“Listen, Communicate, Go Local” –
Event Publics and the Construction of a European Public Sphere

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Abstract:
_Event publics_ are an empirical category that has hitherto remained untouched by the recent interest in the viability of a shared political public sphere at the European level. However, such event publics – understood as organized face-to-face encounters constituting _concrete_ speaker-audience relationships – may turn out to play a relevant role in the construction of such a European public sphere. Taking its twin points of departure in the ongoing debate on the viability of a European public sphere as well as in the European Commission’s Plan D (and associated documents), this paper explores the role and deliberative potential of organized event publics from the perspective of the European public sphere conceptualized as a transnational community of communication. Do the framing processes observable when the Commission “goes local” support the claim that a transnational communicative context is emerging?
1. Event Publics – A Category of the European Public Sphere?

*Event publics* are an empirical category that has hitherto remained untouched by the recent interest in the viability of a shared political public sphere at the European level. Following Habermas (1992: 358f.; cf. Gerhards & Neidhardt 1991), they are understood here as organized *forums* for public debate, i.e. events where the communicative context of the public sphere manifests itself in concrete, non-metaphorical *face-to-face encounters* between speakers and audiences, and importantly where audiences have the opportunity to engage speakers in direct dialog on the issues at hand. Previous empirical studies’ inattention to such concrete forums is at once surprising and understandable. It is *surprising* to the extent that the public sphere – in its seminal form a sphere of *concrete* public encounters (cf. Habermas 1962; Calhoun 1992) – is today understood virtually exclusively in terms of the entirely *abstract* speaker-audience relationships constituted by the mass media (cf. Dahlgren 1993). Consequently, the recent body of empirical work on the European public sphere focuses almost exclusively on the mass media, often in the form of quality newspapers (cf. Trenz 2004, 2005), in the search for what is frequently conceptualized as a *transnational community of communication* based inter alia on the recurrence of similar framing processes in different national contexts (cf. Risse & van de Steeg 2003). The inattention to organized event publics is *understandable*, on the other hand, as event publics are significantly less conspicuous a phenomenon than public opinion formation via the mass media at the same time as they are significantly more problematic to analyze empirically, as empirical material capturing their dialogical element is not as readily available as e.g. newspaper material.

Nevertheless, the failure to create two-way communication between the European institutions and the citizens is perceived to be at the core of the EU’s legitimacy deficit (European Commission 2005a; 2005b); hence not only the perceived need to “connect by ‘going local’” (European Commission 2005b: 4), but also the intriguing question what such concrete arenas can contribute to anchoring the European project in the public sphere at large. In other words, what role do they play in establishing an “overarching communicative space that functions as a public sphere” (Eriksen 2005)?

On these grounds, this paper explores the role and *deliberative potential* of event publics, taking its twin point of departure in the ongoing debate on the normative and empirical viability of a European public sphere *and* in the European Commission’s
launching of Plan D and the forthcoming White Paper on Communication expected later this fall (European Commission 2005a). In doing so, the analysis draws on the conceptualization of the European public sphere as a transnational community of communication (Risse & van de Steeg 2003), asking first and foremost if the claims to similar patterns of interpretation and framing processes observed in much of the mass media are also supported by an initial analysis of framing processes observable at event publics.

2. Setting the Stage: What are we looking for at event publics?

Event publics are one category of the overarching social, communicative context we have in mind when speaking of the public sphere. The public sphere has proven difficult to capture in any concise definition, often because we tend to think of it in terms of its democratic function rather than what actually constitutes a public sphere (i.e. what it does rather than what it is); one catchy formulation is however the description of the public sphere as “the place where civil society is linked to the power structure of the state” (Eriksen 2005: 358). On an abstract level, the public sphere is a spatial concept alluding to the social room where public communicative interactions can take place. This social room can however take very different shapes, as Habermas reminds us when emphasizing that the public sphere, far from being an institution (although of course institutionalized in legal rights to freedom of expression and association, cf. Eriksen …), is best understood as a highly complex network of communicative interactions, “a communication structure rooted in the lifeworld through the associational network of civil society” (Habermas 1998: 359). More concretely, the public sphere “depicts a relationship between the speakers and the audience that is created by social actors experiencing the byproducts of cooperation and the inclusion of affected parties” (Eriksen 2004).

