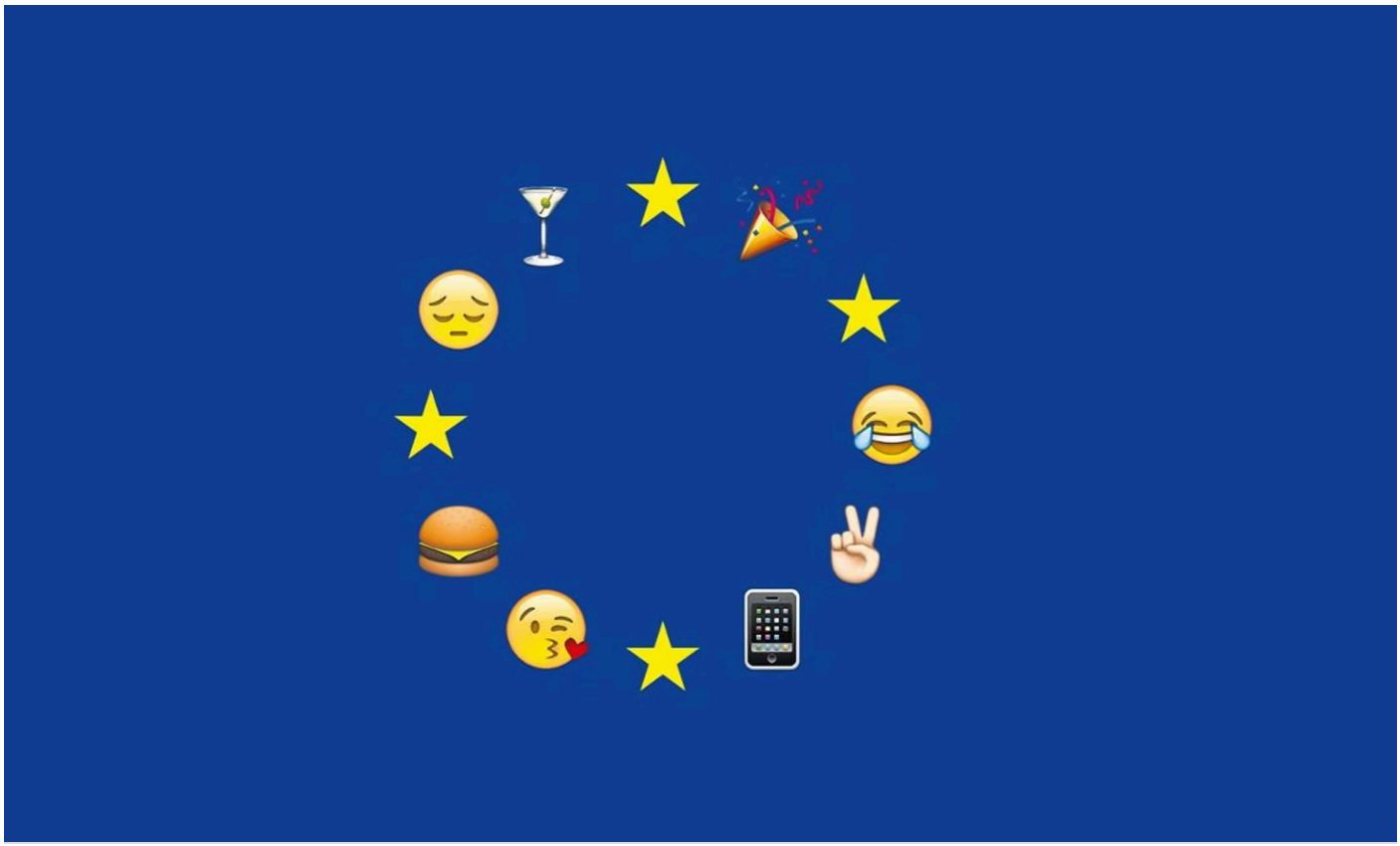
The long read European Union

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Can Politico make Brussels sexy?

Their brash, fast, gossip-obsessed website has transformed Washington journalism. Now they've landed in Europe



Gideon Lewis-Kraus

Thu 18 Jun 2015 01.00 EDT

Prefer the Guardian on Google

The 27-year-old New Yorker Tara Palmeri, a former gossip columnist and the incandescent envoy of media's future to the Brussels of the past, believes it her duty to show up without fail at the European commission's midday press briefing. The briefing centre is a softly lit ovoid room, upholstered in bridesmaid-dress mauve and framed with slatted blonde wood, as if chosen off-the-rack from the conference-room department at Ikea. A passel of serious international journalists assembles there each noon, under the benign gaze of glass-caged interpreters, to check Twitter. The briefing is a daily exercise in spokespersonal obstructionism,

and most of the town's thousand-odd accredited journalists quickly fall out of the habit of going. Palmeri attends less to cull actual intelligence than to present, to both the commission and the press corps, the spectacle of herself.

