



**Peter Preston**

## Dialogue of the deaf

The Europeans talk a lot about each other but less with each other. Attempts to create Europe-wide publications and to establish a culture of dialogue have failed. Without such a medium, however, Europe will lack something vital: a free press that monitors and controls European institutions.

Begin with the most basic and principled of assertions, believed implicitly by journalists everywhere. We say that a free media and a free society are twins umbilically linked. You can't have one without the other. We know that where there is democracy there is also a paramount need for independent newspapers and broadcasting stations to monitor its deeds, progress and failures. Take away that monitoring and, all too swiftly, the body politic rots and open societies turn in on themselves, mired in introspection and corruption. We stand, in short, wholly behind the first amendment to the American constitution and Article Ten of the European charter of human rights, not because they serve our narrow interests, but because they allow to serve the citizen, the reader, the voter... Where, though, does our new Europe stand? The trouble, you see, doesn't lie with the principle – but with the absolute lack of a press capable of doing its duty. The Union, in many vital ways, has become a supra-national force. The press hasn't followed. It remains bound by national, even regional, chains. Pragmatism drags its principles down – and, as they fall, the edifice of Europe may creak and slide, too.

So the problem, at heart, can be very simply stated. Our evolving Union, with its constitutional proposals and enhanced parliamentary oversight, is not yet some giant federation like the United States. Nevertheless, year by year, it is becoming both wider and deeper. Its attitudes towards, for example, immigration, foreign policy and an integrated economy have the most profound implications for every citizen in our continent, from Latvia to Portugal and Malta to Ireland. But, as the Union grows, where is the interrogating press to make it accountable?

All the countries of the present and future EU have a relatively free press and broadcasting system, to be sure. But, with the marginal exception of some TV channels (like, in very different ways, Arte and Euronews) they are all nationally based; that is, they reflect a French or German or British view of affairs – not an overall European perspective. And as for the newspaper word, there is only the *International Herald Tribune* (or the *New York Times* masquerading under different colours). Newspaper distribution patterns have improved hugely all over Europe. You can buy the major papers from Milan, Frankfurt, Madrid, Paris and Rome each morning, almost wherever you happen to find yourself. You cannot, however, buy a paper whose catchment area is Europe itself, whose views and attitude don't arrive filtered through

some narrow national prism. Simply, there is no newspaper for the Union itself – and that, in turns, means that the process of democratic monitoring is frail and often forgotten.

Such a lack shouldn't surprise us, perhaps. There was for a time a paper called *The European*, but it perished for lack of a reading or advertising audience, and there have been only cursory attempts to build a replacement. The contrast with the USA couldn't be starker. America has four national TV networks and a host of cable stations available nationwide, able to talk to Californians in the same language and at the same time as it talks to New Yorkers. America has national news magazines and a growing selection of national papers available wherever you live: *USA Today*, the *Wall Street Journal*, the *New York Times*. Americans, in sum, can talk to each other. There is a shared dialogue in a shared democracy. Europeans have none of those options. They are doomed, all too often, to a dialogue of the deaf.

The lack, this democratic deficit, seems barely to be recognised, though. The Council of Ministers is happy to patrol onwards through meetings and summits, with national briefers telling national stories to a national correspondents. The Commission and Berlaymont apparatus is even more selective, feeding tales to local correspondents from the *länder* or *departements*, leaving out the national context entirely when it suits them.

But "divide and rule" offers Europe nothing for the future. On the contrary, it guarantees only increasing disaffection and disillusion. The union grows, but without roots in understanding or participation. Some of the new member countries are so small – and relatively under-resourced – that their papers stand little chance of monitoring what happens in Brussels, let alone in nation states on the other side of the continent. Even large countries, like Britain, often have fewer staffmen in Europe than in the USA. And the bigger our quasi-federation grows, the direr the consequences.

What's to be done? From time to time, someone recognises the problem and attempts to do something about it. Helmut Schmidt tried over a decade ago to set up a European weekly of opinion; the *Guardian*, when I was editor, launched *Guardian Europe*, a supplement of shared opinion pieces. Neither initiative, however, went very far. Practicalities again. The business of translation was slow and expensive. Styles of writing change from country to country and tradition to tradition. (Try reading the first sentence of a story in *The Times* and *Le Monde*). There was no common advertising base in a Europe split between national advertising markets. Printing and distribution were complex and expensive. And, fatally, there was no sign of an international readership which could staunch prospective losses, let alone turn a small profit. In sum: it was all a nice aspiration, but it was also a dream. Europe needed a paper of its own – but Europe wasn't strong enough to sustain one.

Any attempt to address the deficit, therefore, needs to be rigorously realistic. It is no use looking round for huge state subsidies. They would only mean vulnerability and isolation as well as an evident lack of independence. Audiences, like ideas, have to be nurtured, brought slowly to fruition. And now I think there is that other way. The internet is not a newspaper or a broadcasting station: but it can provide a stream of information which informs other media. In particular, it is an instant way for the individual and the news organisation to keep in touch with each other. It is an immediate forum. So why not try to bring that forum to the steps of the Berlaymont?

The United States, with fewer language difficulties, already has sites – like [Political Wire](#) – which bring together comment and factual reporting on American politics from all over the country and make them accessible. Europe is in dire need of an equivalent service as an underpinning for other services which can bring us closer together.

Put a relatively small but highly intelligent staff in one or possibly two European countries. Give them, either centrally or in national capitals, a translation service available in at most five languages: say German, French, English, Spanish and Italian. Ask them to bring together comment and reportage on political issues which cross European borders on that day. Is it George W. Bush coming to London and what would Paris have Blair say to him? Why are ultra-nationalists topping the Catalan polls? Where is ground zero on the pell-mell development of identity cards?

In any and every case, there is always an issue, always direct relevance to be teased out and pulled together. So make it available. Tackle copyright restrictions so that at least the best newspaper material is available, and can be reproduced in other papers in other countries. Start an issues and diary service for TV and radio broadcasters so that they know the pace and variety of European developments each morning. The Net is there, along with the opportunity. One day it may make profits of its own, because there is a European market for European news and opinion. In the meantime, it is a start – relatively cheap, relatively easy to fund – along the road to dialogue and understanding. A little later on, and we could be asking where the latest EU fraud began, with thousands of bloggers chipping in.

This isn't another nit-picking British intervention, merely a way to make Slovenia and Sweden feel they are part of the same enterprise. It starts to create an audience. One day a newspaper and TV channel will serve them both equally, with news they need. One day the monitoring will come naturally. In the meantime, here is the beginning of a beginning.

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