Although we most commonly think of the public sphere as the form of speaker-audience relationships constituted in and by the mass media (cf. Dahlgren 1993), there is in principle no reason to reduce the concept to this its most abstract form, although certain authors argue to the contrary (e.g. Wimmel 2004). Habermas, drawing on Gerhards & Neidhardt (1991: 49ff.), argues that the public sphere as the social space for
public communication entails very different levels of abstraction, beginning with the most concrete form of spontaneous, episodic encounters on the street or in pubs and coffee houses, via the less spontaneous, organized form of event publics, to the entirely abstract speaker-audience relationship constituted by the mass media (Habermas 1992: 452). In the mass media, the discursive arena is entirely abstract as speakers debate before a virtual audience, i.e. before a public of readers or viewers that is physically remote. Here, however, we are interested exclusively in a form of concrete speaker-audience relationship that may be a new phenomenon in the construction of a European public sphere to the extent that it is based on the idea that stimulating debate by engaging in more direct interaction with the citizens may be the (only) way to resolve the legitimacy and public sphere deficit characteristic of the present-day European Union. The stage we are setting for this analysis therefore requires not only a concrete speaker-audience relationship; the point is that we are going for the sort of stage set not necessarily by, but definitely with the participation of Commission staff as speakers, all in the context of Plan D. It is the direct interaction between the Commission and present audiences that matters to our analysis.

Contention on the status of event publics as constitutive of public spheres notwithstanding, event publics envisaged this way are a relevant category at least and particularly in the context of Plan D. The new communication strategy represents not only the Commission’s attempt to improve its way of communicating its general visions and ambitions to the public, but also its (even explicit) attempt to contribute to remedying the broader issue of the EU’s public sphere deficit.1 Of course, Plan D and the oft-quoted period of reflection involve significantly more (and broader) measures than the organization of and/or participation in event publics as envisaged here2; nevertheless, its emphasis on the need for the Commission “to become more visible and present in the national and local debates” (European Commission 2005a: 7) can be interpreted as at least one reason for expecting an intensification of efforts in this

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1 “Together with Plan-D these initiatives set out a long-term plan to reinvigorate European democracy and help the emergence of a European public sphere, where citizens are given the information and the tools to actively participate in the decision making process and gain ownership of the European project” (European Commission 2005a: 2f.); “The staff members of the Commission […] should be empowered and encouraged to act accordingly in their contacts with the press […] and the public, addressing visitor groups and participating in public events […] in the Member States and third countries” (European Commission 2005b: 7).

2 This is particularly clear in Plan D’s special emphasis on the internet as one main forum for interaction between the institutions and the citizens (European Commission 2005a: 10; cf. also 2005b: 12; Wallström SPEECH/05/396: 5).
direction – and for exploring its potential for contributing to the development of a European public sphere characterized by a more dialogical, deliberative style of will formation.

The stage we are setting for this paper, then, looks like this: we are interested in the role and potential of event publics in the construction of a European public sphere. Particularly, we are curious about the Commission’s active role in constructing this element, which is why we are empirically interested in its new communication strategy and, more importantly, event publics either organized by or with the participation of representatives from the Commission, including its Representations and Delegations. Importantly, however, we are bringing the audience back in to emphasize the interaction between stage and gallery, aware nevertheless of the notion that speakers in public events are normally active, whereas audiences are predominantly passive recipients whose opportunities for expression are significantly constrained (Gerhards & Neidhardt 1991: 52). But this dialogical element is precisely what we are after: how are issues of European politics framed in the interplay between speakers and audiences? This is an interpretive question, but only to a certain extent: we are not interested in the clash of perspectives per se, but much more on the extent to which we can empirically observe transnational communication as conceptualized by Risse & van de Steeg also in the empirical context of event publics: Are the issues discussed at such event publics framed as shared concerns in the interplay between speakers and audiences? ³

