

---

**Reading Europe:  
Representations of the European Union in the Australian Media**

**KATRINA STATS**

---

In May 2004, the European Union (EU) yet again loosened its waistband to make room for 10 new Member States and an additional 75 million citizens from Central and Eastern Europe. As the Union grows in width, it is also growing in economic power, political significance, and social influence both at a global level, and also in terms of its bilateral relations with third countries such as Australia.

The European Union has been Australia's largest and most important economic partner for the past 15 years. It is our largest merchandise trading partner, our largest partner for trade in services, our principal source of import goods, and our leading investor. Yet, in spite of this clear importance to the national interest, our government has declared the EU to be 'complex and difficult', it is virtually invisible in local media, and is perceived as incomprehensible and esoteric by the Australian public, who find contemporary Europe easier to swallow if it comes in a pizza box or latte glass.

The media plays a crucial role in civil society and public education and has the power to direct both elite and public perceptions and opinions. This paper looks at the media's role in informing understandings and misunderstandings of the European Union in Australia by analysing the representations of the EU in local print and broadcast media. The paper considers the dynamics of interest, reflected in the visibility and status accorded to EU news, as well as the dynamics of content in order to comment on the significance of media representations for the EU-Australia relationship.

In February this year *The Australian* reported that "(i)n the modern go-ahead European Union, while it is illegal to sell bananas displaying "abnormal curvature", frying up bits of your fellow citizens in olive oil and eating them is simply part of

life's merry-go-round.” The European Union is arguably the most dynamic region in the world at present and has been for some time now. The architects of European integration are redefining borders, reconfiguring international relations and, while not officially endorsing the practise of consuming one’s fellow Europeans, are also redesigning social modes and norms.

The integration project emerged from the post-war devastation of Europe and was born of the conviction that enduring peace could be achieved through the integration of economic interests. To those of us observing with keen interest the changes in Europe, it would not come as a great surprise to discover that the project was being financially sustained by a shrewd investment in the either the business of publishing history books or the map-making industry. In the space of just over half a century, the EU has grown from an economic collaboration between six European countries (France, Germany and the Benelux trio) into the most advanced example of regional coordination, encompassing an ever-increasing number of member states in ever-deepening forms of cooperation. Thus, the European Union is undeniably in the business of both rewriting history and redrawing maps.

In May 2004, the Union accepted Cyprus, the Czech Republic, Estonia, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Malta, Poland, Slovakia and Slovenia as new members. With a total population of some 452 million citizens, the EU is today the largest single market in the world, and also constitutes the largest economy with a combined GDP that exceeds that of the United States. This accounts for over a quarter of world GDP. Overall, the Union accounts for a massive 38% of global trade and in contrast to the United States, it enjoys a significant trade surplus. These factors arguably make it the world’s wealthiest region and its citizens experience some of the highest living standards in the world.

As well as prosperity, the EU has been responsible for the spread of peace and democracy throughout Europe. This is evidenced by the most recent expansion; as recently as fourteen years ago, eight of the ten new member states were under communist rule. Ambassador Mazzocchi, Head of the European Commission Delegation to Australia and New Zealand, points out that the EU has never ‘begged’ any country to join. Rather, the benefits of membership have been incentive enough to

encourage EU hopefuls to implement enormous economic, political and social changes in order to adhere to EU norms and standards such as transparent democracy, rule of law and a functioning market economy.

The EU is progressively becoming a more potent political force on the world scene, especially as it continues to define itself in contrast to the United States. In fact, if we are to believe some commentators, European-style unity is this season's new look - the 'new black' of international relations. It is both the catalyst and (super)model for regionalisation in other parts of the world. In a recent article in *Foreign Policy*, for example, Parag Khanna argued that "by cleverly deploying both its hard power and its sensitive side, the European Union has become more effective—and more attractive—than the United States on the catwalk of diplomatic clout." Australians, being a season behind Europe, are not so sure about this new trendsetter. The current Australian Government has acknowledged the EU as a substantial "force in world politics". However, it is ambivalent when it comes to deciding just what kind of force it is; benevolent and cosmopolitan, as the Euro-enthusiasts would have us believe, or a more sinister, cannibalism-approving, sovereignty-devouring monster.

