

Maastricht Monnet Lecture Series:

“Shining a Light on the Mess” - Politico and News Reporting in the EU

Harry Cooper from POLITICO Europe, 13 October 2016

(Chatham House rules applied)

Following up on the success of the past academic year’s lecture series, CERiM has had the pleasure of welcoming students and scholars at Maastricht University for the opening of the Maastricht Monnet Lecture Series this past Thursday. This lecture series not only sets out to provide a platform for stimulating discussions about EU-related topics but also seeks to open up new research avenues by encouraging a better understanding of the complex institution that is the European Union.

It was with this thought in mind that the Centre reached out to one of the liveliest outlets to have entered the news reporting scene in the EU in the recent past to analyse the institution from the viewpoint of a non-governmental actor. Much like its original counterpart in the United States, POLITICO Europe’s much anticipated debut in Europe operated on the premise of providing an alternative – and often more provocative – approach to reporting on what is happening in the EU. As a reporter on EU Affairs and deputy on POLITICO’s Playbook Email, Harry Cooper, the speaker of the evening, was keen on sharing his views on how POLITICO functions and on how it perceives its role as a news outlet in the Brussels scene.

Starting his speech with a journey down memory lane, Cooper sought to demystify the European Parliament, one of the most crucial bodies of the EU. Reflecting on his experiences as a former policy adviser to a British Member of the European Parliament, he noted that the legislative force of the EU remains an opaque entity for many due to the non-transparent nature of bureaucratic processes in the institution. His critique of the system relates to the challenges both sceptics and proponents of the EU have called attention to: The seemingly paralysing barriers erected by bureaucratic procedures, and the heavy reliance on the delegation of tasks to committees. Undoubtedly, the complexities that arise from this have proven to be one of the major challenges the institutions have to address in order to reduce the democratic deficit and strengthen solidarity among member states.

For Cooper, it is particularly this deficit that POLITICO Europe seeks to address and reduce, and it does so by ‘asking the questions nobody is interested in’. In this sense, the outlet primarily perceives its role to detect and expose the inconsistencies in what the different bodies of the EU report to citizens. To achieve this goal, POLITICO’s reporters put great emphasis on aligning the statements issued in Brussels with concurrent information provided by national media outlets in the Member States and information privately sent by individuals who have access to classified documents. The Playbook, which is circulated each morning to subscribers, is reflective of this endeavour, as it sources news from the numerous national media outlets to present what is going on in a more comprehensive and digestible manner to its audience.

Through this lens, POLITICO’s effort to provide an insight into the dynamics within and between the different bodies not only fosters greater public scrutiny by cross-referencing what is said in public with what is said ‘behind closed doors but also serves as a powerful tool that policymakers themselves make use of to influence how ideas find their way onto the political agenda of decision-makers.

Cooper’s closing statements echo the remarks made at the beginning of his speech: Looking to ‘shine a light on the mess’, POLITICO Europe is starting to ‘connect the dots’ by exposing the gaps in EU regulations and workings. What he notices is that, although still implicit, this modus operandi is beginning to leave its mark on the functioning of the institutions, as it puts the EU and its bodies under greater public scrutiny by cross-referencing what is said in public and what it says ‘behind closed doors’.