Framing has become a bit of a buzzword, particularly in constructivist research. Without wanting to engage in this debate in detail, framing is understood here as the organization of experience, to use Goffman’s classic description (Goffman 1977). Since the concept was first introduced, it has become standard particularly in accounts of persuasion processes, frame referring basically to a particular focus on one or several aspects to help construct meaning or simply make sense of a given broader issue; a frame is a device used to reduce complexity and help us create our understanding of what is “really happening”, no matter how problematic such assertions may be (ibid. chap. 1; cf. Payne 2001).

³ The catch with the construction of a European public sphere is not whether the Commission manages to stimulate public debate (or not), but more relevantly whether we observe processes of self-reflection (“Selbstverständigung”; Risse – Kantner 2004) across borders that are themselves constitutive of political community. In other words: Do event publics during a period of reflection amount to any understanding of the sort of Europe Europeans want as Europeans (and not exclusively as Swedes, Germans, Brits etc.)?
3. Plan D for Dialogue, Debate, Democracy – and Deliberation?

The European Commission’s role in constructing a European public sphere can intriguingly be linked to notions of deliberative democracy (cf. Habermas 1992 chap. 7; Bohman & Rehg 1997; Eriksen 2001). The deliberative reading of democratic politics is based on the notion that democratic legitimacy is contingent less on the method of aggregating preferences than much rather on the quality of preceding debate, which needs to be characterized by four ideal conditions: freedom, rationality, equality, and publicity (Eriksen 2001: 4f.). Only when these four ideal conditions are met can we speak of fully legitimate outcomes. The public sphere therefore becomes the testing ground for assessing a given policy’s justification. Of course, there is a significant amount of contention among deliberative theorists beyond this fundamental consensus, based most of all on the issue of the respective weight of procedural and epistemic aspects in producing legitimate outcomes (e.g. Estlund 1997). Beyond this debate, however, deliberative theorists agree that “outcomes are democratically legitimate if and only if they could be the object of a free and reasoned agreement among equals” (Cohen 1997a: 73). The public deliberation of citizens is thought somehow to improve the quality of decisions – “to make it more likely for outcomes to be rational, well-justified, true, or just” (Bohman – Rehg 1997: xix).

Our interest lies in the role and deliberative potential of event publics in constructing a European public sphere. In particular, we want to explore the extent to which event publics during a period of reflection contribute to a period of deliberation on the future of Europe, deliberation understood here as the exchange of ideas between the European institutions (in this case the Commission) and the citizens, governed by the ideal procedural claims of deliberative politics (cf. Eriksen 2001: 4f., see below). I see two main ways of approaching this question, one broadly theoretical (3.2) and one broadly empirical (3.3). In the theoretical approach, the focus is on the Commission’s argumentation in the relevant documents relating to Plan D – at this point the Commission’s communication on Plan D (European Commission 2005a) and the Action Plan (European Commission 2005b) as well as in relevant speeches, subsequently to be

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4 Deliberations have to be free in the sense that arguers are bound only by the outcomes and the conditions for their own deliberations; rational in the sense that they are based on reason-giving; equal in the sense that all individuals competent of speech have to be able to participate and have their claims assessed irrespective of power and resources; and public in the sense that they are legitimate if arrived at in a free debate in public arenas (Eriksen 2005: 4f.).
complemented by the forthcoming White Paper on Communication. The approach is theoretical in the sense that its reading of the Commission’s argumentation on Plan D occurs exclusively before the backdrop of the procedural claims of deliberative politics. In other words, the question is to which extent the forums envisaged as part of Plan D are *in principle* consistent with the ideal procedural conditions for deliberative decision-making. In the empirical approach, then, we would bring these considerations back down on the ground and *go local* to observe the Commission going local in its attempts to “[create] a new consensus on the European project, anchored in citizens’ expectations” (European Commission 2005a: 3). Here, the focus is more concretely on the interpretive task of analyzing the communicative interplay and the framing processes observable in the field, all in order to draw conclusions on the extent to which the Commission manages to live up to its commitment of listening and creating dialog instead of merely *talking at* the people.

