the story refer to two sides or to more than two sides of the problem/issues? Does the story refer to winners and losers?* The questions were answered with YES (1) or NO (0). The mean of the presence of the conflict frame was calculated per country by dividing the total amount of scores per item by the number of items. This allowed identification of the degree to which the frame was present on a scale ranging from 0.00 (not present) to 1.00 (highly present).

*Domesticity.* The measurement for domesticity consists of two components: the origin of actors commenting on the Constitution and the direction of its predicted effects. Since the main focus was on the nationality of the actor, no distinction was made between individuals, institutions, or organizations. Similarly, no attention was paid to the actor's profession or function. Therefore, actors were coded in six categories (actor from a country from which the different news outlets stem, from another EU country, from a candidate country, an EU actor, a journalist, and others).<sup>7</sup> The second component was the perspective from which the Constitution was presented in the news. In order to capture the perspective, the frequency in which expected effects of the Constitution were projected for the country of the outlet, other EU countries, the EU as a whole, or the candidate states was measured.

## **Results**

### **Interviews**

Journalists were explicitly negative in their evaluation of EU institutions' press work. The institutions' efforts were characterized as being not very supportive of the correspondents' work. In this respect, the press releases were especially criticized for being too dull and overly complicated.

It is, I don't want to call unprofessional, but not very encouraging. If you read a press release, not only from the Commission but also from the Council, is simply packed with words that you have to erase. In respect to this, the EU is blocking its own way . . . Half of my work is to translate it [a press release] into normal words. (Journalist II)

The interviews in addition showed that TV journalists face one particular additional obstacle. Their dependence on pictures adds another difficulty to

their work, which became particularly apparent when trying to report on the Convention's work. A television journalist stated that arranging filming possibilities for the Convention was more difficult than for other EU institutions.

The actors themselves are doing everything imaginable to make it as hard as possible. TV depends to a certain extent on pictures, right! And the Convention did not really help to make our job easier. Meaning pictures, shooting possibilities etc. By no means am I asking them to make a headstand or anything like that, but it was truly difficult. (Journalist I)

Second, the interviews focused on the correspondents' relationship to their home organization. In this respect, an indication of the importance of EU-related issues, and specifically of the Constitution, in the newsroom at home could be investigated. In general, editors regard EU events as being of minor importance. Again, the unique role of television must be highlighted and, in particular, the distinction between public and private channels. Some commercial channels are not able to finance a permanent office in Brussels. In this respect, a journalist from a German public TV channel stated:

Our channel has six editors working in Brussels because of idealism and not necessarily because it pays off. In fact the situation on the market is, that the demand for reporting on Europe is still badly neglected in Germany. There is still – especially since the German Reunification – an inward orientation. But our channel is initiating all this because the integration of Europe is constantly proceeding. (Journalist I)

Newspaper journalists reported having a permanently busy schedule. Despite this, one newspaper journalist mentioned that 'only in exceptional cases does the coverage [of EU-related issues] get pushed up the agenda [of the newsroom], if you compare it to news about the national government' (Journalist II). This illustrates that the demand for consistent coverage of EU issues is lower than for domestic political issues. A second impulse from the home organizations, which is closely related to the 'inward orientation', is the demand for nationalized news coverage. All the correspondents who were interviewed stated that a link to their home country was the primary selection criterion when reporting from Brussels. The use of this criterion was described as increasing the chance of selling the stories to the newsroom.

Well, that's what they want us to do. You have to go out there and pick the right story; one that is of national relevance. Theoretically you could fill pages about what is happening here every day. But in the end it's something that is of national concern that makes it in the paper. I know, that's sad, because there is so much more, but that's the way it is. (Journalist III)

The relationship to audiences was very much a function of the selection criteria discussed earlier. They cause a dilemma in the eyes of most correspondents. On the one hand, they agree with the logic behind focusing mainly on

issues with national relevance. On the other hand, they feel the need to put more than just EU issues with a link to the nation state across in their coverage. The correspondents expressed their regrets that they are often not able to present certain issues in a broader, more outwardly oriented context to their audience. In this respect, the Convention seemed to have been a good opportunity for reporting on the EU more elaborately and in more general terms. Apparently it allowed journalists to bring more information into the coverage than usual.

