

# Introduction

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The CONNEX/ASCoR conference held in December 2005 was entitled ‘A European public sphere: How much of it do we have and how much do we need?’ When studying the public sphere the media are an inevitable component as they can be seen as a market place of ideas, statements and images of Europe, nations in Europe and the process of European integration. Research on the emergence and nature of a European public sphere is accumulating and diverse. The underlying assumption of this research is that a shared European space, a European public sphere, may contribute to the (public) legitimacy of the EU polity, in much the same ways as has been suggested for national public spheres (Habermas, 1964).

Over the past two decades it has been possible to observe a development in the literature from a focus, with regards to European politics, on a ‘public sphere heavy’ notion of a single, pan-European public sphere, to a focus on a ‘public sphere light’ notion of co-existing national public spheres. Several models and criteria have been suggested. The by now largely rejected notion of a single pan-European public sphere was conceptualized as a communicative space requiring a common language, a shared identity and a transnational media system (Kielmansegg, 1996; Grimm, 2004).

However, the notion of a monolithic, singular and pan-European public sphere has been largely discarded in the light of the evidence in this area, where attempts to create pan-European media (including, for example, the newspaper *The European*) have failed. Other media, such as *Euronews*, have relied on heavy subsidies and those few commercial news outlets with a global outreach and a significant European audience, such as the *Financial Times* have, at the end of the day, a limited, elite readership that makes it hard to speak of a *public* sphere (De Vreese 2002, 2003; Koopmans (forthcoming)).

Other research has distinguished *segmented transnational public spheres* which have been conceptualized as issue-specific communicative spaces, largely dominated by political and economic elites (Eder 2000). Another model of Europeanized national public spheres has proposed a distinction between *vertical* and *horizontal Europeanization* (Koopmans & Erbe, 2003). Vertical Europeanization refers to national actors addressing European actors, national actors making claims on European issues or European actors partaking in national debates on European issues. Horizontal Europeanization is referred to as national media covering issues in other EU member states and national actors addressing issues or actors in another EU member state.

The notion of Europeanized national public spheres has found most resonance in large scale comparative studies of the media's coverage of European integration. The media coverage of European affairs is not constant and is best described as cyclical, with occasional peaks and long periods of little news (De Vreese 2002; De Vreese et al., 2001; Peter & de Vreese, 2004). Key events, such as national referendums and EU summits, can take up a substantial part of the news (Van der Brug, Semetko & Valkenburg, 2007; De Vreese & Semetko, 2004; De Vreese & Boomgaarden, 2006), but most of the news is seen through the prism of the nation state.

There is no consensus in the literature about the nature and scope of a European public sphere or the extent of Europeanization of national public spheres. Much of the difference in conclusions can be traced back to different criteria, operationalizations and foci in the studies. The Amsterdam

conference was explicitly conceived to bring together researchers working on these themes, but often applying a variety of definitions and operationalizations. One of the goals was to take stock of the state of on-going research and identify future questions and avenues for research.

The papers presented (and included in these proceedings) confirm that conventional wisdom, holding that a European public sphere is close to impossible due to communication barriers imposed by, for instance, the different languages, seems to belong to the past. Following the developments sketched above most papers instead seek to demonstrate – in their various ways – that Europeanized public spheres do exist. These might be ‘imperfect’ compared to the (theoretical) benchmark, but – very importantly – the contours of a European public sphere can be sketched. This development is perhaps taking place as a result of the growing contestation over the shaping of the EU polity (as evidenced in the constitutional process) and its growing policy reach and scope (as evidenced by the proportion of EU law that is ratified by national legislatures).

Some 25 academics from all over Europe convened in Amsterdam in December 2005. The conference included a number of presentations. Only full papers are included in these proceedings.

*Hermann Schmitt* elaborates on the notion of European issues. European issues arguably are the raw material of a European public sphere. It is about them that EU citizens are required to resonate and participate in relevant decision making. Contrary to many, this paper argues that EU issues are not only about (more or less) European integration, but also and even predominantly about EU legislation on such matters as unemployment, the environment, peace and war, etc.

*Christoph O. Meyer* sets out to show how the literature on the political effects of mediatisation and the empirical findings of public sphere research can be combined to better understand the erosion of the EU consensus

culture over the last ten years. The paper also briefly examines how European governance and representation could be adapted to encourage the positive consequences of mediatisation and minimize its increasingly problematic effects.

