

## Out of Brussels, Into Europe

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Before you lies the final deliverable of the Country Team of the Netherlands, to be presented at the plenary session of the EUth for Democracy Project on Saturday 24 April 2021. We are a group of five students and young professionals currently living in three different European countries (Italy, Belgium and the Netherlands). Our backgrounds range from economics, defence, law and governance. Based on our different experiences of living and travelling through Europe, we understand how connected our lives are to that of fellow Europeans. The market economy, climate change policies and vaccination strategies affect us both directly and indirectly; and are all part of a wider effort that transgresses the Italian, Belgian or Dutch borders we live in. It does not take much imagination to see that despite the differing national contexts, approaches and sensitivities - we are in fact dealing with *European* issues. Do we, as citizens of the European Union (EU), however perceive these issues to be typically European? As a starting point for this deliverable, we observe a disconnect between the common issues that we as a union are facing - and public opinion at the national level.

Issues that European media outlets cover on the news, are mostly brought through a national perspective. In consideration of the Future of Europe<sup>1</sup>, there is the need to recognize that the everyday reality of one member state (say, Sweden's wave of forest fires) is connected to the everyday reality of that in another member state (of say, air pollution in Austria). This is why we propose to establish **a network of journalists who bring local European perspectives to national European news programmes**. The network's sole task is to produce add-on segments on a variety of topics that national media platforms can make use of. In Part I, we explain how we arrived at the problem we wish to tackle. In Part II, we present our idea and elaborate on the defining characteristics of our proposal. We identify cross-border curiosity and an increased sense of European identity as benefits to our proposal.

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<sup>1</sup> Our proposal is designed in the run-up to the Conference on the Future of Europe (CoFoE). With this paper, we wish to contribute to the debate on the EU media landscape and EU correspondence.



## PART I - PROBLEM DEFINITION

### “Nationalizing” European news

As the mayor of the Dutch city of Breda, Mr. Paul Depla notes during the first *EUth for Democracy Engage Track Webinar*: ‘Citizens want to be involved in issues that impact them directly’.<sup>2</sup> When we however look at how Europe is reported in member states’ news segments, ‘the focus seems to be not so much on European issues – as on the EU legislative process’, albeit Politico reporter Jacopo Barigazzi.<sup>3</sup> Yet not unlike local themes, EU issues directly impact the lives of its 450 million citizens. This is where the interest and knowledge gap of European affairs amongst EU-citizens comes into play. Too often, as *The Guardian*-correspondent Natalie Nougayrade notes, ‘Europe’ is equated with the ‘Brussels bubble’ where members of national governments meet.<sup>4</sup> What is left is media reports on events from a mostly *national* point of view.

European news reporting knows a long and diverse history. Each of the 27 member states has its own channels and programmes that cater to specific audiences. Style, length and - not to be forgotten: humor - is country specific. By promoting media exchange across Europe, it is in no way suggested to standardize news reporting schemes in a one-EU-way format. Rather, the objective is to counter the dominant national lens of news reporting in today’s European media landscape. Because

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<sup>2</sup> Paul Depla (2020) Statement during the EUth for Democracy Engage Track Webinar: When are Democracies Legitimate?

<sup>3</sup> Jacopo Barigazzi (2021) Statement during the EUth for Democracy Engage Track Webinar: How to Form Consensus in a Democracy?

<sup>4</sup> Nina Rijnerse (2021) *Koffiehuis Europa* (trans. *Coffeehouse Europe*): <https://www.groene.nl/artikel/koffiehuis-europa>.

explaining the matters at hand from a national reporter in the context of a national country, prevents the possibility to view an issue broadly and refinedly. Additionally; the ability to learn from other member states! In such a way, it can happen that even though we are one Union - we tend to focus on the narrow effects specific to our own country.