The Convention was a continuous event. Here we have to offer more than demanded by the market. . . . I believe that we have tried hard to do that apart from the general coverage. Not only by writing news articles but also with comments, analysis and even with reportages, which should have given a better insight into the work of the Convention. (Journalist II)

Furthermore, most journalists reported frustration about their audience's lack of knowledge of the EU, thus adding another difficulty to their job. Since most national political systems differ from the EU system, it is problematic for the journalist to cover issues adequately. Often they see themselves simply forced to approach a topic from the basics. This problem was raised by all correspondents. A German television journalist saw another problem deriving from this discrepancy. When asked whether he regarded educating his audience about the EU and the creation of transparency of the political process as equally important journalistic duties, he mentioned that there is often not the possibility to fulfill both of them adequately.

Unfortunately we do not always have the possibility to do it really sufficiently. But the reason for that is that we have to work with the wrong frame. When we report, we report on the basis of national experiences. . . . When I think back to the time when I was working as a correspondent in Bonn, I knew that my audience would know about what a Chancellor does, or the Bundestag; at least roughly. This is not the case with what I am doing here. (Journalist I)

Specifically in relation to the Constitution, journalists had different opinions. For a British correspondent, it 'was not any different to write about it'. The only difference for him was 'the continuous presence of the Convention. So there was a lot to write about' (Journalist III). A German correspondent, however, identified an effect of the Constitution vis-a-vis his colleagues.

The Convention has changed something within my newspaper, namely its importance has increased. Look at my colleagues covering national news events, and they have to take care of almost everything anyhow, they got interested in that topic during the working process of the Convention and started to put it in relation to what is going on at home. (Journalist II)

The tendency by correspondents to nationalize EU-related issues was reversed in this case by almost a Europeanization of national news events. One

journalist cast the work on the Constitution as part of a general worry about the work of Brussels correspondents:

What really bothers me sometimes is that we are supposed to be experts in almost every possible field. One day you have to dig through new regulations in agricultures. The next day you have to be able to say something about media regulations and so on. (Journalist III).

## **The Constitution in the news**

### **The visibility of the EU Constitution in the news**

In the two periods included in our sample, the British media reported most elaborately on the Constitution (with 69 stories, see Table 1). It was somewhat less visible in the German media with 56 stories and, in the Netherlands, the visibility of the Constitution was the lowest with a total of 46 stories. Even though the research focused on the overall visibility, it is important to take a closer look at how it has developed over time. Table 1 demonstrates that most attention was paid to the Constitution during the first sample period. British media was an exception from that since 44 percent of all articles and news stories appeared in the second period.

The presence of the Constitution was relatively limited on the day before the draft text presentation, boosted on the following day and decreased again one day later. Despite this sudden increase at the beginning of the sample period, the Constitution remained almost invisible during the routine week. Shortly before the Summit weekend, it gained the attention of the media again. Therefore, the effect of the first key event – the presentation of the draft

**Table 1** Number of Constitution-related articles and news stories

	<b>First period</b>	<b>Second period</b>	<b>Total</b>
<b>Britain</b>			
Newspapers	37	30	67
TV	2	0	2
<i>Total</i>	39	30	69
<b>Germany</b>			
Newspapers	35	14	49
TV	7	0	7
<i>Total</i>	42	14	56
<b>The Netherlands</b>			
Newspapers	31	9	40
TV	6	0	6
<i>Total</i>	37	9	46

*Note:* Period 1: 12–23 June 2003. Period 2: 8–19 July 2003.

– on the visibility of the Constitution was limited to that one initial boost. It failed to keep the media's attention during the routine week. Differences between the two different types of media were apparent during the second sample period. During the final working week of the Convention, TV news programs did not report on the European Constitution at all (see Table 1). This event was of minor importance on the TV agenda in all the three countries. Even though the Constitution was not overly present during the last working week of the Convention, however, newspapers still reported on it in a consistent manner.

### **More bad news than good news: the tone of the news about the Constitution**

The average tone in which the Constitution was presented was investigated in two ways. The actors' stances towards the Constitution as well as the tone of predicted effects were measured. In the British case (see Table 2), national actors commented on the Constitution most often in the coverage and also most negatively ( $M = -.50$ ). The average tone of all groups taken together reveals that the stance of all actors who were commenting on the Constitution in the British media was rather mixed ( $M = -.09$ ), however, with a slight tendency towards a negative overall tone.

