

Opinion

Corner

Hard Sell–The media and the European Parliament elections

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Intro.

Hard Sell – The media and the European Parliament elections

The European Parliament elections in June should be a continent-wide celebration of democracy. They are the only transnational elections in the world and the sole chance European voters get to directly alter the political make-up of the EU.

Over 375 million voters from 27 different countries are eligible to cast their ballots. The big question is: how many will actually bother to do so?

Despite the fact that the EP has gained enormous powers since direct elections were first held 30 years ago, turnout has declined in every poll since 1979 and there is little evidence to suggest this trend will be reversed in June.

A recent opinion poll revealed that only a third of voters are certain, or almost certain, to head to polling booths on June 4-7. Even more disturbingly, less than half of respondents said they were interested in the goings-on of the European Parliament.

Who is to blame for this parlous state of affairs? The media accuses political parties of pursuing purely national campaigns and of failing to show voters how their decisions will change matters. On the other hand, members of the European Parliament (MEPs) often rail against journalists for failing to cover the important laws decided on in Brussels and Strasbourg.

Reporters clearly have a key role to play in how the European Parliament is perceived by voters. But is it really the media's duty to educate the electorate, 'get out the vote' or make the EU assembly look more attractive? And is there anything the parliament itself could do to make its communications more effective and its coverage more positive?

These are some of the questions Mostra posed to over a dozen leading journalists, editors and experts from across the continent. Their answers highlight the continued challenge of communicating EU politics to a disparate and demanding European audience.

Gareth Harding – Editor Brussels

INTERVIEW: Christine Ockrent

Belgian by birth, Christine Ockrent became the first woman to regularly present the evening news in France in the early 1980s. Anchor of the pioneering France Europe Express programme for ten years, Ockrent is currently Director-General of France Monde, which groups together France 24, TV5 Monde and Radio France Internationale.

"The media and politicians talk about Europe as little as possible and then we suddenly expect electors to get excited about it at election time. It's not very realistic."

Interview:

"Obviously, I am a committed European, and I am also a believer in the responsibility of the media. Reading and looking at the results of the latest Eurobarometer is really depressing and demonstrates the temptation to abstain in the majority of European countries, including a country like Belgium where voting is supposed to be compulsory. Most of all, there is a level of ignorance among European citizens, who have this incredible opportunity to have democracy both in their own countries and at a European level, and this ignorance is partly due to the media. We wouldn't be in the situation that we are in now if the media were more enterprising and ambitious, if they did not wrinkle up their noses and say 'Oh well, Europe bores everyone. So for goodness sake let's not do anything!' I am convinced that it is important to continuously educate the public about Europe. That does not mean issuing propaganda or proselytising, but educating, explaining and then playing our role as the media. Here, as well as on France 24, with Caroline de Camaret in particular, and also on RFI with Daniel Desesquelle and others (on RFI, there are at least three magazine programmes about Europe).

- **With your experience as a pioneer, more or less, on European issues, what is your take on this? How do you interest people?**

I think firstly you interest people by taking them seriously – that's the first thing. Next, I am a firm believer in the value of making comparisons. It is strange, at this time of crisis – a huge crisis which is affecting everybody – it is striking to see, in the most recent polls in France at any rate, that suddenly, because there is a crisis of confidence regarding national leaders and bodies, we see Europe, strangely enough, growing in credibility. And so I think that in order to interest TV viewers or listeners, the role of the media is to draw a lot of

comparisons. I believe that as soon as you make the French aware, or even the British or the Belgians or others of other situations: 'here is the problem that we have at home, and this is what the problem looks like over the border, here are the solutions that they seem to have found ... how different are our systems, or are they the same, etc..?' - I think that as soon as you highlight both what brings us together and what sets us apart, then you succeed in interesting people. If you just deal with the institutions, that bores everybody, but that is also true at a national level. If you talk only about the institutions at a national level, that also bores people, and they don't get drawn in. But clearly what is complicated is the size of the European Union and the complexity of its mechanisms, and so I think that you have to start with the concerns of citizens as they express them themselves, and be as specific as possible in demonstrating the usefulness of the European Union, as well as its responsibilities and failures. Europe is not a fairy tale, but a work in progress which is constantly changing.