Palmeri has only been a reporter in Brussels for six weeks, and she and the city are still in the process of acclimatising to each other. Her last beat, covering City Hall for the New York Post, found her throwing elbows in the scrum of mayor Bill de Blasio's press conferences. Before that, she had established herself in classic Manhattan-ingénue fashion as a force behind the Murdoch tabloid's legendary gossip folio, Page Six. For Italian-Polish Catholic-school girls from New Jersey, this trajectory typically ends in media-blog notoriety, not at the fiefdom of Jean-Claude Juncker. But her new employer, Politico Europe, was keen to appoint an impenitent to fire warning shots across the commission's bow. Palmeri, never one to follow orders to the letter, has taken direct aim. As she put it, after obtaining for me in two minutes the commission press accreditation that can take others weeks: "They hired a gutsy girl who worked at Page Six to come through and destroy this town."

Palmeri may put herself across as a little uncouth, but like her new employer she is in fact neither stupid nor callow. The original Politico, which in only eight years has become a major presence in American journalism, was launched in 2007 by two seasoned Washington Post reporters. They believed that political coverage had become clubby and sclerotic; their model would by contrast be clubby and exhilarating. They were obsessed with accelerating the news cycle's "metabolism" which, depending on your perspective on their approach, recalls either the quickening of the pulse or the churning of the bowels. They flattered a network of Beltway insiders with celebrity-style coverage, palace intrigue described in an intimate court pidgin. They spoke with the confidence of those first in the know. The site's flagship product, Mike Allen's highly profitable Playbook, brands itself as a "must-read briefing on what's driving the day in Washington"; it is a predawn email farrago of breaking news, grapevine hearsay, sponsored content, and the gladhanding of the pickpocket. (Take this, for example, from a Playbook email that arrived on my first day with Palmeri: "WEEKEND WEDDINGS - Tracey Schmitt, EVP of Emergent Biotech Solutions, former press secretary at the RNC and Bush 43 alum, married Nick Lintott … The four-day affair included watercolour maps of the island, bug spray for when 'love bites', and a full local choir to sing "Alleluia" … Sushi, Tracey's blond and extra fluffy Pomeranian, was the ring bearer as 14 bridesmaids walked down the aisle as the orchestra played 'Don't Stop Believin'.")

In April, Politico alighted on European shores. Palmeri was brought on right away as a dish-breaking ambassador to ancien regime Brussels, with its preening institutions of obscure function. She mostly covers the European commission, which is usually described as "the executive arm of the European Union," as if the EU were some super-robot of member states and the European commission held the metal fist. The stadium seating at the commission's briefing centre has four rows of economy comfort in front, but Palmeri likes to sit in the middle of the second tier, where she can survey the whole scene.

It was the Monday of the first week in June, and that Friday was an important deadline for a Greek IMF payment. That evening Juncker, the president of the European commission, would be meeting in Berlin with German chancellor Angela Merkel and Greek prime minister Alexis Tsipras. The consensus that day in Brussels was twofold: that the commission was more sympathetic to the Greeks than the other two members of the so-called "troika", the IMF and the European Central Bank, and that Juncker saw the crisis as a chance to consolidate his commission's role as a political power broker.

The Politico Europe team devotes a lot of time and energy to Juncker, whose ambition parallels theirs: any serious assertion of Brussels's relevance can only raise their own profile. Juncker's CV reads almost as though he were a performance artist of bureaucracy: he was prime minister of Luxembourg for 18 years, and he served for nearly that entire time as the country's finance minister as well as its labour minister - thus singlehandedly occupying a whole wing of its major ministerial posts. He wants to be known for creating the commission that remade Brussels as an actual centre of power, which has inspired an optimism the city has not felt in more than 10 years.

A reporter asked a question about the commission's view of the ongoing debt-crisis negotiations. Palmeri sighed in anticipation. "They never say anything real about Greece." She opened her laptop to Twitter.

The spokeswoman at the podium, whom Palmeri believed might benefit from a makeover, blathered on about how the institutions were working with the process groups, and after intense technical discussions over the weekend they could say that progress had been made but they were not there yet. She was not, she concluded, in a position to comment on "paperology".

Palmeri perked up and peered around; it was almost as though she had not heard the nonsense word so



Tara Palmeri, a Politico Europe reporter and former gossip columnist for the New York Post. Photograph: Graeme Robertson

much as caught its scent. Her eyes narrowed. “Did she say paperology?” Palmeri had been sick all weekend, and her nasal voice was serrated with a throaty growl. The spokeswoman repeated the word before another journalist asked what, exactly, she meant by “paperology”.