## PART II - THE SOLUTION

### Bringing local European stories to your home

For more easy-access and fun everyday European media content, we propose to create a **network of local journalists to produce a (weekly) 10 minute local euronews segment** that can be added to existing local and national media programs. The idea is that these thematically changing snapshots offer fellow Europeans a quick peek into the lives of (far-away or close-by) neighbours. In this way, a maximum number of people get a piece of Europe on their media '*plat du jour*'. Local journalists will be central in developing content, as we want to go beyond national narratives and instead focus on regional and local stories. This ensures a broader perspective that not only goes beyond the headlines but also beyond the nationalist framing of news and events. The content of these segments will consist primarily of street interviews and reporting, but will also provide comical relief and informative snippets. The goal is that Europeans hear from different parts of Europe every week, covering capitals and the countryside. What we observed on national media outlets, asking bystanders on the street about issues that occupy the weekly news cycle is a popular way to poll the public opinion and bring the national and regional discussion in an accessible language. Doing this on a Europe-wide scale, but through national tv channels, will contribute to a broader sense of 'Europeanness' in everyday life.



### The philosophy behind the idea

Fundamental to our proposed solution is the hypothesis of the 'filter bubble' effect.<sup>5</sup> Representing a state of intellectual isolation, this effect explains why politically diverging groups are not able to find ground for common understanding. The filter bubble effect works through a mechanism of biased information provision and is a tried concept that contains a mechanism that we both propose to harness yet hope to

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<sup>5</sup> Brent Kitchens, et al. (2020) Understanding Echo Chambers and Filter Bubbles: The Impact of Social Media.

mitigate through its use<sup>6</sup>. It might be an impossible undertaking or a naïve ideal to strive for holistic information coverage. But we aim to fight this mechanism by offering a wider pool of sources and thus perspectives.

### Using the lens for good

Influencing the perception of information knows gradations on a spectrum. On one side of the spectrum is information manipulation. This is a negatively perceived form of information filtering. It implies active engagement with the information at hand through the fabrication of facts and experiences. We like to focus on the other side of the spectrum and focus on the more passive modalities in which access to information and views on that information are facilitated. We identified this solution by looking at the media landscape in the Netherlands where television shows that bring the current affairs to the broader people have been found to be able to actively communicate with a broader public as well as influence, on occasion, agenda setting or even policy making. This mechanism we intend to harness in our proposed solution.

### Fighting the lens of bad

At the same time media outlets that introduce biases through active manipulation or cherry picking of facts are increasingly regarded as sources of political instability. Those that see merit in information based theories of political influence propose that through widening the media landscape and offering more perspectives on the same issues, we might be able to educate citizens better and as such enable them to make better informed decisions. This is the same idea underlying the Erasmus+ enterprise. As such we hypothesise that by providing media coverage through the lenses of the different European member states' citizens we can be able to create better understanding and more support for the Union.

### What will this look like in practise?

The most important aim in this project is that the weekly news segments are light, easy-to-make and easy to access. What do we mean by this?

**Light:** Our number 1 requirement is that the content is light and funny. If a week is dealing with a heavier topic, we aim to make it as entertaining and digestible as possible. The length of the show is intentionally short for minimum time investment by the audience. Ten minutes allow just enough time to offer real content and nobody can say they don't have 10 min in a day/week. Instead of the dry lecturing mode that we often find in relation to EU content, we want to offer tongue in cheek jokes and

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<sup>6</sup> A detailed discussion of this topic is beyond the scope of this paper. Suggested further reading: Natalie Jomini Stroud (2011) Niche News: The Politics of News Choice.

refreshing statements from Europeans that don't make it to other country's national news shows.

**Easy-to-make:** Next, the segment format is designed to be adaptable to both low and high budgets. Instead of starting big and setting up a pan european broadcasting station, we want to rely on already existing local and national journalists and their stations. In that way we can start with a collaboration between 3-5 different countries and slowly expand the network around the news segments. By financially supporting a few journalists at the head of this network, we ensure that the coordination and production runs smoothly. Building this network of both local and national journalists and their (home) broadcasting station, will ensure a self-sustaining long term partnership that could result in many other cool media projects about what it means to be European.

**Easy access:** We aim for tv broadcasting where possible, because we want to involve a broad demographic that is not exposed to Euronews and foreign press on the daily. Of course, we do not aim to involve all countries from the start, but we want to kick off this initiative with a handful of countries and slowly expand with more national networks and journalistic ties. We believe that using existing programs and adding our segment to these established and trusted news services will greatly benefit the viewing numbers. Naturally, for member states that do not have a tv connection yet, the program can be watched via the official Youtube channel.