- **So you are fairly critical about the way in which the media cover the European Union ...**

C.O.: or don't cover it!

- **Do you have the impression that this is a specifically French thing, or is it in fact true that the same sort of thing happens in France as happens in the other EU countries?**

I think that in France it is particularly apparent. I think that the French media are worse than the rest. I have been struck, for example, when working on several British programmes – and in particular the BBC which provides at least some coverage of the topic...! Even though....now that I don't have a weekly programme on France Télévisions any more, I see hardly anything about Europe on the TV in France! On the cable channels, it's different. There's a lot on France 24, but that's not a terrestrial channel, it's a channel for the decision-makers, just like all the news channels. So yes, in France, the media don't say much about Europe, and that goes for television, radio and the press. That's not to say that they don't talk about what is happening elsewhere in Europe, but, if you like, they don't talk about European Union issues outside of major news items – the Lisbon Treaty or major Community issues. Otherwise, coverage is very, very fragmented."

Challenges

The European Parliament faces enormous challenges in getting its message across to the media – and therefore voters. If news is about drama, scandal, personalities and clashes between recognisable people and diametrically opposing ideas, then it is little wonder parliament rarely excites the media.

Dr George Terzis, Associate Professor, Vesalius College, Brussels

"The Parliament discusses issues which are technical, also they are very complex issues and I mean news and newspapers and TV-stations like simple, clear, news, bad versus good, black versus white, etc and also the European Parliament discusses processes, I mean you know, we are talking about the EU project that from the time and date something is proposed by the Commission to the time that it is implemented might take 5 years - 6 years. News, I mean media, like timely events, spectacular events."

Members of the European Parliament face an uphill struggle convincing journalists to cover their activities. But often they do not help themselves, says Nikolas Busse, the former foreign editor of German daily Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung now based in Brussels.

Nikolas Busse, EU correspondent, Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung, Germany

"The Parliament I think is doing a very bad job in selling itself very often, because they come up with hilarious statements on almost everything in the world, most of which they are not in charge of. And I don't see any use in reporting any of this back home, you know. And I think the European parliament gets a fair share of coverage in our newspaper and in other German newspapers when it comes to thing where they have a say. But this strange habit of making statements about almost everything that is going on the planet and I think they are not doing themselves a favour because you don't start to take them seriously."

Among some of the intrinsic communications problems faced by the European Parliament, journalists mentioned the fact that it:
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Lacks immediacy

"I think it is a procedural issue. The Spanish Parliament - I guess like the British, French, Italian or Belgian national Parliaments - debates an issue, then it gets

approved or rejected and that's about it. There is a start, middle and an end to the story. The European Parliament is more bureaucratic; things are not as straightforward... Political decisions are not only taken by the European Parliament, as they depend on the Council as well. Let's say there are various institutions that need to coexist, which makes it more complicated and incomprehensible. Not only for the Spaniards, but for the citizens of any EU Member State."

Alvaro López Goicoechea
Brussels Correspondent, TVE, Spain

Lacks political clashes

"The European Parliament's real problem is that it doesn't work on the basis of a majority and an opposition. In most of our democracies, there is a majority and an opposition. The European Parliament is more like the United States Congress. Americans are very comfortable at the European Parliament, whereas we are uncomfortable. Seeing a Socialist, or even a Labour party member, voting with the right is something that is not natural. So there is no easily comprehensible politics. You can't say that the European Parliament and the European Union have right-wing politics, or liberal or ultra-liberal politics."

Jean Quatremer
Brussels Correspondent, Libération, France

Lacks personalities

"Politics is very much about personalities and individuals and if you look at the national coverage of politics it is very much about who is up and who is down, which politicians are popular and which ones are not. And, if we take that to the European level there are very few individuals who are capable of generating that kind of interest on the European level, at the Brussels level, let alone when look at it, down to the level of the member states.