It could be argued that the official Australia-EU relationship is one driven by uncertainty. Initially there was the fear that the UK accession to the European Community in 1973 would distance Australia from its closest and most important European partner. With each subsequent European Union enlargement there has been growing concern that internal distractions might cause a loss of attention in our part of the world and, as Foreign Minister Alexander Downer has argued, that "Europe's ambitious agenda" might "impinge upon Australia's interests". This has been exacerbated by a fear of being unattached in an emergent climate of regionalisation, led by the EU. Throughout its modern history, Australia has struggled with its regional identity. With Europe becoming more distant, Asia blocking Australian participation in established regional forums such as ASEAN and ASEM (Asia Europe Meetings), and the Pacific Islands rejecting the colonial overtones of an Australian-led regional grouping, Australia has more recently, under the Howard Government, further engaged with the United States.

There are also fears that the EU's substantial economic weight will translate into political domination. This concern was certainly at play in 1997 when Australia refused to sign a potentially favourable Framework Agreement because of the inclusion of a human rights clause, a prerequisite of the EU in its trade agreements with all countries. A much weaker Joint Declaration was signed instead.

This official ambivalence towards the EU is somewhat mirrored by indifference in the local media. The effects of this should not be underestimated. The media plays a crucial role in civil society and public discourse. Indeed, it has been suggested that the news media possess a "new and autonomous capacity to influence the formulation and conduct of foreign policy". This influence is not always simply an overt partisan approach. As Trevor Barr argues, "We use media to construct our version of what the world is like, and what we regard as important issues in society depends in part on how the media choose to represent them." Surprisingly little research has been conducted on how the European Union is presented to, and perceived by, the third countries such as Australia.

This essay draws upon the work of an international research team aiming to redress this deficit by undertaking a multidisciplinary, comparative investigation of perceptions of the European Union in the Asia Pacific. The project, titled *Public, Elite and Media Perceptions of the European Union in the Asia Pacific Region: A Comparative Study*, is designed to explore the nexus between media, public and elite perceptions of the EU in four Asia Pacific countries, Australia, New Zealand, South Korea and Thailand. The project has a tripartite structure and employs multiple methodologies to target each of these focus groups – it involves content analysis of local *media* sources, a broad *public* survey, and in-depth interviews with media, political and business *elites*.

The media phase of the project involves the analysis of any news items containing either of the two search terms, 'European Union' or its abbreviated form, 'EU' in five prominent daily newspapers and two daily prime time news bulletins in each country. In Australia the newspapers selected for analysis are the *Herald Sun*; the *Sydney Morning Herald*; *The Australian*; the *Australian Financial Review*; and the *Canberra Times*. This selection provides as representative a sample of the Australian print

media as possible. In terms of ownership, News Limited and Fairfax are evenly and overly represented in the sample as is appropriate to their share of the market. In addition to the two national newspapers, the largest cities, Sydney and Melbourne are both represented, as is the nation's capital, Canberra. There is a range of styles and formats, political leanings and, with the exception of the *Canberra Times*, all are in the top ten highest circulated and read papers in Australia. The two television news bulletins are Channel Nine's National Nine News and the ABC National Nightly News. The selection includes one public and one commercial broadcaster and both are leading and respected news bulletins, with Nine's news consistently dominating ratings.

The period of analysis for the project is from the 1 January to 31 December 2004; however, the analysis being presented here is based upon only the first three months of data. As such, it is necessary to caution that these results and the reflections in this paper are preliminary conclusions based on preliminary results. Different trends may emerge over the full 12 months, especially given the episodic nature of, in particular, the television coverage. Both formal and content characteristics of each news item are coded. The formal details include 'surface' characteristics such as the sources of the news, the leading topics, its placement in the paper, and the length of the articles, as well as 'in-depth' characteristics – the centrality of the EU to the news item and the focus of domesticity – that is, whether the news is located in Australia, the EU or a third country. As well as assessing the dynamics of coverage the content of the news items are examined more closely and the news is divided into three main frames - economics, politics and social affairs. Content characteristics include such things as the EU actors and their actions ('propositions'), the character of the news, the journalist's attitude, overall evaluations (positive, negative or neutral) and analysis of the conceptual metaphors contained within the propositions.