In the German media, national actors were also the biggest group evaluating the Constitution (average tone  $M = .24$ ). When taking the tone of all groups together, the overall tone turns out to be also slightly positive with an average of  $M = .14$ . The biggest group of actors in the Dutch media was EU actors who were the most positive towards the Constitution ( $M = .17$ ). The average overall tone, however, was with  $M = -.19$  the most negative one, followed by a slightly negative overall tone in the British and a slightly positive one in the German media.

The second element of the tone measure – the tone in which the relevance of the Constitution was presented – revealed that in the British media, for instance, the relevance of the Constitution for Britain was most frequently discussed ( $M = -.60$ ) (see Table 3). Together with the evaluation of the Constitution's effect on EU candidate countries ( $M = -.67$ ), it was regarded the most unfavorable. In general, no positive average evaluation of the Constitution's relevance was found in the British media. This led to an average tone of predicted effects of  $M = -.52$ .

The way in which the Constitution might affect the EU as a whole in the future was the most discussed issue in the German news. It was assessed as having a positive impact ( $M = .57$ ). The relevance for Germany was evaluated slightly positively and the effects on other EU countries, as well as on

**Table 2** Presence of actors and their evaluation of the Constitution

	UK (n=69)				GER (n=56)				NL (n=46)			
	n	%	Tone	% neutral	n	%	Tone	% neutral	n	%	Tone	% neutral
<i>Actors from</i>												
Country of outlet	139	61	-.50	31.8	145	71.4	.24	29.4	25	15.4	-.29	23.5
EU	34	15	.72	5.6	28	13.8	.38	12.5	46	28.4	.17	38.9
Other EU country	28	12.3	.2	20	23	11.3	-.25	25	37	22.8	-.47	13.3
Candidate country	1	0.4	0	100	2	1	-1	100	3	1.9	0	100
Journalist	12	5.3	-.14	14.3	4	2	.17	50	18	11.1	-.18	35.3
Others	14	6.1	-.27	18.2	1	0.5	-.67	33.3	33	20.4	-.22	33.3
Overall	228	100	-.09	22.5	203	100	.14	26.2	162	100	-.19	27

Note: Total percentage uneven 100 percent due to rounding errors; n refers to number of actors evaluating the Constitution.

**Table 3** Tone and direction of predicted Constitution effects

	UK (n=69)				GER (n=56)				NL (n=48)			
	n	%	Tone	% neutral	n	%	Tone	% neutral	n	%	Tone	% neutral
<i>Effect on</i>												
Country of outlet	43	64.2	-.6	20.9	14	24.1	.21	50	25	36.2	-.26	33.3
Other EU countries	7	10.1	-.57	14.3	7	12.1	0	14.3	16	23.2	-.23	30.8
EU as a whole	14	20.9	-.21	33.3	30	51.7	.57	16.7	19	27.5	-.26	23.1
Candidate countries	3	4.5	-.67	33.3	7	12	0	42.9	9	13	0	17.1
Overall	67	100	-.52	20.9	58	100	.36	27.1	69	100	-.19	35.4

Notes: Total percentage uneven 100 percent due to rounding errors; *n* refers to the number of news stories referring to possible effects of the Constitution N is based on the numbers provided in Table 2.

candidate states, were characterized by mixed judgements. Consequently, the overall tone in which the relevance of the Constitution was evaluated was, with an average of  $M = .36$ , positive. The relevance of the Constitution for The Netherlands was in the center of the Dutch media. Despite the small number of news stories, they provided the most explicit monitoring of the effects of the Constitution. With an average of  $M = -.26$  the effect was regarded as being more negative than positive. The overall tone in which the impact of the Constitution was presented was, with an average of  $M = -.19$ , slightly negative.

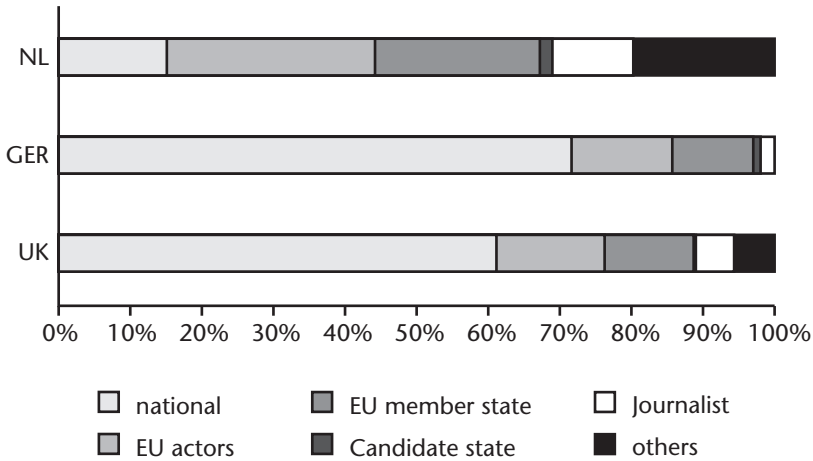
### **A consensual Constitution reported by conflict**