If you have a politician who doesn't speak your language, who somehow doesn't figure in your media on a daily basis, then you are not going to know them and the media lose interest."

Michiel van Hulten
Former MEP, Public Affairs expert

National elections in disguise?

The journalists, editors and EU experts Mostra interviewed were in almost unanimous agreement that the June elections will be fought on national, rather than European, issues.

"In the case of the European elections you always have the problem: do you cover this from a pan-European view or the member states' perspective? Usually we choose the member states' perspective – especially in Germany," says Busse. "I mean it makes no sense to have big coverage on the campaign in Malta – nobody would be interested in that."

The harsh reality is that most media outlets will have only a passing interest in the overall political make-up of the European Parliament post-June 7 and will be unconcerned about the fate of political parties in other EU countries.

Instead, the media – like national political parties – will treat the poll as a mid-term referendum on the party in power.

The problem, as several journalists pointed out, is that if politicians – and therefore the media – talk about national issues from Monday to Saturday, it is difficult to convince them that Europe matters on Sunday.

Alvaro López Goicoechea, Brussels Correspondent, TVE, Spain

"I think the average Spanish citizen is not interested in knowing the results of the elections in the other 26 Member States. They will be more interested in knowing how the elections develop in Spain. If the opposition wins them, as the polls are currently predicting, it would be the first electoral defeat of Zapatero since he came to power. In any case, they are seen from a very « national » point of view."

Sophie Larmoyer, Head of Foreign Desk, Europe 1, France

"It's difficult to follow a campaign when you are following people who in fact do not say very much about Europe. On our station, Socialist Party spokesperson Benoît Hamon said 'Let's make this election a protest vote against the politics of Nicolas Sarkozy'. He has a perfect right to say that, to give that impetus. The problem is that it means you are leaving European issues out of it. How can we interest the French if the candidates themselves are not interested? The people we hear talking most about European issues are usually the Euro-sceptics, and in fact the most extreme Euro-sceptics."

DEBATE: Are the EP elections boring for the media?

Editors will only broadcast or publish information they deem interesting or entertaining for their audience.

Most Brussels-based correspondents and many foreign editors are convinced the European Parliament is important and can be made interesting. *"I don't believe European Parliament politics is boring. In fact I think it's quite interesting,"* says Irina Cristina, Foreign Editor of the Romanian daily Jurnalul National.

"I genuinely don't find Brussels boring. There are plenty of good stories here."

BBC Europe Editor Mark Mardell."

The problem is most EU citizens appear turned off by European politics. In a recent opinion poll published by the European Commission a majority of EU citizens declared they were not interested in the European elections – 54% versus 44% who said they were interested.

"The biggest obstacle we face is the lack of interest from the Romanian public and its disbelief that valuable people will be sent to Brussels or Strasbourg," says Cristina, whose compatriots are voting for the first time in June's elections. *"Nobody is talking about these elections in other terms than 'who's on the list.'"*

So are the European Parliament elections a hard sell for the media?

No: Mark Mardell, Europe Editor, BBC

"I genuinely find it fascinating, I want to know more, there's lot's of things I'm frustrated about, you know I haven't been to Bulgaria recently, I want to know how the crises is going down there, you know, I went to Latvia but I didn't go to Estonia, that part of the trip got cut off. I want to go and see that. I'm trying to get a visa to go to Kaliningrad, where the missiles were due to be sited. They even threatened to put nukes in there... I mean that's a fascinating place I haven't been to. You know there is loads of stories out there."

Yes: Jean Quatremer, Brussels Correspondent, Libération, France

"There is no enthusiasm among French newspapers for covering the European elections. Why is this? Because Europe is boring; Europe is deeply boring. There's no desire to devote a lot of coverage to European issues. These elections are seen mainly as a full-scale opinion poll, making it possible to show how power relations have developed since the 2007 presidential elections. We are well aware that we will have to 'do' Europe, that we will have to talk about it, produce pages on the powers of the European Parliament, talk about the European political parties and so forth, but there is a profound boredom; it doesn't get the editorial staff enthused."