Despite its glowing economic credentials and model-like appeal, the EU does not attract high media coverage in Australia and, unbecoming of its status, rarely graces the cover of any major newspapers. Rather, the United States consistently and substantially trumps the EU in terms of international press coverage. A snapshot comparison to US visibility in the five newspapers being analysed in this project

reveals that there were approximately 4,000 articles referring to 'United States' (but *not* 'US' or 'USA') for the first three months of 2004. This compares to less than 450 articles containing either of the *two* search terms, 'European Union' *and* 'EU', for the same period. If the print media coverage of the EU seems inadequate, the broadcast coverage can only be considered appalling. The EU is virtually invisible on Australian screens. While Australia has more print coverage than the three other countries in our study, the trend is reversed for television with the two Australian channels broadcasting just 1.8 items per month, the lowest average of all four countries.

If we consider the accessibility and role of television in modern society, this has serious implications. Television is the most popular leisure activity in the world, a fact difficult to dispute in a country where 99% of households have at least one television set, (most have two or more) and the average person watches 3.3 hours of television each day. The National Nine News is the highest rating program for Channel Nine and, in fact, across all the channels. Moreover, according to a recent survey sponsored by the Australian Broadcasting Authority, it is also the most used source for news and current affairs. The ABC News is ranked third. By contrast, the print media, containing significantly more EU news, rates more poorly as an important source of information. Melbourne's tabloid style paper, the *Herald-Sun*, is the highest ranked newspaper on the list in position 7 while *The Australian*, typically considered to be our highest quality newspaper, especially in terms of foreign news coverage scrapes in at unlucky number 13.

Even more concerning is the fact that the *Herald Sun*, both the highest circulated newspaper and the print source *most* used for news and current affairs, has the lowest level of EU news of all the papers with an average of just 13.3 articles per month (including articles not only with a major but also a minor or secondary EU focus). Somewhat surprisingly, given its role servicing our political elites, the *Canberra Times*, with a monthly average of 14 articles, has only marginally more EU content than the *Herald-Sun*. Predictably, the two national dailies, *The Australian* (69.7 articles per month) and the *Australian Financial Review* (29.7 articles per month) have the highest EU content while the *Sydney Morning Herald* averaged 18.3 EU news items per month.

A similar trend emerges from the television data – that is, the most popular news broadcast and *the* most used source for news and current affairs overall, National Nine News, has the least, and in real figures, very little, EU news content. Perhaps this essay might have been more aptly titled “Not Reading Europe”.

Is, as the idiom goes, no news good news? Unfortunately for the European Union, this is not likely to be the case. As Stille has remarked of the Italian Prime Minister, Silvio Berlusconi’s attitude towards news, “if something does not appear on television, it does not exist.” More a comment on Berlusconi’s virtual monopoly of the Italian media than a statement of fact, there is, nonetheless, an element of truth to this claim. In pragmatic terms, exposure conveys a subject’s importance to the audience - if it is important enough to be mentioned in the media, it is important for the public. The more frequently a subject is mentioned, the more importance it is accorded by the viewing public.

Thus, the relative lack of interest in the EU is curiously incongruent with the relative significance of the EU as a global power and as a local partner for Australia. The European Union has been Australia’s largest and most important economic partner for the past 15 years. It is not insignificant that 45% of Australian official reserves are currently held in euro. So why are we not seeing, hearing and reading more about the European Union and what are the implications of this ‘communication deficit’?

First, there are some obvious reasons for the limited amount of EU news in Australia. The complex institutional structure, the dense treaty basis and the novel economic configuration of the European Union are not familiar concepts for the average person on the street, or, it seems, even our political elites who have described the EU as “complex and difficult”. It is difficult to contextualise EU news in a few brief paragraphs or within an average word length of 828 words for EU-based news with a major EU focus and just 454 words for local-based news items with a major EU focus.

Second, the EU-Australia relationship is developing slowly (especially in the absence of a Framework Agreement) and meaningful economic and political benefits are slow to appear and often of low significance, at least in terms of audience interests. As

Matthew Saltmarsh ruefully observes, “EU affairs...will often be relegated or glossed over...[in favour of] more accessible national stories like the UK royal family, French cultural and social issues, the quirkiness of Italy’s political system and so on.”

