

## The media coverage on the Convention – A missed opportunity?

With the end of the Convention, an increasing number of disappointed voices can be heard – at least among those who had hoped for a wide and open debate on the Future of Europe through the mass media. Once again, it is said, the elites took over and the great opportunity for a “wide debate on the future of Europe” (Declaration of Nice) has not been exploited. – Has this really been the case, and if so, what are the underlying reasons for this missed opportunity?

The media coverage on the Convention has been criticised concerning both its quantity and its quality. Concerning the *quantity* of coverage, it cannot be denied that *tabloids* and the great majority of *regional papers* have not carried stories on the debates within the Convention at all. One has to admit, however, that institutional debates have rarely moved the masses, at least not if clear-cut solutions are not on offer. Unfortunately, this is the case with many of the proposals that were discussed in the Convention. Questions of “more qualified majority voting” or “a double-hat model for a future European foreign minister” demand serious prior explanation – and thus an extra effort from journalists and politicians which the majority of them were seemingly not willing to make.

On the other hand – especially given the lack of “European faces” who could have potentially transported such complex debates – many *quality* newspapers have done a rather good job in covering the Convention. In the first twelve months of this new forum, for example, there have been more than 200 articles in the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* on the Convention and Convention-related matters. In case of *Le Monde* the number was even higher and even some British newspapers such as *The Guardian* and *The Independent* offered decent coverage of the main events in the Convention.

And another positive development could be observed: Media coverage of the European Union has always been highly event-oriented, so that whenever there was a European Council summit – with massive presence of heads of states and other “faces” – news coverage was strong, only to immediately decrease sharply afterwards. In this difficult context, the Convention has “steadied” the coverage – even if this has been still at a relatively low level.

The *quality* of coverage has also come in for a fair share of criticism. It is certainly true that some of the coverage has been quite shallow and that the interest in

the Convention has increased every time something supposedly “scandalous” happened. Giscard’s remarks about Turkey and the lack of a common foreign policy in the context of the Iraq war attracted much more attention than some of the questions that were most disputed within the Convention. Yet, it has to be asked whether only the media can be blamed for this or whether it was perhaps also a failure of those politicians who had announced a “large European debate” and then did not want the media to get too involved in the “real” power issues after all. The windows that had been announced at Laeken to be “open wide” for a European debate thus sometimes simply remained closed.

On the other hand, there are also still a lot of factors that inhibit a common debate on the European level. One of them is the fact that *national* media still concentrate on their *national* politicians. Journalists and politicians often know each other personally, have the same frame of understanding and both cater to the attention of the same *national* voter/reader. Not even to mention the fact of speaking the same language. As a consequence, one of the rituals that could be observed at the Convention was a member making his or her statement in the plenary – often rather modest and reasonable in tone – only to rush outside afterwards to deliver his opinion on the praesidium or his political opponents to his national media – often in a much stronger language than before. This ritual reminds the observer just all too well of what has already been seen at (too) many intergovernmental conferences.

There have, however, also been positive signs of a true “European debate”: Following a first assessment of the quality-press coverage of the Convention, it seems that considerable room has actually been given to viewpoints and speakers from other member states and the reflection of the debate often does not move strictly along national lines anymore. The Convention seems to have opened up national debates to views from other member states. Whether the quality press will maintain that practice in the aftermath of the Convention and in the subsequent IGC, however, remains to be seen.

The British tabloids, on the other hand, never even had the ambition to be well-balanced and have seized the Convention’s endgame as an opportunity to start a debate that most of the pro-Europeans would not have wished for. When *The Sun* characterised the whole process as “the biggest betrayal in our history” and the *Daily Telegraph* sees the constitution as “a blueprint for tyranny”, it is certainly not the differentiated and fair discussion that the well-meaning “European elite” has hoped for, when it wanted to have

“the people” more involved in the European integration process. On the other hand, would it be the “open debate” that was demanded, if these blatantly eurosceptic voices were just brushed aside? In Britain it will certainly trigger a wider debate on Europe – as one could already witness on BBC television one week later, where a popular talk show dealt with just the same subject that had been raised by the tabloids before: “A referendum on the European Constitution.” So, it could well be that via the “detour” of anti-European provocation a wider public actually will get interested in the complex institutional issues of the European Union.

Coming to conclusions, the progress that the Convention has brought for European media coverage is definitely not a sea-change, but rather an incremental and slow process towards a larger debate on the European Union. More would have been desirable, but it would have demanded an extra effort from both politicians and journalists to overcome old habits and structures - an effort that the majority of them unfortunately were not prepared to make.