Using our multiple-item scale for the presence of conflict frame, we found that the conflict frame was clearly present in the Dutch media with  $M = .54$  ( $SD = .42$ ). In the German and British coverage, its presence was found to be significantly lower. The conflict frame in the British media scored  $M = .28$  ( $SD = .41$ ) on the scale, which was similar to  $M = .24$  ( $SD = .38$ ) in the German coverage. A high score on the scale suggests that conflict occurs in the coverage in a form in which actors or groups have a dispute, about which at least two sides of the problem as well as the outcome of the conflict for the parties are presented. Looking at the mere presence of conflict, conflict was mentioned in 59 percent of the coverage in the British media, 57 percent in the German, and 85 percent in the Dutch media. These figures illustrate that conflict was also a persistent part of the British and German presentation of the Constitution.

When summarizing the findings, we see that conflict was present, to a great extent, in the Dutch media. Even though the conflict frame was less present in the British media, a significant concentration of conflict was found in the presentation of the Constitution. The German news emphasized conflict the least.

### **More in Europe than at home**

In order to measure domestication in the news, two indicators were used: first, the number of actors from the country of the news outlet. National actors were dominantly present. In the British case, 61 percent and, in the German case, 71 percent of all actors referring to the Constitution were from the country of outlet (see Figure 1). Even though EU actors were the second largest group of actors in both countries, with 15 percent in the British and 14 percent in the German media, they were not nearly as visible as the domestic actors. A different picture is found when looking at the Dutch media. Here, no group of

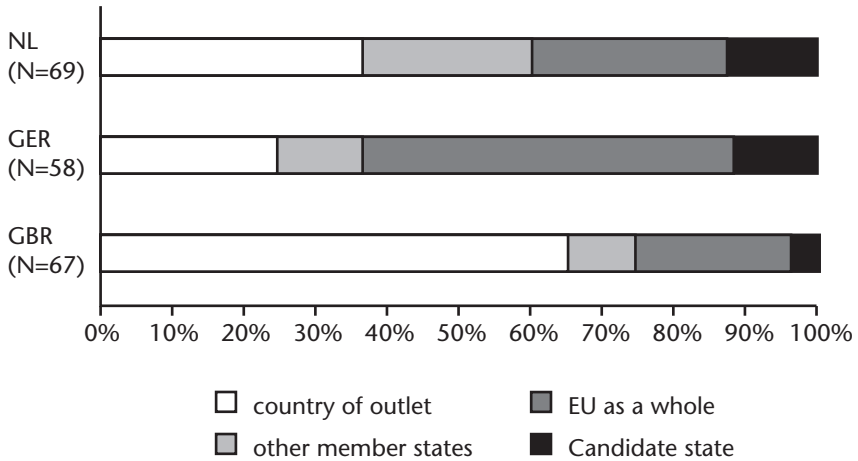


**Figure 1** Presence of actors evaluating the Constitution

actors was present in such a dominant way as in the German and British cases. European actors (28 percent), however, were found to be the biggest group of actors appearing in the coverage whereas domestic actors (15 percent) were even less present than actors from other EU member states (22 percent). Compared to the German and British cases, the Dutch media gave more room to these two groups.

The second domestication component was the perspective from which the possible effects of the Constitution were being presented in the news. In the British case, the focus of the possible effects of the Constitution on their own country was the most prominent with 64 percent (see Figure 2). Even though the relevance of the EU as a whole was discussed the second most often, it was three times less present than the discussion about the effects on Britain. When taking together the number of discussed effects on the EU as a whole, other EU countries, and candidate countries as an index for an outward orientation, the European focus (36 percent) in the British media remains rather limited compared to the national focus.