Palmeri tweeted the exchange: “‘Paperology’ - coined in briefing by commission spox: ‘exchange of different papers in order to express progress’ #canyouusethatinasentence?” Palmeri first mentioned the Twitter handle of the spokesbot, then deleted it; she was already worried the spokeswoman didn’t like her and she knew enough not to push it - quite yet.

After a minute of refreshing, Palmeri followed up with a second tweet, comparing the commission’s neologism to one of George W Bush’s most famous solecisms, “misunderestimated”. A journalist, somebody Palmeri thought was in the room, responded to her first tweet: “Sentence: ‘unresignation and paperology weren’t words in April, they are now’”.

The room slowly roused itself around the exchange; one journalist in the row across from us tittered at his phone, turned to his colleague, and gestured at Palmeri with his elbow.

The next press-corps question took on the unfolding Fifa scandal, and the presiding spokeswoman called up a reinforcement to a second podium beside her. The no-comment prelude had ended, and the time to really get down into the muck of not commenting in earnest had begun. The reinforcement, a sports specialist for the commission, solemnly allowed that “corruption has no basis in sports”, but regretted that she was unable to say anything more. The first spokeswoman looked over and shrugged in solidarity, both of them hopelessly put upon by all this presumptuous expectation of comment. Sarcastic responses from Brussels journalists

continued to pour in to Palmeri's Twitter feed. There was a question about Juncker's controversial proposal of quotas for the distributed resettlement of migrants, and the two spokeswomen on stage took turns politely gesturing that the other was welcome to not comment first.

The first spokeswoman asked if there were any more questions on immigration. "On topic, pfffft," Palmeri said. "At City Hall in New York, nobody respects 'on topic'. Here they're so much more inclined to follow decorum. Until Politico comes to town."

As Carrie Budoff Brown, a longtime White House correspondent for Politico and now the managing editor in Brussels, put it to me, Politico's animating idea was always "to be first, be interesting, to tell everything through the people involved, the dynamics - the nuggets nobody else has. You wanted to win. You were an upstart so you constantly had to prove you were worth being taken seriously." The Brussels operation represents an attempt to bring that voracity, alacrity, and heedlessness to Europe. It is an experiment with far-reaching implications, not only for the future of journalism but, perhaps, for the European self-image. But it will not be easy. For one thing, it is not clear who, exactly, might make up the audience. Susan Glasser, Politico's editor-in-chief in DC, told me, between metabolic glances at her phone beneath her desk, that it would be consumed by "the thought-leader class of Europe". This is a meaningless phrase, of course, but in the US it almost makes sense as shorthand to describe the self-congratulatory cohort of what the sociologist David Riesman called "inside dopesters" - people who follow politics as a sport, who betray equal interest in the sex lives of congressmen and the minutes of the Senate subcommittee on specialist crops.

In other words, the appetite for Politico in DC existed before Politico did. The audience for a digital-first gossip-mongering Brussels-based Anglophone pan-European publication does not yet exist, and each one of those constitutive elements presents its own problem. Continental Europeans are not used to a headlong online media culture of breaking news. They remain much more committed than Americans to a separation of serious reportage and entertainment, and they are more inclined to doubt the journalistic value of moral scandal. They view Brussels as, at best, a grey backwater of minor trade quarrels and, at worst, an abscess of smug antidemocratic technocrats bloated with regulatory power. And, finally, there's the question of whether a "pan-European" outlook can even be said to exist.



Carrie Budoff Brown, the managing editor of Politico Europe. Photograph: Graeme Robertson

Politico's European strategy is to begin building their audience by creating the kind of coalition inside the newsroom that their outside readership might one day resemble. Where the DC order skews well-nurtured and ruddy Midwestern - shirt-sleeved, flat-vowelled, goyish, hetero - the Brussels team is pretty much none of those things. Their office is chaotic, a cosmopolitan circus of grizzled foreign-correspondent lifers alongside energetic novices with little patience for Brussels nicety. Where other digital-journalism startups have scoreboards detailing web traffic, the proudest metric at Politico Europe is that the team thus far shares 22 passports and at least 14 languages. They educate their reporters in the way they hope to edify their readers. This starts with a tipsheet they provide to new hires: "Ten things you need to know about the EU." Some of the tips are merely strategic: "The parliament has plenty of stars but plenty more time-wasters and space-fillers. We can make hay with both." But others reflect the aspiration to view a changing Europe in novel, sidelong ways: "There are different axes of viewpoints in town. Left and right are less and less meaningful. Open and closed / protectionist or liberal / Dutch or Greek are usually better indicators."