*Renée van Os* and *Nicholas W. Jakowski* elaborate on their understanding of a Europeanized public sphere. According to them, the requirement is that political actors, including citizens, are engaged in communicating about Europe. They go on to discuss the potential of the World Wide Web by reviewing a number of pertinent studies and their research designs. The paper concludes with recommendations for a more thorough empirical investigation of the concept of a European public sphere within an Internet environment.

*Paul Statham* tries to answer the question of how and to what extent political communication now spreads across the borders of two nation states within Europe and which actors drive such processes. In addition to obvious communalities – political elites are shaping EU political communication in both countries – he finds striking differences between France and Britain in the form and content of political communication over Europe and explains them as being the result of a path dependency of duration of membership and central/ peripheral location and orientation.

*Juan Diez Medrano* explores the validity of the claim that legitimacy crises since the 1990s have something to do with a purported democratic deficit. This is done by analyzing both ordinary peoples' and journalists' frames on European integration and the European Union. Preliminary results suggest that a perceived democratic deficit – rather than an actual one – may indeed be among the factors that are responsible for this legitimacy crisis.

*Marcel Machill*, *Markus Beiler* and *Corinna Fischer* present a meta-analysis of 17 studies that analyze media content data from several European countries. All of the studies investigated compare the volume of European topics being

reported in the different countries. Prior to the 2004 Eastern enlargement of the EU the overall trend points towards the increasing importance of those topics. However, EU topics still account for an extremely small proportion of reporting, and EU players only feature in minor roles.

*Ruud Koopmans* and *Ann Zimmermann* analyze the structure of online public spheres with regard to two leading questions: (1) whether the Internet is an egalitarian arena that offers chances to less resourceful actors to get their message across to the audience; and (2) whether the Internet is a more transnational space for political communication. The most remarkable finding of the study is the great similarity of findings. Both with regard to the type of actors who achieve highest visibility, and with regard to the prominence of (own) national actors as compared to foreign and supranational actors, it does not make much difference whether the content of off-line newspapers or that of websites is investigated.

*Claes de Vreese*, *Hajo Boomgaarden*, *Susan Banducci* and *Holli Semetko* present a detailed examination of the Europeanness of media contents across the 25 EU member states in order to better assess the possible role the media can play in enhancing EU democracy and shaping public opinion. The paper presents the findings of an EU-wide study of the news media's coverage of the 2004 EP elections. Special attention is paid to the question of the extent to which national news media represent the elections as a national or as a European event.

*John Erik Fossum* and *Hans-Jörg Trenz* start out from the observation of a significant re-politicisation of the EU integration process. They elaborate on a research design for the study of the dynamic interrelation between the emerging European polity and its social constituency. In empirical terms, they suggest looking at the structure of public communication and claims making in the EU and its member states.

*Anders Esmark* argues that a European public sphere does exist as a “transnational resonance” of the EU polity, its policies and politics. Transnational polity resonance is event driven and is both more vibrant and more frequent than that in national systems. Policy resonance is well developed but varies from one policy area to the next. The central problem seems to be the resonance of politics which is, however, arguably not EU specific.

*Donatella Della Porta* and *Manuela Cainai* draw a picture of a European public sphere that can only emerge from processes of contestation over a variety of policies and over the very concept of “Europe” itself. They report on a study of new social movement groups and NGOs which has shown that the EU became the target of political claims and protest. And this is how it should be: the evolution of European integration necessarily involves “pressures from below”

*Barbara Pfetsch* assesses the role of the national press with respect to the emerging Europeanized public sphere. Within the framework of the *Europub* project, the paper focuses on the role and voice of the press by looking at the claims that are made in editorials. The overall picture that emerges from her findings is that the level of Europeanization of national media depends on the salience of Europeanized issues in public debate, while the support for European integration varies between the countries under study.

As can be seen from the outlines above, several perspectives, findings and conclusions were presented. Future research in this field should acknowledge the need to include multiple data sources, such as mass surveys, content analyses of news media, and party manifestos. In addition, further explication of the different models of public spheres in Europe and conceptual and empirical clarifications of the notion of Europeanization are essential.

It was a pleasure to organize the conference and we would like to thank The Amsterdam School of Communication ASCoR at the University of Amsterdam and CONNEX for making the conference possible. We hope moreover that readers will enjoy the collection of papers and find them as stimulating and rewarding as we did.

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