In contrast to this, the German media focused on the impact of the European Constitution on the EU as whole. A domestic angle of reporting was present in 24 percent of the discussions about the Constitution’s relevance (Figure 2). This results in an ‘outward perspective’ of 76 percent in the German news. Taking together both the domestication indicators, a clear tendency of domesticating the coverage of the European Constitution was found in the British media. An excess of national actors presented the European Constitution by mainly referring to its relevance to Britain. In the Dutch media, the



**Figure 2** Focus of the coverage of the Constitution, in %

opposite was found. Mainly actors from the EU, as well as those from other member states, appeared in the coverage and predominantly presented the relevance of the Constitution from an outward perspective. The Dutch media, therefore, treated the Constitution as a EU topic rather than a domestic one. The German media can be characterized as a mixed case. It contained the highest amount of national actors as well as the strongest outward orientation of all the three countries. A high number of national actors discussed the possible effects of the Constitution by strongly focusing on the EU as a whole. Therefore, it rather holds the balance between domestication and Europeanization of the coverage of the Constitution.

## Discussion

Our results clearly corroborate previous research in terms of the pattern of news coverage about EU affairs: high visibility during key events and low visibility in routine periods (e.g. De Vreese, 2001a; Norris, 2000). This pattern has also been mentioned by a German correspondent who admitted that the EU only finds adequate attention in the newsroom in 'exceptional cases'. The visibility of the Constitution decreased between the two key events and was only of marginal visibility in the second sample period. In this context, the interviews with the correspondents revealed that news-makers regard the EU as being of minor importance compared to news about the national government. However, newspaper journalists stated that, in contrast to the usual coverage of EU issues, they tried to extend the reporting on the Constitution

by bringing in more background information. Nevertheless, the findings from the content analysis suggest that EU news is highly dependent on key events or a clear linkage to the nation state as a vehicle to bring it into the media spotlight. The statement of a Dutch journalist illustrates this best: 'I am happy that we will have a referendum on it. That gives us the possibility to write about it more and that will probably improve the knowledge of the people, what the Constitution is about' (Journalist IV).

In terms of the tone of reporting, the British and Dutch media had a high number of actors in their coverage who evaluated the Constitution in an unfavorable way. The British media, in particular, continued the tradition of reporting on EU-related events negatively, which has been identified in previous coverage of EU-related events (De Vreese, 2002; Norris, 2000). When the findings on the visibility and the tone for the case of the British coverage are taken together, one is tempted to speak of a love-hate relationship between the British media and the European Constitution. The German media, however, did not report strongly in favor of the Constitution but did show a positive tone in its reporting. An explanation for the negative tone in the Dutch and British media was difficult to find in the interviews with the correspondents. To conclude that the tone derives from the journalists' personal attitudes towards the EU would not be accurate. A Dutch journalist was found to be rather euro-critical while an interview with a British correspondent revealed a more positive attitude towards the EU. Therefore, further research is needed in order to investigate the reasons for negative EU coverage.

The conflict frame was strongest in the coverage by the Dutch media whereas it was less present in the German and British media. This supports previous investigations that found a consistently present conflict frame in Dutch TV news. An explanation for the focus on conflict given by a correspondent was the 'built-in excitement' of conflict (Journalist I), which is needed to sell a story. This was further described as a necessary procedure of 'sexing-up' a rather boring consensus-centered EU (Journalist II). This procedure does not seem to be necessary for the journalistic routine when covering national political affairs, since national governments 'create conflict about nothing' (Journalist II). Seeing this statement in context with what other journalists have stated earlier, one can conclude that even though conflict is a necessary selection criterion in all journalistic fields, EU correspondents are forced to bring it to the surface even more in order to compete with other topics in the newsroom.

In terms of the use of domestic actors and an inward orientation of reporting, we found a mixed pattern. In Britain, 'the European Union still does not have enough importance to generate news that is of interest in itself'

(Conde, 2000: 2). This also confirms Novy's (2003) finding who explained the inward orientation with the unfamiliarity of the British public with the political system of the EU. The Dutch media, however, presented the Constitution from a EU perspective, since the focus was predominantly on its relevance for the EU and its member states. In the Dutch coverage, a large number of EU actors was also found to be commenting on the Constitution. The reason for this might be the information-gathering strategy that a Dutch journalist described. He stated that in order to escape the spin from EU officials as well as the one from national political actors, he is trying to bring various perspectives into the coverage:

The Dutch delegation also tries to spin it for the home front. They don't want to make fools of themselves. So if they are losing a battle, they are trying to put a good face on. Then it is important to go to the Germans or to the French and listen to what they have to say. (Journalist IV)