3.1 Deliberation and the Politics of Persuasion

Both approaches touch on fairly fundamental issues that go beyond deliberative democratic politics per se – a context we could call the *politics of persuasion*. Deliberation is understood as the public reasoning of citizens to arrive at normatively justifiable and epistemically “better” outcomes based on a shared commitment to the common good. Notions of communicative rationality, understood as the form of reason predisposing an arguer to yield to the force of the better argument, i.e. to be reflexive and competent of self-correction (Eriksen 2001: 8f.), are however commonly subjected to the skepticism that more or less *manipulative* attempts at *persuading* a counterpart in communicative processes are problematic to distinguish clearly from more or less *genuine* attempts at *convincing* that particular counterpart (Checkel 2001: 2). What constitutes persuasion? What constitutes conviction? How much persuasion is possible while still claiming communicative rationality? Can we only speak of conviction if we witness a clear change of preferences in any of the actors involved? And how do we

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5 The distinction between persuasion and conviction is only one way of addressing the different underlying logics of action and modes of rationality (i.e. instrumental versus communicative). Alternatively, Checkel speaks of *thin vs. thick* (2002) as well as of *manipulative versus argumentative persuasion* (2003).
know, in that case, that the actor whose preferences remained unchanged convinced the counterpart instead of persuading her or him?

First, changing minds is an integral element – and indeed the goal – of any deliberative process aiming at the communicative resolution of conflicting interests by refocusing them onto notions of the common good. The question that concerns us here, though, refers to the extent to which the outcome of the procedure has to be open in order for the process to qualify as deliberative. To what extent, in other words, is any process based on communicative rationality reconcilable with highly rigid (exogenous) convictions about what serves the common good best – such as we may expect the Commission to have in its encounters with the public? Clearly, the current period of reflection does not start from scratch; the new approach to communicating Europe is an exercise in listening, but only to an extent. Beyond that, the Commission’s argumentation indicates that it is based on a fairly clear vision of the future of Europe beyond the mere procedural claim to more dialog between the institutions and the citizens. So how changeable do visions of the future of Europe, particularly on the part of the institutions, have to be for the period of reflection to qualify as a period of deliberation? Could the outcome of the period of reflection depart from the ideas of Europe currently advocated by the Commission?

The concrete example of the Commission’s performance at event publics illustrates the essence of the debate between procedural and epistemic approaches to deliberative politics. Whereas proceduralists argue that legitimacy is ultimately a function of procedural correctness, i.e. that the correctness of an outcome can only be derived from the correctness of the procedure, epistemic approaches ask whether correct outcomes can also be based on procedure-independent criteria. The point is linked to

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6 This is not to say that any one actor’s convictions will have to remain unchanged throughout the deliberative process.

7 Frequent references to the democratic deficit as the outcome of a communication failure rather than policy failures are testimony to this. “We political leaders,” argues Margot Wallström, have been bad at listening, bad at explaining and bad at anchoring EU issues in contemporary national politics” (SPEECH/05/396: 2), or elsewhere that “the EU’s political leaders and decision-makers have not been good at highlighting the advantages European integration brings to ordinary citizens” (SPEECH/05/342).

8 For instance, already the introduction to Plan D illustrates the continued commitment to the Constitutional Treaty: “Pending the outcome of the ratification process, the Commission believes that the overall balance achieved in the Constitution should not be undermined by piecemeal implementation of parts of the text” (European Commission 2005a: 2).

9 On this count, Eriksen (2001) wonders how we can base our notion of what is correct on procedural criteria, as procedural justification would imply that literally all citizens’ perspectives will have to be heard before we can draw any conclusions about the correctness of possible decisions. Estlund (1997), on the other hand, argues for an epistemic proceduralism in which correct outcomes are guaranteed by correct procedure, but only imperfectly so; however, this imperfection is corrected through the epistemic,
the question to which extent notions of communicative rationality require the flexibility to subject one’s own (better) moral judgment to the outcome of the deliberative procedure, and in turn to the issue of how far the Commission’s ideas for the future of Europe can be reshaped in the process of deliberation. Of course, the Commission enters the communicative context with a given agenda and attempts to convince (or persuade) present audiences of the value of its approach. At least in theory, the deliberative value of event publics in a period of reflection lies in the procedural requirement to argue for (and meet the objections against) the benefits of the European project in terms of notions of the common good.