DEBATE: Does the media have a duty to 'get out the vote?'

The European Parliament faces a crisis of confidence with its electorate. Despite gaining enormous powers since direct elections were first held three decades ago, turnout has fallen in every poll – from 63% in 1979 to 46% in 2004.

All the signs are this downward trend will continue in June's elections. In a European Commission poll carried out in late 2008 and published in April, only 18% of respondents said they would definitely vote, with a further 16% declaring they were almost certain to vote. Six months before the Europe-wide poll, less than a quarter had any idea EU elections were taking place in 2009.

82% of citizens are not sure to vote in the EP elections.

Parliament's cheerleaders point out that turnout has slumped in national elections and that the Strasbourg-based assembly is still 'new' compared to many member state parliaments. Nevertheless, it is becoming increasingly difficult for the EP to claim it is the voice of the people of Europe when the people of Europe cannot even be bothered to elect its members once every five years.

Some broadcasters believe their role is to educate the electorate and help 'get out the vote' on June 4-7. However, others say it is up to voters to decide whether to head to polling stations or not.

Up to voters: Mark Mardell, Europe Editor, BBC

"People should be aware that there are elections, they should be aware of what is at stake. It's our job to inform them that if they don't want to vote, but if they don't want to make a protest, because there often is a protest, or if they don't think the process works or it doesn't have any value. That's absolutely their decision. It's to me as big a bias saying it's your duty to vote as it is to say vote conservative or vote labour. It's not my job, and I feel that quite strongly."

Get out the vote: Peter Stano, Foreign Editor, Slovak Radio

"Just to flood the airtime with information about the European Parliament and hope that it will catch with people, that people start to pay attention to this. And then, you know, it's like forming the run-up to the main programmes which we will run shortly before the election, and then really try to inform people and convince people that it's important to go to vote. Because, in the end, this is their only opportunity to elect direct representatives on the European level, so they should use it."

INTERVIEW: Mark Mardell, Europe Editor, BBC

Mardell is a well-known face on British TV, having covered Westminster politics for 17 years as the BBC's Chief Political Correspondent and Political Editor of current affairs programme Newsnight. He has been the BBC's Europe Editor since Autumn 2005.

"I think what works best is rarely telling the story from Brussels...I have chosen to tell the story in the individual EU countries and tell the story of how people are affected by the EU there."

Interview:

- How is the BBC planning to cover the European Parliament elections?

"We are taking the European elections very seriously as it is part of our European coverage, after all it's when people get the chance to vote about a subject, an institution, that there is so much debate about it in Britain.

My plans would be to look at it very much from an economic perspective in terms of the campaign on the continent, go to various different countries and actually I'm just in the middle of writing out different proposals at the moment. I hope to go to France to look at the rise of the left if that is happening, to Italy to look at immigration, and to Germany to look at the economy generally. But I think most things are going to be through the prism of the economy. I look at all the U.K. parties. Some are more interesting than others, frankly but the conservatives position both within the Parliament and what they might plan to do if they got into government in the general elections next year, is fascinating. We also have 2 parties, the Greens and the United Kingdom Independent party, that aren't represented at Westminster and are represented in the Parliament, so this is the only opportunity to look at those important policies. So we are doing all that and are also doing what I call explainers. Which is looking at what powers does Parliament have. People are saying, particularly people who are hostile to it, 80% of British laws are made in the pub. Is that true? What about this business about expenses and waste, what's the truth behind that? And we are sending my colleague Johnny Diamond off in a bus travelling round all different parts of Europe reporting there from radio, television and online.

- **Is it possible to make the EP elections interesting for viewers?**

I think that people are interested in the issues. People are interested in Europe; they are interested in the European Union, often in Britain that's interested in the way that people are hostile to it. But that means there is a big audience out there who want to hear more about it, who are hungry for news about it, because, partly because they don't like it. I think people are interested in the economy. How European Union policies impact on that and also how it is different in other countries. I think people do have a hunger to know, yes, they might be suffering in the U.K, but is it worse in Spain or in Germany? Have the governments done things that are better or worse than our government? Is everybody pretty much in the same boat? There are other policies that people are clearly interested in. One of the biggest European Union policies overall has been that on climate change. We know people are fascinated by that. There are things that will bore them and that they are not particularly interested in. And that's true in the politics of any country, but I think there are things that should make people interested in the European elections.