They thus take themselves as a kind of test case. In Silicon Valley, this is called "dogfooding" - eating the same product you sell the customer. The other thing the Politico executive team has learned from Silicon Valley is to speak the language of "disruption", but the venture in Brussels is after something altogether more interesting and difficult: the *constructive* education of an audience, and a community, that is not accustomed to being spoken to as such. Despite all signs of rising Euroscepticism in the member states, this is a moment of new assertiveness in Brussels. Politico's ambitions are equally grandiose: it sees itself in turn as both an avatar of the European body politic and an inspiration for it. If they are successful they hope to do

more than reflect back to Europeans their own fractiousness; they want to build a market that will buy a story about its own integration.

The newsroom employs a rearguard contingent of encyclopedically informed Europeans - among them Quentin Ariès, a young bespectacled Frenchman whom Palmeri likes to call “her butler” - to keep track of international news in a dozen languages and to provide assistance when anybody wants to know what, generally, is going on. When Palmeri calls out, to nobody in particular, to ask exactly how many directors-general the Italians have on the European commission, more than one person will shout “two” without looking up from their screens. They provide some continental ballast to foreign excess, as well as some historical context: when Palmeri returned to the office crowing with delight about “paperology”, Ariès explained that the coinage was “so 2012”, and that the commission’s most recent miscarriage of neologism was “leakology”. Palmeri responded with the suggestion of “Deep Throatology”, a reference lost on most of the newsroom; everyone went silent, and Palmeri laughed loudly and with slight discomfort.

She explained to her colleagues that her bluntness was hard-won after her tenure at the New York Post. “Hey, I worked at a tabloid where you’d hear ‘dead baby, cop shot, jumper’ - that’s a suicide - you know, short ways of saying terrible things.” She looked around. “Rape cop. Cannibal cop.”

Reporter Zoya Sheftalovich looked up from her story about a proposed telecoms act. “Wait, what?”

“Oh, the cannibal cop?” Palmeri’s eyes glinted. “That was a huge story. I had to go chase down his wife in Reno. Actually, my bosses wanted me to ask the cannibal cop out on a date.”

Later that day, the whole newsroom could overhear Palmeri on the phone with a source - the whole newsroom can hear everything Palmeri says, to anyone, all day - who was desperately trying to retract a tip he had given her about a hidden conflict between Martin Schulz, the president of the European parliament, and Klaus Welle, its longtime secretary general.

“How about this,” she said, “why don’t you come back to me with a good reason not to use that? There must be something else you can give me. I’ll give you two hours.”

“‘How about this,’ she said, ‘why don’t you come back to me with a good reason not to use that? I’ll give you two hours’

Tara Palmeri

Nicholas Hirst, a proper Englishman bred for mannerly diplomacy at the College of Europe in Bruges, sat mouth slightly agape. “I’ve been here for four years and I’ve never seen anyone talk to officials the way Tara does.” His eyes shone through his Coke-bottle glasses with undisguised admiration. “And she gets really far!”

The Rue de la Loi, a stolid row of stout entrenchments, each one eight stories full of acronyms, runs from the quarter of Brussels where the chief activity is the Instagramming of waffles to the one where bulletproof black Audis cruise the pavements with impunity. The Politico offices are on the eastern end, wedged behind the newly built “imprisoned egg” headquarters of the European council, in a sandstone pile commandeered as the headquarters of the German army during the second world war. They have the casual, instant-noodle feel of a university study hall, with reporters in socks sitting on couches, computers in laps.

Though Politico Europe have modelled themselves after scrappy startups, they have two strong, and wealthy, parent companies behind them. Politico.eu is an even partnership between Politico in DC, owned by the TV-station heir Robert Allbritton, and the massive German multinational conglomerate Axel Springer. Springer, with a rich heritage of cold war paranoia, is best known for two print properties: Die Welt, a perfectly respectable middlebrow centre-right newspaper, and Bild, a lurid, inflammatory broadsheet with the highest daily circulation on the continent. Germany, like most of Europe, has been very slow to accept or exploit the realities of digital journalism, and few of its media organisations, with the exception of the weekly Die Zeit, have put much effort into a robust online presence. Over the past few years, Mathias Döpfner, the widely admired CEO of Springer, has set about reinventing the company. He sends his editors on mandatory extended tutorials to Silicon Valley, and has begun shedding the company’s local print properties, erecting online paywalls, and investing heavily in startups.

