

Journalism Research

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HERBERT VON HALEM VERLAG

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Why the reporting about Europe is so boring

by Friederike Herrmann

Abstract: For the lack of interest in the participation of the European elections scientists have not only held politicians and uninterested citizens responsible but also the media. [1]

„The astonishment that the things we are experiencing in the 20th century are ‚still‘ possible is by no means philosophical. It is not the beginning of knowledge, unless it would be the knowledge that the conception of history on which it rests is untenable.“ (Benjamin 1940/1974, thesis VIII)

The call for a new narrative for Europe has accompanied the debates about the European Union for ages. Even an own project of the EU commission was created for this purpose. The aim was to make the idea of Europe livelier to the citizens.

A narrative connects humans and events, it transports emotions. The wish to create a new narrative is based on the wish to charge Europe more emotionally as Europe has a communication problem.

That problem is also reflected in the media. The daily journalism with regard to subjects dealing with Europe is above all one thing, namely boring. The image of the EU as a bureaucratic monster is continued in the daily reporting. The EU appears to be infiltrated by a frenzy of regulation which reportedly wants even to dictate the curvature of cucumbers. It deals with the Eurocrats in Brussels. The audience therefore shuns reports about European policy. The TV viewers turn off the TV, the newspaper readers turn over. It is a small wonder that the editorial departments also prefer other subjects, they prefer to bring news from the inland and the big cities of the world (Fengler/Vestring 2009.74). At best scandals and crises, the Brexit or Greece achieve a greater media presence. The actual work at Brussels however is often only shabbily treated (ibid). And if reporting actually takes place the focus is on the national context, whereby the media, that's at least the reproach, contribute to the re-nationalisation of Europe (Hepp et al. 2012; 9).

Journalism fails where the subject of Europe is concerned. For the lack of interest in the participation of the European elections scientists have not only held politicians and uninterested citizens responsible but also the media (Brettschneider/Rettich 2005: 137, Gerhards 2002).

But Brussels is more than merely bureaucracy. In Brussels highly important decisions are made

which have influence into the daily life of us all, i.e. decisions concerning the economy, the job market and the refugee policy, all of which being relevant subjects which should allow for interesting reporting.

Why then does reporting about the subject Europe appear to be so boring?

Again and again there have been attempts to emotionally stimulate the European Idea. The demonstrations under the name of "Pulse of Europe" are the latest example, a grandiose project which invites participation. But how far does enthusiasm reach? Who is reached by it? Does Europe not above all remain an extremely reasonable idea which is shared by all enlightened citizens? Reason is not sexy, reason arouses no passion. The feelings remain weak, the subject remains stringy.

Boredom, so the psychoanalysts say, results from defence. If certain aspects of a subject are excluded, the emotional occupation is taken away. This produces boredom. It is therefore worth to raise the question of what remains excluded when the subject of Europe is being dealt with.

A new narrative for Europe is also therefore requested as so many people think that the old narrative of the community of peace does no longer reach the young generation. For them peace is perfectly natural, whilst fascism and war belong to the distant past. But the turning away from Europe is not primarily a problem of the young – quite the contrary. It was the older generation of voters who gave Great Britain the present of the Brexit, and it must be acknowledged that the narrative of the European peace has not very much filled the masses with enthusiasm. It was more a matter of reason than of passion. With the peace demonstrations which in the seventies and the eighties brought thousands into the streets it was not an issue.

The first narrative of Europe, i.e. the unit as a guarantor of peace, was followed by the inner-European Market as the narrative of growing prosperity for all. "Europe" said Hans-Dietrich Genscher with a hoarse voice "is our future. We have no other future" (Genscher 2003). For the moment the statement resonates with pathos which is atypical of Europe. But after the first sentence the confession vanishes already again into vagueness. No vision is connected with this kind of future. Rather the statement is followed by a negation. There is no way of showing strength in a globalised world without a community. Europe is without an alternative one would today perhaps say. Like a drug which must be taken, whether or not it tastes.

