

## Deep throat is not on Twitter

In Europe everything seems to be changing because of the crisis and the growing complexities of a globalizing world. This makes European politics more interesting and more relevant than ever for European citizens. Here lies a huge task for journalists, too – in fact there is more work than ever. Why is it, then, that there are fewer and fewer newspaper correspondents in Brussels?

By Caroline de Gruyter

The world is changing. New power centers are emerging, old ones are fading away. Our continent will be transformed by this. This is the main message of the crisis Europe has gone through during the past five, six years. This is why this is in essence a political crisis – not a financial or economic one.

For journalists like me, these are incredibly interesting times. For years nothing much seemed to happen in Europe – I remember myself yawning when, returning from the Gaza strip where I lived in the mid-1990s, Dutch newspapers ran headlines about an experiment involving cars driving with their lights on during the day. Now, by contrast, big things seem to be happening all the time. Banks have been collapsing. We are fighting semi-trade wars with China all of a sudden and a semi-war with Russia. Meanwhile Europe slowly disintegrates in a protestant north and a catholic south, into bickering little states trying to protect their own citizens and banks. Meanwhile we are negotiating a trade accord with the United States, even if this will make it easier for their intelligence agencies to read our emails and spy on our leaders. Will we still have welfare states, ten years from now? Does Europe still have any choices?

These are, in short, great times to be a journalist. A few months ago I received an email from a Dutch woman who had heard I had just won a prize for political reporting. She wrote: „I don't understand the world any more. Everything is moving. There is too much news and too little context. I want you to take me by the hand, to tell me what is important and what isn't. I don't want answers from you, I just want you to help me posing the right questions.” I regularly receive these kind of mails. They are a nice counterbalance to the hate mail that most reporters are receiving regularly no (especially those of us covering Europe). They are also revealing: the Netherlands seems to have done away with the elite, and here are people asking us to take them by the hand in the old-fashioned way. My grandmother used to turn on the big radio on the kitchen table at one o'clock sharp on a Sunday afternoon, and tell us to be quiet. A seasoned broadcaster called GBJ Hiltermann would then explain in a booming voice what was happening in the world. My grandmother had a mind of her own. But when it came to world affairs, she tended to accept Mr Hiltermann's authority.

These days are over, they tell us. But are they really? I think citizens are yearning for explanations. They are looking for someone who is knowledgeable enough to guide them and explain what is going on. They hardly find them on twitter, blogs or news sites.

This guidance can come in the form of a long newspaper article. It is another misunderstanding that people don't have the patience to read long articles any more. I won my prize with the longest article I had written in two or three years (on why German chancellor Angela Merkel decided to keep Greece in the eurozone in 2012). Carnegie Europe's long articles are well read, too. This spring I spent all of 4000 words explaining the historic origins of Dutch euroscepticism, and the response was overwhelming.

If traditional newspapers were still looking for a mission, they should find one now. Explaining the world in turbulent times is what papers were invented for. But look around in Brussels, my biosphere for the past five years, and you get a different impression. Climate change, the financial crisis, immigration – these are just a few of many issues that journalists cover, which have all become more complex because of globalisation. In addition, there is more ‘Europe’ than ten years ago. Not only has the EU grown from 15 to 28 members during that period, but EU Member states are doing much more together because they cannot survive on their own anymore. To cover the Europe portfolio adequately, you would need more correspondents than ten years ago. But the opposite is happening. There are fewer. Those who are still there are covering more themes that are more complex with fewer people than before. Eurocrisis. Terrorism. Data protection. Banking supervision.

I was posted to Brussels twice. When I arrived there for the first time in 1999, most of the issues I mentioned hardly existed yet. There were approximately 1500 accredited journalists in the city. The Financial Times worked with six people. Le Monde had five on the payroll. I was one of three for NRC Handelsblad, the Dutch quality newspaper. We all ‘specialized’: you could follow a couple of subjects more closely. We were well informed on our own fields, partly because we had the time to build up good networks. If you had to write something you knew whom to talk to straight away without being too dependent on spokespersons. In those days we still had one deadline per day. This was before newspapers had websites that need to be updated multiple times a day, and before they had tv channels, blogs and tweets.

Now there are less than a thousand correspondents left in Brussels. The FT still has four. Le Monde went from five to two. My newspaper also has two. But many colleagues are left on their own, covering the entire EU, NATO and Belgium. We are in the midst of an existential crisis that deeply affects the societies we grew up in. „Sometimes politicians have to lie” because of the hyper sensitivity of the subjects they are dealing with, Luxemburg prime minister Jean-Claude Juncker once said. Detecting those lies is time-consuming. Detecting what Juncker and other politicians are really thinking is even more time-consuming. How can one person do all this on his own?

I don’t manage. Frankly, I don’t even want to.