Last year, Döpfner published an open letter to Google chairman Eric Schmidt in the Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung (FAZ), in which he conceded that he feared the



Zoya Sheftalovich, technology reporter. Photograph: Graeme Robertson

company's near-absolute leverage. Springer has joined other German media companies in an antitrust suit against Google, and part of Döpfner's strategy has been to look for allies in Brussels. Initially, Angela Merkel refused to support Juncker's bid for the commission presidency, but she changed her mind the day after a Bild editorial pressed for public support. Springer aggressively courted Politico over the last two years, and its interest in the Brussels project is obvious: it is an Anglophone digital beachhead and a digital-first property, and with any luck it will prove a nontrivial presence in a town increasingly known for its regulatory initiative - particularly on the matter of digital antitrust issues. Together, Politico and Springer bought and rebranded the 20-year-old European Voice, a trade rag (and former Economist asset) with a top circulation of 19,000; its stories were written mostly with English words arranged vaguely in accordance with German grammar.

Springer and Politico also have similar business models, a mix of ad revenues (both online and in print editions), subscription-based specialist newsletters (on, for example, energy or health), sponsored content, and paid live events. Some Germans have groused that newsletters whose subscribers pay upwards of four figures per annum for early access to inside information are unworthy of the name journalism - but if there are vested interests willing to support news-gathering at the price of hearing everything two hours early, that may not be inherently worse than the old ad-based business model.

Döpfner also wants media properties to affirm themselves as specifically journalistic outlets instead of trying, like so many indistinguishable internet sites, to become open platforms for any content. What made Politico such an intuitive match is that they have always focused on doing only one specific thing and doing it well: politics and policy. For the most part, Politico Europe has focused on heavy volume of breaking news; their weekly print paper,

which appears on Thursdays in the haunts of “influencers” all over Brussels, as well as in the executive lounges of the Eurostar, the Thalys, and Wizz Air, reserves space for substantial features of more enduring appeal, often culled and expanded from the week’s online work. (Nicholas Vinocur, a young Swedish-American in Paris, has done distinguished longer-form work, including a profile of a French mayor who has transformed “his town into a laboratory for in-your-face, far-right policies that often make Le Pen look moderate on issues like security and immigration”.)

The hiring has been done by the three grownups who oversee the Brussels operation: executive editor Matthew Kaminski, managing editor Carrie Budoff Brown, and publisher Shéhérazade Semsar-de Boisséson. Kaminski came to Politico from the editorial board of the Wall Street Journal; he had worked as a correspondent in Brussels for the Financial Times and the Economist in the 1990s. With a thick, tousled thatch of brown hair and a rumpled olive green corduroy jacket, he has a slightly absent-minded, professorial air, and he wanders desultorily from room to room. Semsar-de Boisséson comes from Persian media aristocracy; she fled Tehran with her family just days before the revolution in 1979, and arrived in Washington at 17. After a long, successful career in media-event planning, she bought the European Voice in 2013, and she furnishes the office with its whispery ration of exoticism and legend. She has a Bloch-Bauer face with one variety of pursed frown that serves to indicate both pleasure and disappointment, and a heavy lapis lazuli ring and a rose-gold Rolex. It is as if Susan Sontag had recovered an ancestral duchy.

The executives on both sides were worried that their proposed European “view from nowhere in particular” - that is, a broader frame for European news than one might get from one’s national press - would be taken as cover for a “view from America”, so they were careful not to bring over too many reporters from the US. The chief American majordomo, hired to keep the house in order, is Budoff Brown. She came up through well-respected regional papers, Connecticut’s Hartford Courant and the Philadelphia Inquirer before she signed on for Politico’s launch in 2007. She has assembled her editorial team for their backgrounds in long, bruising terms overseas, almost all of them picked up from long stints at various news agencies, the FT, or the Economist.

Budoff Brown’s mien around the newsroom is that of a high-ranking Goldman Sachs executive taking the day off to chaperone a school trip. She has a billowy style, with chunky black glasses and barely tamed black curly hair. When approached simultaneously by two reporters on the subject of

Juncker's proposed migrant-resettlement quotas, she listened carefully for a minute before putting up her hand and saying, with somewhat disingenuous modesty, "I'm confused."

She was, of course, not in the least confused, but what she meant is that they had not yet found a way to bring her the story in a coherent way. A German reader is used to newspaper stories that broadcast such sentiments as: "Juncker wants to shove more Somali refugees down our throat, which is essentially our reward for being prudent economic stewards who are seen to owe the world's dispossessed a perennial favour." Budoff Brown wants stories that instead report: "We have a refugee problem, and this is the state of our collective need to do something about it." When the story on the migrant-quota controversy came out a few days later, it was co-bylined by a German and an Italian, and it noted not only a joint statement by Germany and France, but referred to a Norwegian newspaper, rumours from Madrid, a quotation from the Italian prime minister, and an interview with the Czechs.