A third narrative has accompanied the EU since its foundation. This narrative is expressed in a concept which is again and again cited: The United States of Europe. Said concept is the attempt to respond to the might of the USA by achieving the unity of Europe and thus creating a counterpart and becoming a strong partner. Thanks to Donald Trump this narrative was given a strong boost in the last months and culminated in Angela Merckels' recent speech in Trudering with its demand that "we Europeans have to take our destiny really in our own hands". It sounded a bit as if a child in puberty had at last to grow up. Joschka Fischer celebrated this speech in a guest article for the *Süddeutsche Zeitung* as an approach for the strengthening of Europe and requested the courage for

a Franco-German leadership in Europe (SZ, 9.June 2017, p. 2).

Such leadership is obviously only possible with a dual chairmanship. Germany alone cannot take that role. The concern that a mighty Germany would dominate the Euro zone is too great (Miskimmon 2015). In that concern something comes up that does not appear in the narratives which address the topic of Europe: The traces of the past which become visible when Angela Merkel is portrayed by Greek demonstrators as Hitler.

Who in the last decades after the war travelled to France could make the experience that initially friendly people would radically and angrily turn away when they learnt that one came from Germany. Too painful were the memories of the atrocities committed by the Nazis. The starting points of Europe were fascism, war and fierce hostility between the peoples. That had left wounds the impact of which is still felt today.

The narratives with regard to the EU do not deal with those problems. They only briefly touch the topic of the past, if at all. They describe the past as a time of strife and focus on the future and a new beginning. Also the EU has its zero hour. The question of guilt and responsibility was not asked. A real dispute as to how history has its continuing effects in a unified Europe has never taken place. Europe is our future but it has no past.

Narratives normally have a threefold time dimension. They name the themes or topics of the present, explain their genesis in the past and make prognostications in respect of the future (see Herrmann 2017). They can create an identity as a pre-condition of a community. In the narratives about Europe, however, there is a gap. A dispute about the history which still sticks Europe and the EU in the bones, is missing. Unity was proclaimed without examining the ground on which Europe is intended to stand.

Sociopsychologically this defence of a dispute about guilt and responsibility requires the withdrawal of feelings which is why the idea of Europe appears to be so lifeless and the journalistic reports about it so boring. The EU is looking ahead. It is therefore caught in the belief in progress.

The orientation on the future, the idea of redemption through a unified Europe reminds one of Walter Benjamin's criticism of the messianic concept of history of the historic materialism as he has described it in the famous picture of the angel of history. The angel sees the rubble of the past and "would like (...) to piece together what has been smashed. But a storm is blowing from Paradise, it has caught itself up in his wings and is so strong that the Angel can no longer close them. The storm drives him irresistibly into the future, to which his back is turned, while the rubble-heap before him grows sky-high. That which we call progress, is this storm." (Benjamin 1940/1974, thesis IX). The narratives of Europe are focused on progress. The question of the origins of the problems remains open: Why did the Europeans not take their fate in their own hands? Why were they not able to accept responsibility? Why did their visions of the future not fire like the American dream? And why does the Community of Peace degenerate in national egoism? In present Europe the states do not seek the community but their own advantage. The economic gradient is immense, juvenile

unemployment frightening and the refugee policy has failed and is extremely unjust. The causes lie in the past. It has not been possible to heal them by a new narrative. Nor will it be possible to devise narratives with regard to the unity of Europe. They must be found and anchored in the memory of the people (Miskimmon/O'Loughlin/Roselle 2013:5). To that aim the look back would be needed.

It would be a task for which critical journalism could provide the impetus.

About the author

Prof. Dr. Friederike Herrmann, 1960, Professor of Journalism and Communication Studies, Journalism, Catholic University of Eichstätt-Ingolstadt. Narratives often unintentionally preform public discourse and thus media reporting - it is important for journalists to reflect on these narratives. E-Mail to the author

Footnotes

[1] Thoughts and theses of this essay emerged from an exchange with sociologist and psychoanalyst Prof. Dr. Ilka Quindeau. The author wishes to thank her for important impulses.

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