Bob Woodward of the Washington Post, the Watergate man, recently said to *Le Monde* in a long interview titled ‘Confessions d’un reporter d’élite’: „Contrary to journalists who blog, tweet and update their articles eight times per day, I always take my time. I go out (...), meet people whom I interrogate for a long time – sometimes during four or five hours, after which I always ask if I may come back. (...) The first tells me about a meeting that took place. The second adds details. Then I try to find a third who took notes or has documents. (...) This is how I put a story together: slowly and patiently.”

Woodward’s description of White House media coverage reminds me a lot of what you see during European summit meetings. There are huge press rooms full of long tables with tiny work stations. Hundreds of journalists are sitting behind their screens, typing. They hardly have time anymore to walk around, talk to diplomats or officials and find out what is really going on inside that building where journalists are not allowed. They sit there till spokespersons – many of them former journalists themselves – pass by and give them a crumb of well-spun information (it is no accident that while the amount of correspondents has gone down, there are more spokespersons than ever).

„The system,” Woodward went on, „is obsessed by speed and by the urge to cater immediately to a pseudo restless public.” The problem is, as he says, that Deep Throats are usually not on Twitter.

Almost the only subject I covered during the past years was the crisis. Since it changed appearances several times you had to cover banks, credit rating agencies, tax regimes, sovereign debt, and so forth. I quickly learnt that technical details not always matter much - but of course still you have to dive into them before deciding not to use them. In the end everything is political in Europe. The crisis is like a war fought with money instead of weapons. Every country wants to protect its banks. Every country wants to push the costs of the crisis over the border to make someone else pay. This is a nasty game. The only consideration all member states share is that no one wants to sink the whole system – because then obviously everyone will lose out. In this environment it is clear that no politician will tell a journalist what he really thinks as long as the tape recorder is running.

This is why, suprisingly perhaps in a trade that has so strongly digitalized, old-fashioned methods work best. You make appointments with people without passing by their secretaries, so nothing appears in his agenda. You meet sources in a park, since they don't want to be seen in the office with you. You have lunches and dinners, in people's kitchens or in a private dining room above a restaurant. This is less adventurous than Woodward's spooky underground garages. But you do it because otherwise you won't hear much. 95 percent of my work is off the record. When you are at a European Council meeting and everyone starts tweeting that the meeting is a failure, your alarm bells should start ringing. You wait for officials and diplomats to go home, long after the press conferences have finished where politicians tell you what they want to tell you, and ask them if it is true that this meeting was a failure. Usually they are so tired at this point in the night that they react immediately. And usually the story you get is different from what was tweeted. Sometimes the tweets turn out to be complete crap, even. The advantage of this method is that your paper has a more accurate and detailed story than some others. The disadvantage is that by the time you get home, your children are sometimes having breakfast already.

In the old days many journalists worked like that. Now this method is considered 'too slow'. The paper wants new stories all the time. Editors call you four, five times a day with a request. They need something for the foreign pages about Schengen procedures for asylum seekers, the economy desk wants a short piece on the budget. Then the Saturday edition would like an article on taxis in Brussels. Most newspapers are owned by private equity funds nowadays. First they cut twenty per cent in personnel and resources. Then they sell you to the highest bidder, who will do exactly the same. Maybe papers were overstaffed, and maybe not all overseas trips in the good old days were really journalistically relevant. But the dead wood has long been cut. We have reached a critical point where papers can no longer guarantee good-quality reporting.

I have seen my Brussels colleagues servicing four, five communication channels till late in the night. Many will somehow write several articles a day, even if they are not always sure about the accuracy. They are often too tired to think. When you ask them why they hardly ever say no, their answer is: 'If I refuse, they may sack me, too. I don't want to be next on the list.'

And so the machine tanks on. It is an information machine, increasingly spitting out news snippets instead of substance. But it is substance that readers, and journalists themselves, so desperately need. Good journalism is about selection and reflection. How can one ever finish a thought when one is bleeping from morning till night?

For Europe this development is not very promising. European decision making is per definition complex, involving 28 countries, several European institutions and national and international lobby groups. Most problems facing the continent are of a cross-border nature. They cannot be explained in a two-minute soundbite. Nor can its history as a peace project, essentially to prevent France and Germany ever to wage war again. Many citizens don't know any more what Europe is. In many countries, including the one I know best, the subject is hardly taught at school any more. At a time when Europe is battling an existential crisis, the very least the media can do is make people understand why this is so and what is at stake. They will have to show its complexities, not simplify everything. They must stop pretending Europe is just about outrageous salaries in Brussels. As if this is all one needs to know in the middle of a crisis.

Caroline de Gruyter is Europe correspondent for the Dutch newspaper *NRC Handelsblad*. She has been based in Brussels (twice), Geneva, and Jerusalem. She currently lives in Vienna. Her book about Europeans in Brussels, *De Europeanen* (2007), was shortlisted for the M.J. Brusse Prize in 2008. In June 2013 she was awarded the prestigious Vondeling Prize for best political reporting on the euro crisis from Brussels.