- **Are these elections as much national as European?**

I think that's right. People when they are given a chance to vote that's why they are so awkward these dreadful people, the voters, they go ahead and vote on whatever issues they choose. I'll just say that's ironic, in case some people think I'm being serious about that. I think it is fantastic, I think it gives the politicians a kick up the back side, that they can't say "no really this election is about,..." no it's not; it is about whatever you choose as a voter for it to be about. You can vote on hunting; on what you think on the foreign secretary; You can vote on what you think of the E.U.. It's a chance for people to express their opinions. And, it is just natural, that if there are particular issues in particular countries, they will come to the fore.

- **How do you tell the E.U. story to your viewers?**

I think that what has worked best and what I thought would work best when I came out here was not telling a story or rarely telling a story from Brussels. It is not like reporting Westminster or Washington in some ways, where there is a heck of a lot of activities going on at the hub. I mean there is a lot going on but it tends to be very detailed in what comes out of Brussels or the parliament in Strasbourg. And that's an important component. It's an important, as journalist's would say "peg", so when MEP's vote one thing, when the Commission decides on something else. That is a key moment. But I have chosen to tell the story about what is the impact of enlargement of the expansion of the European Union in Romania. What are the implications for the borders of Ukraine? What about climate change? What does that mean about the way that Germany is doing, does it have to spend more or less? And those sorts of things. Tell it from the individual countries; tell the story of people who are affected. That is what it is about in the end.

- **Is E.U. politics lacking in drama and personalities?**

I think it is one of the things that hinders the coverage, that there aren't the big personalities and that there isn't necessarily the big drama; although I wonder if the people who say that ever watch the European Parliament. Because I think there is some pretty exciting clashes. You watch Daniel Cohn-Bendit sometimes, I mean I wouldn't say he is a man lacking in passion or character. But equally, that probably is true that the about the Commission people don't know who these people are; it doesn't punch through national boundaries. Even our own Commissioner's -Mandelson might be a little bit of an exception- don't have that high a draw at home. But I don't feel like a journalist, I am essentially a reporter. It is not my job to try to change that; if there are duller characters it is just something we will have to live with; I think the truth behind that is that European politics is often about consensus. In Westminster politics they are looking, the conservatives and labour and the lib-dems, for a clash, looking to shout at each other. You go to a Summit, a meeting of the 27 prime ministers and presidents of the European Union, and they are looking for consensus, even if they have had a bitter row. And it does happen. But it is pretty unusual they will come out and start condemning each other. That's not what it is about. It is about finding a solution. Does that make us a great telly, no but it is something we have to live with as a fact.

DEBATE: Is the media to blame?

Less than a quarter of Europeans consider themselves to be 'well informed' about the European Parliament's activities.

Some reporters feel this is largely the fault of MEPs for failing to communicate their activities in language voters can understand. Others blame national politicians for ignoring Europe until election time. But even if the media is not in the business of education, it clearly has a role in informing voters about the European Parliament.

So how well is it doing?

According to the Eurobarometer opinion poll, less than half of respondents remembered having read, seen or heard something about the EP recently. *"This fact is somewhat worrying,"* said the study, *"since if the majority of Europeans cannot remember having read or heard something about the European Parliament, this calls into question their ability to turn out to vote in June 2009."*

Most EU experts Mostra spoke to, whether from the academic, consultancy or think-tank worlds, were highly critical of the media's coverage – or lack of coverage – of the European Parliament.