* * *

Politico's chief print competitor for Anglophone Brussels coverage (apart from a sheaf of identically dull trade papers with Euro in their titles) is the Financial Times, though Politico's scope is much broader than the City of London; as Nick Hirst, Politico's English antitrust reporter, put it to me: "The FT is written with the idea of the trader on the Jubilee line." The FT's local bureau chief, the American Peter Spiegel, is supportive of the project in an all-boats-rising kind of way - "If two major news organisations want to throw a lot of money to have news reporters in Brussels, God bless them!" - and he thinks that Politico's emphasis on a 24-hour breaking-news cycle will upend the continental old guard overnight. "In France and Germany it's like the 1990s when it comes to media. The FAZ had a huge scoop the other day on Greece, but they didn't even put it online." Spiegel implied that Politico.eu had yet to break much in the way of news, but that seemed slightly defensive. While I was there, they got one of their first big scoops: an editor found out that Juncker's big meeting with Merkel and Tsipras in Berlin had also been attended by two representatives of the troika - Christine Lagarde and Mario Draghi. This was widely picked up. They were proud to have beaten the FT by a full two hours.

The real problem, as Spiegel sees it, is that the need for breaking news is not in Brussels but in Rome, Paris, London, and Berlin - all of which Politico either already covers (they have reporters in Paris and Berlin) or plans to

soon, especially once they staff up from a newsroom of 40 to the year-end goal of 100. Spiegel is not quite convinced that the readership for scandal or for breaking news in or about Brussels exists. In Washington, Spiegel explained, even junior congressmen on obscure committees have money to spend; in Brussels, nobody has the power of the purse. He thought for a moment. “There is no European *demos* yet.” (Enough time in Athens and anybody will pick up the local lingo.) “People just don’t care about these politicians the way they care about their national politicians.”

Kaminski sees it differently. “There might not be a European polity, but there’s a European policy-space debate that takes place among the power players between GMT and GMT+3, and coverage of that is not only necessary but can also be a guilty pleasure.” These “power players” include not only Juncker, but Margrethe Vestager, the Danish commissioner who, over the last two months, has announced major antitrust inquiries against Google, Gazprom, and Amazon; and the Estonian Andrus Ansip, the vice president of the commission, who has been charged with the implementation of a vast, tentacled, multifarious thing called the “digital single market” initiative.

Kaminski recalled that when he was first in Brussels, in the late 1990s, it was a time of “missionary zeal” for the EU, but the major expansion of the union in 2004, the fading away of French as the lingua franca, and the 2005 “no” votes to the constitution all left dents in morale, and the perception over the past few years is that power has been reclaimed by the national capitals.

These recent efforts to establish EU authority, built around a fear of Russia, on the one hand, and a fear of Silicon Valley, on the other, suggest a local renaissance. The instinct around the newsroom, in turn, is that the first place one might develop an actual pan-European readership would be on the energy and technology beats. If Politico Europe has any chance of being what it ultimately aspires to become - a globally local political paper for cosmopolitans, nomads, exiles, and hybrids - the digital realm is the most auspicious place to start.

European national innovation policies are mostly senseless and incoherent: the French do their best to make entrepreneurship as burdensome as possible, and the Germans talk out of both sides of their mouth - at once resenting Silicon Valley’s reach and trying with great effort to mimic its success. It is on this stage that Brussels has created for itself an important role to play, one whose effects will be felt by European citizens immediately in the form of the end of mobile phone roaming or the ability to pay for

television across borders - and, over time, the business opportunities that would emerge in a unified market of 500 million people.

Politico has produced some first-rate tech-policy coverage, led by Nick Hirst and the Ukrainian-Australian Zoya Sheftalovich. Sheftalovich, a 29-year-old in narrow-lapelled thrift-store blazers over mustard blouses, has a low fringe above wide jade eyes that are surrounded by beaming asterisks of lashes. She spends a lot of her time at roundtable briefings in the hellscape of the parliament complex, which looks like a mirrored children's museum in 1990s Dallas. There and at panels all over town she is tirelessly patronised by the soporific largesse of chinless Christian Democrat lawyers from Bonn who can barely figure out how to connect to the wireless network and cannot sleep at night for fear of Russian cybercriminal malice. She takes verbatim 140-word per minute notes on her laptop, waiting patiently for them to finish their official spiels before sidling up to them afterward in confident yet disarming pursuit of actual information.

These "shadow rapporteurs" are vain about their little pet projects, but Sheftalovich also knows that these people, inert as they seem, are having discussions that will determine whether people can watch Netflix in Milan. During my week in Brussels, she and Hirst got one of the site's first big international scoops: a rare interview on the record with Google's newly appointed head of European operations. In the interview, he acknowledged that Google's initial brusqueness had failed, and that the company had to rethink its whole European approach. Gabe Brotman, their 25-year-old director of digital strategy, exhorted the Washington office to push the story on their behalf, and it was picked up around the world - it was their first international hit, and a vivid example of how to cover Brussels.