This is not helped by the fact that the Australian media presence in Europe is downsizing at a profound historical juncture in European, and indeed, world history. 2004 was a year full of major internal EU events – enlargement, elections, the constitutional debate and the commission changeover – as well as external developments such as the increasing political and ideological divide between the EU and the US. It is therefore quite disturbing to learn that the last crumbs of an Australian presence in Brussels were swept out when the ABC news bureau closed without a whimper in 2003. There are no longer any Australians amongst the 1,200 accredited journalists in Brussels, the headquarters of the EU. The ABC’s London office was reduced to just two journalists and Channel Nine also recently scaled down their London bureau, while Channel Seven closed theirs altogether.

The few remaining Europe-based Australian journalists are therefore reporting delayed, second-hand, and translated EU news from London, inevitably filtered through the well-documented British Euro-scepticism. It is inevitable that the physical position of journalists as much as their personal position can impact upon the type, amount and the quality of news the public is exposed to. In the Australian press, for example, we have found a higher level of negative overall evaluations and more negative conceptual metaphors, which reflect the general attitudes adopted by the British press. By contrast, New Zealand’s most prominent and prolific EU journalist, Catherine Field, is based in Paris and her articles tend to reflect continental European views and carry more positive evaluations and connotations.

This Australian-New Zealand variation also reflects divergent Government policies and priorities. The conservative Australian coalition Government has tended to follow and align itself with the US in recent times on matters such the Iraq War and the Kyoto Protocol for example. By contrast, the NZ Labour government, led by Helen Clarke, is more closely associated with continental European policies on these matters and in other regards, such as social welfare. This connection between media and politics is something that will be investigated further when interviews are conducted

with people within the media industry and government later this year as a part of the *Asia Pacific EU Perceptions* project.

A final explanation might lie in the Government's reluctance to recognise and engage with the EU as a unitary actor. Official rhetoric is littered with qualifiers such as "when taken as a single actor..." The chapter devoted to the European Union in the most recent Government White Paper is entitled, "Developing Deeper Relations with an Enlarged and *Increasingly Cohesive* Europe" (emphasis added). And yet, after a brief paragraph on the recent enlargement, the chapter very quickly moves on to the "countries of Europe" and the importance of our individual bilateral relations with each of them.

This tendency also exists amongst the general public, who are more familiar with and interested in the individual member states - Brussels is foreign and bureaucratic whereas London is familiar and compelling. Australia's bilateral focus is not solely or even primarily accountable for this; a strong and cohesive European identity and civil society is yet to emerge. As well, the divisions over Iraq served to exacerbate the impression of a lack of European unity.

Nevertheless, there are significant ramifications of this reluctance to view the EU for what it is – an increasingly unified and powerful global power – and pay sufficient attention to it. For example, a lack of interest, awareness and understanding of the EU translates to the loss of trade and business opportunities in the world's largest single market. This has been documented by Philomena Murray who, in a recent survey of elite attitudes towards the European Union, found that respondents rated the importance of different facets of the EU-Australia relationship, such as the Wine Agreement, much more highly than they rated their knowledge and understanding of these issues.

While the irreversible processes of globalisation and its attendant technologies are bringing geographically distant states and people closer together, Australia appears to be drifting further apart from an integrated Europe, itself a product of globalisation, despite our historical connections. Thus, comprehending, communicating and critically evaluating the constantly expanding and ever deepening union of the

peoples of Europe becomes an increasingly important task. Uncovering the dynamics of EU media coverage in Australia provides just one layer of a much more intricate picture of Australian perceptions of the European Union. The *Asia Pacific EU Perceptions* project aims to paint a much fuller picture of the development, pervasiveness, and significance of perceptions of the EU by analysing the content of the news items, interviewing the news makers and policy makers and assessing public awareness and, in doing so, stem this drift from our most important economic partner and an emerging global superpower.

More details about the study that this essay draws upon, *Public, Elite and Media Perceptions of the European Union in the Asia Pacific Region: A Comparative Study*, and regular updates of the findings can be found on the following webpage: <http://www.europe.canterbury.ac.nz/appp/>.