What is perhaps surprising is that most journalists we interviewed agreed that coverage of the EU assembly is poor. *"The European Parliament is a classic example of no news is good news,"* says Irina Cristina, Foreign Editor of the Romanian daily Jurnalul National. *"Every time they do something they don't get enough coverage and attention. But wherever there is a scandal about their expenses, or their privileges everyone is hurrying up to write about them. I don't think that's fair."*

Prof. Simon Hix, EU Chair, London School of Economics

"The media are doing badly, I think that it's because the media see this as national actions, national politicians see this primarily as national action, the voters see this as national actions."

The media cannot see an angle like it is used in the elections to encourage people to read the newspapers or to watch the nightly news programmes. So they focus on the issues as a national election context in the middle of national election cycles rather than seeing these elections as a chance for voters to express their opinions about the majority in the European Parliament, the groups in the European Parliament or the MEP's in the European Parliament. Or what

should be the policy agenda of the EU. This is the seventh round of European elections we have had.

When this was noticed back in 1979 people said "well, these are the first elections, of course the media are going to treat this as national elections, just give them time". Now, we are 7 elections later and still the media treat this primarily as a national contest. It's part of the tragedies of the European Parliament. These elections have not evolved or developed into genuinely European wide elections, with genuinely European wide media coverage of these elections."

While accepting their portion of the blame for the paucity of EP coverage, many journalists said the main responsibility for informing voters about the European Parliament lay with MEPs themselves. *"They have to make it interesting,"* says Carme Colominas, a former Brussels correspondent for Radio Catalunya who now covers EU issues for the radio station from Barcelona. *"They have to prove and to show to people what they have been doing these last five years and what they want to do from the European perspective and for their own countries. First of all it's their responsibility because they want to be elected."*

Jean Quatremer, Brussels Correspondent, Libération, France

"The media undeniably bear some responsibility for citizens' ignorance. The media contribute to this ignorance and contribute to the education of citizens. But we need to be precise: there are various kinds of media. There is the written media, in other words the press, which in my view plays a pretty good part in providing explanations. But most of all, you have the audiovisual media, and that is where there is a total disaster. In France, for instance, a recent study that has just come out showed that TV magazine programmes devoted only 2% of their time in the year to European issues. 2%! We never talk about Europe!"

INTERVIEW: David Rennie, European Union Correspondent, The Economist

Before joining The Economist in 2007, Rennie was a foreign correspondent for the Daily Telegraph in Sydney, Beijing, Washington D.C. and Brussels. He speaks Mandarin, French and Spanish and is the author of The Economist's influential 'Charlemagne' column.

"To me the European Parliament is a very frustrating parliament to cover as a journalist."

Interview:

- How does the Economist plan to cover the European elections?

"How do you make it interesting? I think we need to go to some countries which are going to have interesting campaigns and cover them country by country. The idea you sometimes hear from European Parliament Members that there is going to be a pan-European campaign. I think I'm a bit sceptical about that, I think I'm going to end up covering it as a series of national campaigns which will add together in the end to a European result.

- Do you feel that the EU lacks recognisable and well-known personalities?

I think that's true. It's got more to do with the European Parliament than it has to do with the European elections. My big beef with the European Parliament (EP) is that it's not really a genuine Parliament. A Parliament is a place where you have a big clash of ideas, it isn't where you have a majority and an opposition that can kind of tussle. To me the EP is a very frustrating body, to cover as a journalist, because it's the kind of Parliament which is... If you're the kind of politician who loves committee work, who loves backroom deals, and winning points by ambushing the other side in some sort of Committee stitch-up, then the EP is for you. But if you want grand sweeping oratory or the clash of ideas or the big ideological battle, then it is absolutely not the Parliament for you.

Look at the fact, of no matter who wins the next elections in terms of the big groups, one of them will not be president of the Parliament for the whole time, they'll divide it in two and they'll stitch it up between two groups, the balance of power will probably not shift very much, and the parliament president will hand

over after 2 ½ years. And that's just not how real parliament's work. So to me it's not a parliament that has a very direct connection with voters.

I take issue with this idea that they are the direct representatives, the elected representatives of half a million Europeans. I think that's not true.