Brussels can often feel like a series of occasions for pewter-haired white men to gather on panels, their pouchy jowls spilling flesh over their starched collars, waiting their turn to hear themselves talk. Ryan Heath wears slim-fitting pink shirts, untucked, or dramatic floral patterns over linen trousers, and he listens. Virtually everyone I approached in Brussels to talk about Politico - lobbyists, lawyers, aides, NGO administrators - told me that while they think the site shows promise but needs time to mature, they are already in love with Heath.

A 35-year-old Australian, Heath rises every morning at 4.30 to finish off the day's Brussels Playbook, which in only a month and a half already goes out to almost 40,000 people. (The site itself received, in May, about 1.7m page

views, from just over 700,000 unique visitors. The original Politico receives 7m monthly uniques, though they claim their relevance not by aggregate traffic but by the quality of their audience.) If Budoff Brown and Palmeri think a lot about their audience in Washington, and Kaminski and the tech reporters keep Europe more broadly in mind, Playbook speaks directly to Brussels. It promises to create Politico as the trusted house organ for a community of the displaced.

Though Heath's Playbook roughly follows the original Mike Allen model from Washington, Heath has made it his own. He is aware that it is forging something new and, rather than fear the threat of absurdity, he allows it to revel in its own surrealism. Heath writes like he speaks, in flirtatious, conspiratorial tones about serious, substantive things. A recent item: "FINLAND – WELCOME TO THE LAND OF SOLUTIONS: That's the official name of the Finnish government's programme. Take that, all you Lands of Problems! Many journalists weren't able to digest the new programme at the government's regular sauna briefing Wednesday night (yes, people from outside Brussels, this is a real, proud tradition) because they were camped out waiting for Juncker and Tsipras to finish dining. So we bring them, and you, the full programme of the new government." Another item seemed built around the basic desire to simply delight in the phrase, "Róża Gräfin von Thun und Hohenstein, chair of the IMCO working group on the DSM."

"There are so many reasons people end up here," Heath told me. "For some people, Brussels is an escape – if your home country is corrupt, say, or homophobic. That's why Italians and Bulgarians and gay men are so overrepresented here."

He paused to summarise. "Brussels is like the world's highest-class refugee camp." He guffawed and touched my arm, as if he had got a real kick out of the joke we had come up with together.

Brussels has a reputation for being hopelessly boring. As Kaminski put it to me: "It is validating to tell people that Brussels is exciting – both Brussels the place and 'Brussels' in quotes. We're bringing the party." The major challenge, he concedes, is that it is the kind of party that happens on a weekday at happy hour. "Everyone who works here is from somewhere else. They fly home on weekends and say, 'Brussels is so lame.'"

❝ It is validating to tell people that Brussels is exciting. We're bringing the party

Heath shows a special solicitousness for those who have to stay for the weekend, the internationally promiscuous Brussels equivalents of young Capitol Hill staffers. Their weekend starts on Thursday afternoon, when their bosses are on flights or trains home, and they get blind drunk en masse at the Place Luxembourg. Heath is treated like a minor celebrity at Place Lux, and it is a reciprocal thing. His goal, he says, is to "make them believe there is a community here, and then make them want to be part of that community". If he treats his readers like they are a little sexier than they are, they will start to act the part; they are not really doing boring things, they are just accustomed to being terminally boring about them. This is a town where the instructions for handwashing in institutional bathrooms have nine steps in four languages.

Heath's column follows such figures as Martin Selmayr - Juncker's chief of staff, whom one reporter described, with a theatrical shiver, as the town's "dark overlord" - as if grooming them to be played by Kevin Spacey. (They caught Selmayr following @JunckerLU, a parody Twitter account with only 37 followers.) This focus on personal lives bears an inverse relationship to the amount of actual meaning delivered by the various institutional representatives, and supports exactly the same informational levelling - in which personal details are held to have news value - that made DC Politico so popular in late Bush-era Washington. More than one person told me that the fastest route to total insignificance would be to cover issues of personal morality the way the US media does. Then again, a Dutch energy lobbyist told me his very high hopes for the publication have not been borne out: "They had this lavish, American-style launch, so I expected an immediate exposé. It's been six weeks and they haven't broken one big scandal." There are limits to the salaciousness, and Heath does get edited. One Playbook draft I saw contained a reference to the nude appearance of a Danish politician in a campaign ad; the item was titled "It's a schlong way to the top." There was a picture. The email was sanitised before distribution.



Ryan Heath, writer of the popular Playbook column. Photograph: Graeme Robertson

Heath grew up 600km north of Sydney, and started writing for the Sydney Morning Herald while at university; after working in London for the Blair government, he decamped for Brussels, where he found a job as one of the commission's spokesmen. He was too honest to stand at the podium and not comment, though, so he convinced his superiors to let him do his job at large - on Twitter, and out and about at events and panels and parties. He left that job to join Politico in part because there was such a vast gulf between what was being talked about in the cafes and bars and what was being written about by the local press.

