

In Memory of Caroline Pauwels: Pioneer and Mentor of European Media Policy Research

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Caroline Pauwels was one of the pioneers of communication and media policy research and a leading expert in her field. She was a professor at the Vrije Universiteit Brussel (VUB) in Belgium and a mentor to many scholars interested in this field both in her own country and abroad. Her death from cancer at the age of 58 has left the European academic community with great sadness.

The authors of this obituary would like to pay tribute to Caroline Pauwels' academic and professional career, which has had a positive impact on many other European universities. Likewise, Caroline's spirit and good work make her an example to follow from both a professional and a personal point of view. She was a vital, analytical person, open to new ideas and approaches, with very diverse interests, and favourable to creating ties between different territories. We the authors were lucky to meet her and share her enriching ideas and experiences. Here we would like to reflect on the achievements of her career and thus help spread her work and positive spirit among the international academic community.

We must highlight her contribution to the study of European policy and her leadership in consolidating research in this field by creating the influential SMIT research centre and by promoting the study of EU policies at the European association ECREA, where she was one of the founders of the Communication Law and Policy Section. She leaves an important legacy among researchers, and her prolific activity as a mentor even allows us to coin the term 'School of Caroline Pauwels', to describe a way of approaching public

policy from an analytical but also close and informative perspective, to explain its impact on the media system and citizenship.

The Study of European Media and Communications Policy

Caroline Pauwels was a pioneer in the study of media and communications policy in the European Union, and dedicated her research to this topic from the late 1980s onwards. Before becoming an academic, she worked for a short time at the office of the then European Commissioner, the late Karel Van Miert. In 1995, her doctoral thesis concentrated on the European Union's audio-visual policy, and her early contributions were made with her PhD supervisor, Jean-Claude Burgelman. She became a professor at the VUB in 1998 and was Rector between 2016 and 2022.

European audio-visual policy was one of the key focuses of her academic research. She analysed the relationship between European audio-visual policy and cultural identities. She was interested in approaching this topic from a cultural perspective, differing from the main objective of a unified market. Being Flemish made her interested in small countries, languages and cultural diversity. In addition, her knowledge of Spanish helped her investigate the relationship between Europe and Latin America.

As an example of this intellectual bridge, in the early 1990s our doctoral supervisors Professor Murciano and Professor Prado, along with Professor Bustamante, recommended we read her articles, some of them written with Professor Burgelman, and if possible that we interview her. At that time, her writings were already an essential reference point for anyone who wanted to study European communication policies.

Discussions with her were very inspiring. Critical but realistic, she opened up new perspectives and arguments in European media policy research. For example, when she discussed the impact of media concentration on pluralism, her position was clear but far from Manichaeism. She asserted that media concentration – today, we might say platform concentration – is potentially dangerous for pluralism. She noted that no empirical studies had shown a direct relationship between an increase in concentration and less media pluralism. However, in her view, this absence of causality did not mean abandoning the problem, as the liberals argued. What was needed, she said, was a holistic approach. Thus, she admitted that measuring audience concentration is a tool for assessing pluralism in a given market, but it is not enough. She argued that the concept of access to content was more fundamental. Not only economic but also cultural access. The state must then ensure this access through citizen education and greater media literacy. This critical role of the state openly confronted her with the more liberal political positions of the European Commission of the 1990s, chaired by Jacques Santer. They were overtly pro-market and sought to liberalise as much as possible, with the excuse of convergence and to limit public service broadcasting content under Karel Van Miert's 1999 proposal. She insisted that the market

could not solve everything. But she was not statist either: she recognised that the critical question in any communications policy is to weigh whether an intervention will be more beneficial than non-intervention, taking into account the interests at stake and the possible damage. Years have passed and history has proved her right. Economic arguments have taken a back seat in the current European Commission's approach to communication policies. The defence of fundamental rights and democracy are now the objectives of its communication policies, as demonstrated by the recent Media Freedom Act initiative and the programmes to support independent journalism.

Her position concerning the large telecommunications operators, then the great dominators of the convergent scenario, can now be applied to today's large internet platforms. She recognised that competition among players causes some to reach a dominant position, capable of investing and creating new networks, which is positive. But policy should control them, to the extent that she argued that, if necessary, the EU should propose a partition of these platforms between infrastructure and content, as the US did with the partition of AT&T in 1982. She argued that the EU's role would be to control oligopolies without discouraging investment.

Deep down, she explained, there is an eternal conflict between the media and the world of telecommunications and information technology, content and infrastructure, culture, and economy, between subsidiarity and European intervention, which is a question yet to be resolved. European communication policies must walk on the wire of imperfection.

Pauwels became a reference point among the European academic community. Two books, which she edited with other academics, became manuals for approaching European policies: *Rethinking European Media and Communications Policy* (2009, VUB Press) and *The Palgrave Handbook of European Media Policy* (2014, Palgrave Macmillan). She had many articles and academic contributions published in the most important communication journals. It is easy to find some tens of them on her research page and in the academic database.

Leader and Mentor in European Research

One of the outstanding features of Caroline Pauwels' academic life is that she was a leader and mentor for many academic scholars in Belgium and abroad. From 2000 to 2016, she was director of SMIT, a research centre specialising in the study of communication and information technologies. This centre became one of the most influential in the European Union, due to the quality of its research and for promoting a relative contribution between academic research and the media industry. We know from personal experience that spending time at SMIT provides scholars with new knowledge, methodologies and approaches to media policy.

She mentored key Flemish researchers in media policies, such as Dr Karen Donders, Dr Jan Loisen and Dr Sophie de Winck. She was open to broaden-

ing European research to other geographical areas, such as Latin America. She opened SMIT to international researchers studying this field, including some interested in the relationship between the EU and Latin America, such as Dr Daniele Canedo and doctoral student Marina Fernandes.

Her expertise included European audio-visual policy, concentration and convergence in media industries, public service broadcasting, Flemish media policy, media regulatory authorities and Information Society policy. She was a doctoral supervisor as well as a doctoral jury member for at least 178 theses, demonstrating the importance of her work.

She was also an active member of the European Communication Research and Education Association (ECREA) and of its Communication Law and Policy Section. Between 2006 and 2010, she was vice chair of the section's first management team, led by Professor Katharine Sarikakis, with Professor Peter Humphreys as second vice chair. We met her numerous times during this period and had fascinating discussions about European media policies.

Her Legacy in Academia and Life

Caroline Pauwels's prolific academic life has left us a great legacy. Most notable is her contribution to creating a smart approach to media policy research. Hers was a critical approach and she unflinchingly asked key questions to understand policies better. We would say that she created a particular style for papers and articles that was followed by her mentees. We could coin the term 'the Pauwels SMIT approach.'

We learned from her the interest in relating European policies to other geographical areas, either from an international perspective or a national or local one. She was always open to personal requests and always provided her opinion on academic questions. She always had positive comments, and we remember her with a kind smile on her face. She was someone to admire. Her academic and personal contribution have left us a legacy to protect and promote.