- **Does it really matter who wins the European elections?**

Well you have to look and say, historically it doesn't seem to make much difference. I mean, does it matter whether people turn out and vote? Well every time there's been an election, directly, since the 1970s turnout has fallen and fallen dramatically. And yet the power has flowed to the Parliament, so the Parliament has become more and more powerful on a lower and lower turnout. So there's no link there. There's no sense their legitimacy is linked to the turnout, because if it was, they wouldn't be getting more powerful. The reason they're getting more powerful is because the politics is evolving, and they're very good at accruing new power. The turnout is not the reason because the turnout keeps dropping. Does it matter who wins the elections in the EP? No not really.

- **Is the media to blame for the shortcomings in the way the parliament is reported to citizens?**

I think... where does the media deserve some of the blame? Some of the... There is a structural problem, which is actually a bigger structural problem for the EU. Which is the EU struggles to get media coverage, because a lot of the work that goes on in this town comes under the heading of boring but important, important but boring. You often meet politicians who say 'how come we don't get covered in the same way as national politicians get covered'. Look at the things the national politicians get covered for. They get covered because they're talking about hospitals, schools, whether your taxes will go up or go down, whether your soldiers will go abroad and kill and fight and die. The EU doesn't really control those things, it doesn't control education, it doesn't control national health policies and it doesn't control whether the soldiers go abroad. What it does control is competition policy, whether someone has too bigger share of the market, environmental policy. And if you look at national coverage of national politics, they don't devote a lot of time to national competition policy or national consumer policy or national regulation. And really the areas where Europe is big and powerful is in those technical and rather dull dossiers. So, we just don't cover it.

- **So how can you make the European elections interesting?**

I'm interested in the EU because there are some big ideological fights under way, particularly in this crisis. One of the problems is, with covering the Parliament and that's probably one of the reasons why I don't cover the Parliament very much, is that the noise level that comes out of the Parliament often is in inverse proportion to their power in given dossiers. They know that they love talking about the Middle East or what Israel is doing or... They have absolutely no power when it comes to foreign policies. Not their thing. Their thing

should be whether pigs eat chicken meal in their feed. But that doesn't get so much coverage so they spend much more time travelling the world and being excited by themselves.

- **Why do you believe that British media coverage of the EU is so bad?**

I think British coverage of Europe is sort of crazy. I think there's an inherent contradiction in the British attitude to the EU which is... If you read some of the most eurosceptic newspapers in the UK, like *The Daily Mail* or *The Sun*, their basic set of line is that Europe is this terrifying would-be super-state that is trying to rob us of our freedom, that is trying to rob us of our sovereignty, is constantly plotting to take over the United Kingdom. But then, at the same time, they also think that Europe is rather boring so they don't have journalists based in Brussels and they don't want to write about it very much. It seems to me that if you genuinely wake up every morning convinced that a foreign super-state was plotting a take over by stealth, you'd want to know how that was being done on a day-by-day basis. But they have this extraordinary contradiction that on the one hand, they think it's extraordinarily evil and powerful, and on the other hand, they have no interest in knowing what goes on here. That strikes me as nuts and lazy.

Solutions

Journalists are not in the business of public relations. It is not their role to decide what messages are relayed or how they are packaged for public consumption. But as story-tellers they are in the business of communications. So how do they think the European Parliament can get more and better coverage of its elections?

Personalise elections – Gaetane Ricard-Nihoul, Secretary General, Notre Europe

"We recommend that each large European political group should submit a candidate for the post of President of the European Commission, because we think that we have reached a stage in European integration where it is vital to simultaneously politicise and personalise European issues. So we believe this is a measure that will make it possible to combine these two elements. We know that these are the points that really make an election interesting; usually this is when citizens understand the issues. And so in order to understand the issues, they need to have the impression that they can have an influence on European public policies; to have the impression that choosing a particular party will make a difference. So the first point is to politicise the issues and the second point is to personalise them. It is necessary, however, for people to say to themselves: 'If I go for this particular party, I have a chance of holding this particular post'. I think that this is also an important point. That is why the presidential elections in France are so successful, simply because people like policies to be represented in the flesh by a public figure."