As an example, he referred to the story Palmeri had been working on, with French reporter Maïa de la Baume, about the rumoured strife between the European parliament president, Martin Schulz, and its secretary general, Klaus Welle. When that story appeared the following week - "a recent series of political power plays between the two men have mushroomed into a full-fledged feud that is starting to have public repercussions" - Heath tweeted a link: "The invisible article: the one everyone in #EU Parliament is talking about but afraid to tweet about: Schulz vs Welle."

One morning I went to see Heath present to a group of technology lobbyists. He was introduced as "a reporter from Politico, the new shining star in the Brussels sky". The presenter continued, in mock petulance that had the ring of actual pique: "But in this morning's Playbook I couldn't find anything on our big party last night, just, ahem, the Google one." Heath took only five minutes at the podium to make the related points that a) technological regulation and digital-market integration were not technocratic issues but political ones, and had to be treated as such; and b) that Silicon Valley companies, as evidenced by the Google party in question, were finally awakening to the necessities of soft power.

We strolled back together in the uncharacteristic sun to the Politico office, along what Heath described as the "K Street" - the main DC lobbying drag - of Brussels. Heath is equal parts smalltown mayor and court jester of devious repute. A woman gave him a kiss on the cheek as she rushed past, and he turned to her long enough to purr: "You're looking sexy in those Aviators!"

Brussels can be a pompous place, and Heath thinks that by treating it as at once seductive and silly he might help to let some air out. He does not pretend that he can give the town a new sense of itself - and its role in Europe - without causing some friction. "It's hard to be in touch with someone suffering under austerity when you're living here tax-free. This town needs to have a greater experience of discomfort. That's how they'll know that they're being taken seriously."

He broke off the conversation to point to an Italian restaurant. "Marine Le Pen and Martin Schulz like to eat there. Not together, of course. They go on separate nights."

A young blonde woman walked by us, and just as she passed Heath she turned around and yelled, loudly but sheepishly in a thick French accent: "I love ze Playbewk!" She hurried away before Heath could see if she might be cultivated as a source.

I asked Heath if he had planned that for my benefit, and his face turned the rose of his shirt's florid print. "I have no idea who that was!" He wiped away one tear of laughter. "I feel so embarrassed."

We walked through a rusty unlocked back door and went up to the office. Budoff Brown came by to talk to him about preparations for the trip they would be taking that weekend to cover the G7 in Bavaria, but was struck first by the audacity of his shirt. "Hi, Ryan. So, where's the luau?"

Their newsroom coalition is a carefully rigged set of contrary affections, a little Brussels commune inventing itself and its audience as it goes along. If they succeed, what they might do for digital journalism, and perhaps in turn for Europe, will be a lot more interesting than the old Politico - in most ways, it already is.

Sheftalovich walked over to the desk Heath and Palmeri share and announced a holiday from her usual beat: “I’m interviewing a princess from the Netherlands!”

Heath often flees, in his polka-dot socks, to the couch in the hallway to avoid precisely this stream of unceasing newsroom banter, but this was an item of interest. “Which one, Laurentine, Máxima, or Mabel?”

Sheftalovich, somewhat less familiar with the old European houses, shook her head. “Not sure,” she said. “She works, doing something with a digital-poverty thing.”

“Oh,” Palmeri looked up with renewed attention, “so she married into her princessery?” Palmeri joked this was one of her aspirations in moving to Europe.

A few days later, I got Heath’s morning Playbook at 1am New York time; I have got used to looking at it right before I go to sleep. That morning’s episode began with a comparative list of the day’s Greek headlines, in which the debt situation did not seem so dire, alongside hysterical European prognoses of doom.

Just below that, a blind item caught my eye: “THE PRINCESS AND THE Ps: P as in Princess, PR, Precious, POLITICO and Protocol Police. Which representative of European royalty approached POLITICO to ask us to cover the Princess’s admirable work with an educational charity? But then withdrew the offer, on the basis that we would not let the royal flack approve both the quotes and the context of the article before publication. Dear Princess, we’re still willing and interested to chat if you want - we come in peace.”

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This article was amended on 18 June 2015 to correct an error regarding circulation figures for European Voice. The audited figures as of April 2014, supplied by Politico, estimated total circulation to be approximately 15,000. However, the all-time peak circulation for European Voice was approximately 19,000. Additionally, the original figure supplied by Politico

for monthly unique visitors on Politico.com did not include non-desktop users. The correct figure is 7m monthly uniques, not 4m.

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