### What content can we expect?

We want to highlight crossborder problems and their crossborder solutions. This way we successfully display the immense diversity in opinion and in approach in different countries when it comes to solving problems that concern all Europeans. The content is aimed to create a better understanding of our neighbours struggles and successes. So one episode could deal with tax evasion, another with the wolves returning to many European countries. Yet another could take 10 minutes to look at how different countries deal with animal welfare in intensive livestock farming. For all of these topics, there would be a street interview part and an informative rundown by a journalist. Other topics we are considering: biking infrastructure, drugs & organized crime, youth unemployment.

### What content will not be featured

It's important to stress that this show will stay away from centering around the EU institution. While they may have a supporting role, the main goal is to get in contact with ordinary citizens. Furthermore, we want to emphasise that the show has a neutral position towards the EU. Even if the EU is the sponsor of the network we want to be an independent voice for the European people.

## Pilot to the first episode: a short timeline

As an example of how our idea in practice would look like, figure 1 describes the pilot that we propose. Each episode will be made by a team of journalists on rotation. The coordinator of the network will discuss and decide on this week's topic and reach out to around 2-5 country journalists that suit the theme best.

They work together on the script and set out to collect street interviews. The sketches and stunts are co authored and later filmed in the most convenient available location.



Figure 1: Description of a plot

9 minutes informative

The presenter of the 'hosting' country of that week's episode introduces today's topic. \*this is a designated journalist from the Member State where it is streamed\* He will bounce back the mic to the \*international/local\* journalist during the show.

Two kids read the eurobarometer that matches today's topic: *paternity leave*. (Topical because earlier that week the European Parliament had announced some changes) The tone is set.

Back to the presenter, who makes a lighthearted comment about all his colleagues who were on the streets of Europe trying to find out what people think about that week's topic

Queue to the map of Europe (important because this way even people who 'forgot' where certain smaller european cities are, learn their location in Europe) This week we zoom in onto Coimbra, Ljubljana, [REDACTED]

A journalist on the street asked locals in the designated cities about what it means to them to be a young father and to (not) get to spend time with your children.

Back to the map, back to the streets, this repeats itself until we have enough opinions.

Presenter gives a concluding remark (possibly connects it to EU the institutions, but only if it's not too heavy)

1 minute entertainment

Sketches about the topic. Graphic touring bus through Europe. Maybe a joke on a joke about country stereotypes.

## Conclusion

Throughout this proposal we have shown the relevance, feasibility and innovativeness of our project. For clarity, let us conclude by highlighting all three one last time.

**Relevance:** As set out in Part I, we observe a lack of understanding of the different and common issues across the national border. Combatting the 'Filter Bubble' that we described earlier, forms the basis and inspiration of our project. The value of our proposal does not derive from the European institutions. Rather, its relevance is created by creating an understanding between the citizens that make the European Union.

**Innovativeness:** So far no comparable project like ours exists. In the media landscape, we see cross-European cooperation schemes among newspapers, online European media outlets such as Politico and Euronews, media translation services, subregional media platforms (Balkan, Nordic), financial funding and journalism prizes. The gap we aim to fill, however, is that of pan-European local news - local stories with a clear importance from a European level - brought to Europe's citizens. We also miss the personal touch in European news. Too often, news is brought to the political level and covered in Brussels jargon, whereas the issues that are the heart of it have a direct effect on European citizens.

**Feasibility:** We propose to slowly build the network of journalists and move forward as a '*lean start-up*'.<sup>7</sup> Essential to this idea is both experimenting and realistic thinking. Keeping our core idea in mind, we want to try out different pilots and see what works best. Starting small, we believe that we can convince the necessary partners to make this a wide-scale success.

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<sup>7</sup> Harvard Business Review (2013) *Why the Lean Start-Up Changes Everything*: <https://hbr.org/2013/05/why-the-lean-start-up-changes-everything>.