

Covering Brussels – the Europe correspondent’s tale

All politics is local and no more so when it comes to reporting EU news. *Declan Fahy* outlines the findings of a recent AIM study on the focus of Irish reporters in Brussels.



Irish media coverage of the enlarging European Union remains focused on issues directly relevant to the national interest, a new DCU study has found. School of Communications researchers interviewed Brussels-based Irish print and broadcast reporters as part of a project that has been analysing the development of a European public sphere.

European correspondents – several of whom are DCU graduates – from *The Irish Times*, *Irish Independent*, *Irish Examiner*, *Irish Daily Mail* and RTÉ were asked about how they chose to cover the EU news we read and watch each day.

The journalists agreed that information with an Irish ‘angle’ or ‘hook’ was most likely to be covered in their printed or broadcast reports. These stories usually described policies or announcements concerning Ireland directly, or were reports or surveys on the entire EU with the Irish dimension highlighted. The work of European reporters was described as being like Irish domestic political correspondents – except based in Brussels.

A difference emerged between the news-gathering routines of news organisations with an explicit public service remit or ethos – such as RTÉ and *The Irish Times* – and those with a chiefly market-driven approach to news.

Journalists working for the first type of organisation tried to cover stories about the EU as a political entity. These type of stories were regularly printed or broadcast, especially where the organisation has a specific foreign news section, but reporters generally have found these stories tough to ‘sell’ to their news editors.

Reporters working for more commercially focused organisations almost exclusively sought the Irish angle for their reports.

The Irish research was supervised by Prof Farrel Corcoran and the results will merge with similar studies by institutions from 11 countries participating in the Adequate Information Management (AIM) in Europe project.



The study found Irish correspondents work within tight deadlines to manage the masses of information pouring out of the Brussels institutions, sifting through press releases, reports, briefings and discussions with contacts in order to find stories to cover each day.

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The reporters have found that the EU has particular limitations for news reporting: it does not have the focus on personality which characterises much domestic political coverage. Reporters also found it difficult to describe in dramatic and concrete terms the abstract and slow legislative process in Brussels. Some of the reporters interviewed also believed the growing presence of UK media in Ireland had an important influence on domestic news production, with much of this coverage either ignoring Europe or taking a Euro-sceptic angle.

Three Irish correspondents interviewed in the study received their journalistic training in DCU. Conor Sweeney, the *Irish Independent's* former European correspondent now working in Moscow, graduated from the MA in Journalism (MAJ) course in 1993, learning skills he has used throughout his career.

'I'd like to think the MAJ made me a better journalist,' Sweeney told *DCUTimes*, 'but I suppose that's ultimately for others to judge. Certainly, it helped kick start my career, because I got both a work placement in *The Irish Times* and an internship in the European Commission, both of which partially are to blame for where I am now.'

Jamie Smyth, *The Irish Times's* European correspondent, graduated from the MAJ course in 1999 – a qualification which he too felt advanced his career. He said:

'The MAJ course really helped me to break into journalism. The practical experience on the news days helped to develop my news-gathering skills and the work placement was invaluable to getting a job.'

And as for others: RTÉ's Europe editor, Sean Whelan, graduated with a journalism qualification from NIHE, while the press officer for the Irish Permanent Representation to the EU, Frank Smyth, is also a MAJ graduate.

For further information on the AIM project, contact farrel.corcoran@dcu.ie or see www.aim-project.net

IN MEMORIAM Sonya Rabbitte

DCU's journalism class of 1997 has sadly lost a unique character with the passing of Sonya Rabbitte on August 1st this year. Aged 32, Sonya died alongside her partner Fintan McCarthy in a bus crash on their way to view the Great Wall of China. For someone who carved out an impressive career in business journalism, Sonya had an alternative streak that would surprise those who met her. As friends, we remember her cheerfulness, her smile, her love of adventure and fantastic sense of humour.

Sonya's distinct shaved head through college will never be forgotten by her DCU classmates and marked her out as a bold and determined young woman. I remember fondly the three months spent on Erasmus at Berlin's Humboldt University. Sonya arrived at her student residence 'after office

hours' on a Friday evening, and preceded – despite her fledgling grasp of German – to secure herself a couch until Monday morning while making friends with half the campus. It epitomised her spirit.

Always one for making brave decisions, Sonya after graduating in 1997 headed for Bucharest, where she worked on two business magazines. Over the next two years, which she readily described as the maddest in her life, Sonya gathered an engaging list of anecdotes, including one memorable interview with Nicolae Ceauçescu's former driver.

From there, via a year's travelling around New Zealand, Sonya found herself back on the business desk in London before joining the German Press agency, Deutsche Presse-Agentur, in 2002.



As international news editor in their Cork headquarters, Sonya had recently bought her first home, of which she was especially proud. Her spirit, friendship and unique ability to bring laughter with her wherever she went are greatly missed by friends, family and all her former DCU classmates.

- Alan Stenson