More political debate - Michiel van Hulten, former MEP, Public Affairs expert

"I think the Parliament can do all of itself, to change the way it works and they have to become more attractive to the media, viewers and readers. But the main way, is by becoming more political and by encouraging more political debate within the Institutions."

The Parliament tends to present itself as a sort of monolithic defender of the interests of the citizens of Europe and that is not what they are looking for. What the citizens are looking for is a clear choice as to which direction Europe should be going in. Should be going in a more federalist direction or in the direction where Member States have more to say? That is a legitimate choice and if that debate takes place in the heart of the European Parliament where people have elected their MEP's to have that debate, then I think that the media themselves will focus much more on what is happening there."

Quit Strasbourg – David Rennie, European Union Correspondent, The Economist

"There's one big thing they can do. I just paid my first visit to the EP plenary session for three years. The reason why I don't go is because it is in Strasbourg and everybody except a handful of people around the French and influential people who is sufficiently ambitious that they don't say anything in public, know that to move the EP every month from Brussels to Strasbourg is completely insane. And as long as it is extremely difficult and expensive to get to, then I won't go to the plenary sessions. If they are serious about being covered, serious about being an institution, they have to choose one seat and stay there."

Journalists could also do better reporting the European Parliament elections by:

Providing examples from other EU countries – Sophie Larmoyer, Head of Foreign Desk, Europe 1, France

"Showing how things happen elsewhere is also important: going to see how the new Member States are going to vote for the first time and how enthusiastic they are about it, what their hopes are, how their first years in Europe have been for them. Going to see what's happening in Ireland where they rejected the Lisbon Treaty and are now feeling the full impact of this economic crisis and suffering the consequences of it. Also going to see how the campaign is being conducted in other areas."

Reporting across frontiers – Jean Quatremer, Brussels Correspondent, Liberation, France

"The idea that we had with Libération at a rather lengthy meeting to try to flesh out and give a bit of reality to these European elections was, first of all, to find people who are 'Trans-European'. The idea at first, which is not a bad one, is to find Trans-European professions. What is a Trans-European profession? Well, for instance, the profession of a lorry driver. Lorry drivers are Trans-European professionals and they come up against all the national law systems, all the problems that there are in each Member State and all the language problems. Then, you could take businessmen who spend their time travelling from country to country. Police officers, who are posted abroad in one country or another... Polish plumbers too. So the idea is to take professions that are in contact with other people."

Conclusion

All the signs are there is a perfect political storm brewing ahead of the June vote that could cause serious damage to the reputation of the European Parliament. Opinion polls show that most voters are not interested in the EP elections and are unaware that elections are looming. This is compounded by the fact that Europe's media, which sees politics through a national prism, rarely covers European Parliament issues.

However, there are some encouraging signs. *"I have just written a list of 15 stories we should cover before the European Parliament elections,"* says BBC Europe Editor Mark Mardell, proving that there is certainly no shortage of stories for journalists to report.

"Our newspaper is convinced that [the European Parliament election] is an event that has to be covered – but in the same way a plane crash has to be covered. We don't have a choice."

Jean Quatremer, Brussels Correspondent, Libération, France

The real challenge is not to find interesting stories about the EP elections but to convince ratings-obsessed editors that they warrant column inches and valuable time on news bulletins. The trick, according to Sophie Larmoyer of French radio station Europe 1, is for journalists to show that the decisions taken by MEPs make a tangible difference to voters' lives.

Sophie Larmoyer, Head of Foreign Desk, Europe 1, France

"In fact, people need specifics; they need to understand in very specific terms in their daily lives that the new trains, the new rules that change their lives on a daily basis, that change their cars, their televisions, the lighting in their kitchens and that enable them to make savings, that all that comes first of all from Europe; that France is also partly responsible for making 'Europe'. It is not France against Europe, but the point is that things come first of all from Europe. But this needs to be illustrated; people need specifics in order to understand Europe, but they are rarely given them."