

Connecting Europe: The Calling of Trans-European Media

An interview with Catherine André, Marta Cillero

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In a Europe threatened with rising nationalism, trans-European media could present an ambitious project to connect people across borders and language barriers. We spoke to Catherine André from VoxEurop and Marta Cillero from Political Critique, first runner-up of the Jean Monet Prize for European Integration, about their hands-on experiences of trans-European media and the role of journalism in democracy today.

Green European Journal: Europe has never been more in the news than it is today. Thus far, most European media projects have failed to resonate outside of the ‘Brussels bubble’. Does the current general crisis and contestation of Europe represent momentum for genuinely trans-European media projects?

Marta Cillero: It does indeed, but this opportunity is not as new as it might seem. It has been there for the past 15 years, but now, with the rise of xenophobia and nationalism, there is a much greater momentum for the creation of new European projects. The most important issues today – climate change, corporate tax evasion, racism, migration, the flows of people and goods, feminism – these cannot be tackled at the national level. For them to be tackled at the European level, we need media that speaks about these issues and creates the space for the audience to engage with these topics.

In a way, it might seem as if trans-European media is for the EU bubble and pro-European, well-educated, cosmopolitan people. The discourse that European citizens are not active, engaged or interested is a discourse proclaimed by certain European and national elites and institutions because it is in their own interest to maintain their ideas and privileges and to not have a public sphere beyond national borders. In reality, there are citizens that are not highly educated intellectuals that speak five languages who are concerned because they see racism in their neighbourhoods. They take to the streets because they want their cities to welcome refugees; they are concerned about the use of plastics, and about global warming. This is the audience that we are speaking to and that we need to address. The current political climate and situation of growing far-right xenophobia and racism has brought us to a tipping point, and now we really need to push forward with the European media sphere.

Catherine André: I strongly agree that citizens are not only concerned by the situation of their country of origin, because the main challenges of the 21st century are cross-border issues. If climate change, for example, already impacts people locally, it cannot be tackled solely at the national levels nor merely at the EU level. We need trans-European media more than ever to give coverage of the issues that citizens really care about. Numerous citizens all over Europe are very active, finding their own local answers to the so-called ‘migrant crisis’, for example, or solutions at different territorial levels to tackle climate change and environmental issues. The media must relay these experiences and good practices. We clearly feel momentum, but the coming 10 years could also see the end of the European idea. We have to provide qualitative news to those who are already convinced Europeans but not forget to address the majority which feels it is being sidelined.

Attempts at creating trans-European media projects have often come in top-down, soft power or Western European forms and funding such as Euronews or Arte. Others, news sites or magazines like yours, are rather small in scale. What explains this situation? Are bottom-up and curating approaches the future of trans-European media?

Catherine André: *VoxEurop* doesn’t intend to compete with either these big media, or the outlets focusing on the ‘Brussels bubble’. This is not our ambition, and others do it well. We’re trying to contribute to the emergence of a European public sphere, which is why we publish in several languages. We translate many important pieces that

matter for a number of countries. We are small, but we are welcoming people's contributions and ideas that they would like us to discuss and share.

Marta Cillero: I agree that we're not trying to compete with major media outlets because we don't have the capacity and it's not our objective. Journalists and people within the alternative, trans-European media world need more ambition and more capacity to imagine new ways of creating narratives because we can't compete with outlets like *The New York Times*. Of course, we want to increase our resources and our network, but we do speak for the activists and with the activists. We are involved with several social movements and we are interested in what is happening on the ground.

Political Critique is a magazine but it's also a network and we really want to make this network grow. It's one thing being a journalist and doing the writing and coverage, but it's another thing entirely to follow up the different members of the network and to ascertain which countries are not being covered and how to create synergies. *Political Critique* is not aiming to be the umbrella that gathers them all, but rather to play the role of 'press coordinator' and connect them. This is a real challenge because it is very time consuming. When a certain magazine from the Czech Republic contacted another from Spain because they heard about them through *Political Critique*, that's a success.

With so many local historical trajectories, specific public spheres and media as well as language barriers in Europe, how can trans-European media be set up?

Marta Cillero: *Political Critique* works as a network and the impact that the different members can have is very important. We publish original content in English from our alliance of freelance journalists, and we trust in the content of them and our partners. For example, if we want to cover something in Spain, we ask our partners there either for a piece that they have written on the topic, which we translate and publish, or we ask for contents and commission our own article. This works really well because our partners already have a readership, which it would be difficult for us to build. By building alliances we create an exchange, because the partner magazine also takes content, not only from *Political Critique* but also from our partners in other countries, which are also their partners.

One of our partners, *Pikara Magazine*, is a very well-known feminist magazine in Spain. They're not primarily a European magazine, but they aim to reach a pan-European audience, not only because they collaborate with us but because they write about issues beyond their national context. For example, they published an article in Spanish written by a Spanish journalist living between France, Spain and Ukraine [about the grandmothers that are campaigning against the far right in Austria](#). Originally written for a Spanish audience, it was then translated into English. Like many others, *Pikara* understands the urgency of exchanging contents across Europe in the light of citizens suffering the same issues.

Catherine André: Creating and running a European independent news media is a huge challenge. The current media environment is difficult, and probably even more so at the European level where a community of easily accessible readers has to be created. European media requires translating most articles into at least three or four languages, which is costly in terms of resources and time. But it is really worth every effort. European independent media is slowly growing, in part because it is based on very strong values and really working for democracy, addressing themes that are scarcely covered by national outlets.