The German media were found to strike a balance between domestication and Europeanization. Particularly in reference to the case of the British media, however, EU correspondents stated that they are expected to deliver issues that are of national relevance to the newsrooms at home. A British journalist described this selection criterion as a disappointment, since it significantly limits the range of topics on which one can report. It has further been stated that the tendency of presenting EU issues in a domestic frame is due to a style of reporting which is based on national experiences. This suggests that when reporting on the EU, Brussels correspondents have to put across a topic which is still unknown to the public. Therefore, on the one hand, the use of a domestic frame in the coverage can be considered as facilitating the journalists' attempts to explain certain topics. However, on the other hand, it makes it more difficult to clarify the differences between the political systems of the EU and the nation state properly.

The study also illustrates that EU news is not regarded as being overly newsworthy. Correspondents have mentioned that a link to the nation state is beneficial to sell a story to the newsroom. A Dutch journalist pitched the newsworthiness of EU issues in the newsroom of his newspaper against news from the United States:

News from the US is much clearer and more interesting. The news from the EU is often a little bit more technical, sometimes even boring. Even for me, it is sometimes hard to sell it to my newspaper. Although, I have to say, as always, they want to do more on Europe. In practice, sometimes I notice, news from the United States just gets more attention and presence. (Journalist IV)

Returning to the specific role of the Brussels correspondent, we reiterate Morgan's (1995) point that many correspondents arrive in Brussels without being fully prepared for the job. Many come from national political affairs and

are confronted with the special working reality of the Brussels press corps. The general way of coping with this reality is learning by doing, which is, of course, a precondition for most jobs. However, what makes this learning process, as well as the correspondent's work in general, problematic is the range of fields on which they have to be able to report. In this respect, correspondents have expressed a feeling of being left alone by their home organization. Seeing this in connection with the journalists' criticism of the EU's press work, the working environment of the Brussels press corps is hardly satisfying or fruitful. Moreover, financial considerations lead newspapers and television stations to reduce the presence of their correspondents in Brussels or to rely on stringers. This increases the likelihood that journalists will only be sent to key EU events and that a continuous coverage of the political processes in Brussels is a task left for international news agencies.

Our study was exploratory in nature and the findings must be interpreted in the light of our limited media sample and interviews. Our findings suggest that the media hardly treated the European Constitution any differently than other EU-related issues. However, the coverage did appear more European in nature than has been found in other studies of EU news. Given the highly symbolical meaning of the Constitution, one could have expected a more euro-enthusiastic coverage. This, however, was not the case. As the Constitution moves to become the focus of national referendums, the study of production of news about the topic should be supplemented by studies of the effects of the campaign and the news coverage to understand the role that journalistic coverage plays in the process of opinion formation about European issues better.

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### **Notes**

- 1 At the time of finishing this manuscript (August 2004), the Constitutional Treaty was completed and subject to national approval by Parliaments and in national referendums.

- 2 The journalists who were interviewed are working as correspondents for the outlets of sample of the content analysis. A total of four interviews were conducted.
- 3 Unfortunately, due to technical problems, the BBC's *Nine O'clock News* was the only British news program that could be included in our sample.
- 4 Using the *Telegraaf* for comparative purposes is somewhat problematic. It is much more politically orientated and less sensationalist. It is closer, however, to *Der Bild* or *The Sun* than any other widely read daily newspaper in the Netherlands and was therefore included in the sample as a functional equivalent to those papers. We furthermore acknowledge that, in the British case, inclusion of the tabloid *The Daily Mirror* and the broadsheet newspaper *The Guardian* may have produced more positive EU coverage. Due to limitations in funding and for cross-national comparisons, we included three newspapers per country.
- 5 The coding rule was that actors were only coded when they were quoted at least once or it was referred to in their statements in the article at least twice. Another important condition for the coding of an actor's stance was that they had to make a statement about the Constitution. A politician, for example, who was just giving a statement on the negotiation process about the Constitution without pointing to its content or any future consequences was not coded.
- 6 If, for example, national actors evaluated the Constitution 25 times out of which eight were positive, nine were negative and eight mixed statements, then the calculation was as follows:  $((8-9) / 25) = -.04$ .
- 7 Close attention was paid to whether an actor was presented as a national or a EU actor in cases in which, for instance, a German EU actor (e.g. Verheugen) appeared.

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