

Fluid media landscapes

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Benedict Anderson argued that the invention of the printing press was key to the rise of the modern nation state. As written material could be mass produced, common languages formed, shared discourses developed. Communities started to imagine themselves into existence over large geographical areas, to see themselves as peoples, and to organise politically into administrative units based around these new-found identities.

Later on, broadcasting became key. The radio, it has been said, did more to unite Italy than Garibaldi. The BBC was launched three weeks after Ireland became independent from the UK, so that, as its founder Lord Reith put it, “the chimes of Big Ben could be heard in the remotest cottage in the country”. The powerful have long understood the role of the media in the construction of identity.

Similarly, it seems almost inevitable that future historians will look back at the rise of the telephone, texting, TV and the internet as key to shaping how those of us stumbling through the first half of the 21st century see ourselves. It is still less than 100 years since the first television broadcast, and less than thirty years since Tim Berners-Lee coded the first browser for the World Wide Web.

And, of course, it is not just geographical areas or historic nations, which are defined by these shifts. From magazines for airline pilots to websites for kayakers; journals for conspiracy theorists to forums for people with muscular dystrophy, our civilisation is a veritable forest of media platforms. And through debate and news and in-jokes and jargon, these often begin to form a particular function. Consciously or not, they start to build up imagined communities with shared identities.

It is in this context, and with debates around Britain’s European referendum still forming eddies from the Carpathians to the Balearics and

Sápmi to Crete, it is worth surveying the landscape of European media. Because, of course, there are plenty of significant European institutions. Every football team in the continent yearns to win the Champions League. The Council of Europe facilitates collaboration to protect human rights and the rule of law. The various European courts are key corners of our trans-continental justice system. Much of Europe shares a currency and free movement area. And all countries in the EU, of course, have a common parliament, commission, and council of ministers; and agree to pool policy on everything from international trade to hedgehogs.

Never before in all of human history has a collection of independent nation states been so intertwined. Never have different, self-governing peoples chosen to collaborate in so many ways, share so much in each-other's cultures and institutions, travel so much to each-other's countries, learn each-other's languages, or study at each other's universities. Never have different peoples so frequently fallen in love.

And yet, despite all of this, there is no common European mass media. Beyond the annual Eurovision bonanza, there is no shared broadcasting on Europe's airwaves. Beyond a few, rare projects, like Euronews or openDemocracy's *Can Europe Make It?*, there is no major European common media outlet.

Some of this, of course, is a linguistic question. While 51 per cent of EU citizens had conversational or fluent English even a decade ago¹, this means almost half do not. But real news journalism is expensive, and it is cheaper to translate than to start again from scratch.

The lack of a European media clearly causes a problem: not so much in its impact on our identities. After all, why should those of us on the left particularly care whether we identify more with Europe, Eurasia, Spain or the Basque Country? So long as we are open and inclusive and treat people from everywhere as equal, questions of identity as such are not worth falling out about. But they do matter, because European institutions need to be held to account and, more importantly, because without some kind of shared political narrative, it is hard to mobilise people across a continent against the powerful forces, which shape our world for the worse. Some kind of shared media ecosystem is not sufficient to build

1 | 'Europeans and their languages' Special Eurobarometer Summary European Commission (2006) (http://ec.europa.eu/public_opinion/archives/ebs/ebs_243_sum_en.pdf)

among the peoples of Europe the sense of being a public, but it is probably necessary. And at the moment, our media is not so much a continent as an archipelago.

This, though, is not an insurmountable problem. The collapse in revenues in the media delivered by the loss of advertising money to social media, the loss of small adds to Google and Gumtree and the loss of cover prices to the norm that online content is free means that the future of the press is up for grabs. And while it is not a future which always fills me with hope, this chance to invent new things is exciting.

While revenues are falling, the capital and payroll costs of producing media are collapsing too. Where once you needed a printing press to disseminate a pamphlet to a few hundred people, now you can access thousands with just a laptop, Wordpress blog and a Twitter account. Where, only recently, you needed a TV studio and network access to produce video that anyone beyond your friends could see, now, a decent smartphone and a little editing software are enough to make reasonable quality videos. Where once, typesetting was skilled work, now, it is all done automatically.

In this context, it seems likely that the media landscape across Europe will remain fluid for some time: new publications will appear, build audiences, and then collapse as fast as they arrived. Oligarchs will continue to buy up media empires to assert their political influence, but smaller projects have a chance of breaking through in a way they have not in recent decades. It is worth remembering that the best-read newspaper on earth in 1933 was the now defunct Daily Herald – the paper of Britain's trade union movement. There is little reason to believe that modern social movements could not grow our own media to a similar scale. After all, America's radical right has managed to do so (though cash is always easier for those on the side of the rich).

If these new players want to build cross-continental and international narratives, to hold European power to account and build movements across borders, it seems to me that the simplest way to do this is not through new conglomerates, but through practical collaboration between different projects. Expertise needn't all lie on one payroll or one website, so long as people are happy to share, collaborate and support each other rather than competing. It will not be through one large organisation, but lots of different groups, reaching their own audiences, where they are: whether that is a geographical community or a community of interest.

Some of the more liberal media have become obsessed of late with questions of filter-bubbles and social media echo-chambers, believing they were the protectors of truth. But that is now the terrain of reality, and while it can be scary to watch as the right seize the initiative in this new world, there is no reason to believe that the left cannot win it back. It is the old order which got us here in the first place, after all.

Building the solidarity we will need in the future will be difficult: it is hard to escape from the endless turning of the news cycle in each country to try and make the time to create your own narratives. But it will be vital. Because the problems we face are international and so our media must be too.