VoxEurop existed as an association for three years and became the first European Cooperative Society to run a media outlet in September 2017. It is trying to work in a different and very innovative way: more translators, writers and lots of collaboration and working through networks. The *VoxEurop* website is free and we are currently working on a membership model, probably quite close to that used by *The Guardian*. We are still fragile but we are growing, and are involved in three big projects at the moment. One of these is the [European Data Journalism](#)

Network, which was launched with many partners throughout Europe a year ago, aiming at fighting fake news with data and infographics. The challenge is exciting: we have to create a new form of journalism, staying close to the audience while narrating, debating, and analysing at the European level.

Who funds your media? How can trans-European media be sustainable and financially viable and yet independent? Is the age of online publishing and broadcasting an opportunity?

Marta Cillero: Funding has always been complicated, but there have always been opportunities and one needs to be creative and courageous to create new projects. *Political Critique* is funded by two organisations: European Alternatives and Krytyka Polityczna. They co-source a specific budget for the magazine and equally fund it. It's not necessarily sustainable – in a year, *Political Critique* could (or not) close shop. At the moment, we really need to define the role of network coordinator, but there are ways to go on.

Regarding the age of online publishing, I'm absolutely not one to believe that paper is dead. Of course it's decreasing, but I think it will reinvent itself. Perhaps traditional newspapers not so much, but printed magazines are still present and promising new projects are being created. But you cannot avoid the internet and social media, and the numbers, figures, and reach-outs on Facebook, for example, are incredible – you cannot avoid being there and having those conversations. The far right are doing great in that sense – they know that you need to be active on Twitter, and they are reaching the under-25 audience with Instagram. The so-called traditional media are also reinventing themselves on the internet – *The Guardian*, *El País* and *The New York Times* publish their stories on Instagram.

What model does VoxEurop want to build? Do paywalls not build closed and like-minded communities?

Catherine André: We are today developing a business model based on membership. If we want to contribute to the emergence of a European public sphere, it is vital that our content is accessible to all, for free, and not only to a small community of already convinced Europeans behind a paywall. It is, however, thanks to a close community's financial support that we will be able to do so. Also, as a cooperative, we will offer our readers, partners, journalists, translators, and all the members of our ecosystem the possibility to own a piece of *VoxEurop*, and one vote in our editorial decisions. A media that belongs to its readers and journalists is a guarantee of independence, and this our top priority.

Is there a crisis of the profession of journalism in Europe? What is the role of journalism and journalists toward democracy and a vibrant public sphere?

Marta Cillero: Democracy comes together with pluralism and in this sense we as journalists need to be very attentive of what kind of stories are we telling, who is telling them, and who the protagonists are. When we speak about the European media, we risk having one single story and getting trapped in the European bubble. We really need to engage with the real protagonists of each story. There are many reasons for the rise of the far right and nationalism, but one of the things that has certainly contributed has been the simplification of migrants and minorities by the media, which has represented them as a unique, single, unchanging, isolated group. The people that these concepts represent are actually very diverse and we need to let them speak for themselves and engage them in the conversation: the so-called 'women', 'migrants', 'refugees', 'workers', 'the unprivileged', and so on. As alternative outlets, it is fundamental that we speak not only on behalf of but also with the testimonies and the protagonists of certain stories. Deconstructing the existing discourse is very important so as to not lose more ground to the far right.

Catherine André: Journalists have a huge responsibility, but the crises of media and the economy and their interdependence have led to growing time constraints and economic pressure put on journalists. It is very difficult for them to work in good conditions and produce pieces of which they are proud, and the scope of the articles

published has shrunk greatly in the last 15 years. I think the deterioration of journalists' working conditions has pushed some of them to create alternative media.

Editors-in-chief also have sometimes strong pressure from shareholders or owners who have their own agendas. I feel a huge responsibility as an editor, but I know I am not alone. There are many people doing a great job with often insufficient means – we need to get together more often to think of new ways of funding responsible, quality journalism.

Marta Cillero: Talking about the crisis of journalism, I don't believe in the concept of 'citizens' journalism'. When smartphones came in, I remember people and media analysts thinking that everyone could now be a journalist, and then journalism would be dead. It's not the case, of course, because journalism is more than just taking a picture, doing one interview, and then writing a piece. And it's not that people go around writing pieces and publishing them anyway; I don't see that now citizens are more interested in participating actively in the media landscape at all. That being said, we work closely on the ground with social movements, with political-social campaigns, and activists or citizens sometimes engage with us there, asking how to write a piece or if we can cover their stories.

Catherine André: Journalism is transforming and is challenged in many ways. There have always been some very committed newspapers, and the debate about objectivity has been there as long as there have been journalists. What stance do we take? You can always go back to the facts, but how do you present them, what kind of headlines do you choose to put forward? The idea of looking at reality and trying to transcribe it is complex. At the moment, the speed at which information – including some fake news, although this is not a new phenomenon – is circulating is much faster than ever before and feeds into the political sphere. It needs a faster response. When I decided to become a journalist, my motto was to try help give people the tools so they can think for themselves. It's very interesting to give space to people to express themselves so they can take part in the wider debate.

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Catherine André is a journalist. She is the cofounder and editor-in-chief of *VoxEurop*. She is a deputy editor-in-chief of *Alternatives Economiques* and the Vice president of the Association of European Journalists France (AJE). She was previously the deputy editor-in-chief of *Courrier International*.



Marta Cillero is responsible of European Alternatives communications, writer and co-editor of the online magazine *Political Critique*. Graduated in media Studies, journalism and communication. Background in gender studies, previously she worked with Anushay Hossain as community manager, blogger and research assistant. Marta has just published her first poetry book with a feminist perspective with the Italian publishing house Ensemble.

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