3.2 Arguing for Plan D: Towards a Deliberative Arena?

Climbing down the ladder of abstraction then to the concrete documents forming the basis of the new communication strategy, the overall image in terms of deliberation is somewhat ambiguous. On the one hand, the significance of public events for communication purposes is acknowledged both as such and in the specific context of visits by Commissioners to the Member States. Furthermore, the action plan’s key message is that “communication is more than information” (European Commission 2005b: 2), that it is instead about “[establishing] a relationship and [initiating] dialogue with European citizens” (ibid.), and that this can only be achieved through a strategy of inter alia listening and “connecting with citizens by going local” (ibid.: 4). Similarly, in its communication on Plan D, the Commission emphasizes that

“[u]ltimately, Plan-D for democracy, dialogue and debate is a listening exercise so that the European Union can act on the concerns expressed by the citizens. The objective of the Commission is to stimulate debate and seek recognition for the added value that the European

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10 “Events, whether organized by the Commission or outside agencies, can have an important communication dimension. Organisation of, and participation in, such events should therefore be part of the overall strategic framework for communication” (European Commission 2005b: 14).

11 “The Commission intends to have a more direct contact with citizens, to listen to their concerns and to become more visible and present in the national and regional debates. The President and/or the Vice-President for institutional relations will undertake a series of visits to as many of the Member States as possible. […] They should meet with Governments, national Parliaments, business and trade union leaders, civil society, students and regional and local authorities. Media events and contacts with civil society will be a key feature of each visit” (European Commission 2005a: 7).
Union can provide. The democratic renewal process means that EU citizens must have the right to have their voices heard” (European Commission 2005b: 4).

Broadly speaking, the bottom line argument is that Europe is in need of “a ‘common narrative’” (Wallström SPEECH/05/396: 2) about its own future, and that the Commission is posed to engage in the construction of this narrative in dialog with the citizens. In this sense, we do observe a commitment to the sort of dialogical mode of interaction that would be a requirement for deliberative democracy. ‘Going local’ in this context means setting up points of contact between the Commission and the citizens both in the Member States and in third countries, although this does not always entail the direct engagement in the sort of deliberative arena as which we envisage event publics. ‘Going local’ does mean “listening to the people” (European Commission 2005b: 9) and it does mean involving Commissioners more in connecting with local audiences (ibid.: 10), but it seems to mean most of all to utilize the Representations in the individual Member States, foremost for the purpose of getting a better picture of what local audiences’ respective areas of concern are regarding specific issues of the European integration process, mainly for the sake of informing headquarters and devising communication strategies to effectively address these concerns. Going local in the sense of listening to people means explicitly to “[provide] the Commission with in-depth, accurate and timely information regarding the views of the Government and of civil society on issues within the Commission’s remit” (ibid.: 9), as well as “communicating Commission’s policies and actions to people in a way that takes into account their specific demands and concerns” (ibid.).

In this sense, the strategy maintains a certain measure of the sort of one-way communication that is elsewhere identified as arguably the core problem in communicating EU policies. An illustrative example of this latter point is the emphasis, in a speech by Margot Wallström, on communication being “a two-way dialogue” instead of “a one-way monologue”, followed nevertheless by the argument that “the EU needs to explain its aims and policies clearly and comprehensibly. […] We must spell out the ways in which our proposals will actually affect people’s daily lives” (SPEECH/05/396: 5). Elsewhere, Wallström argues similarly that she sees

“the Commission’s role as a facilitator, a kind of “helper” providing support to member states and civil society in order to make this Plan D happen. But it is essential that we avoid a “top-down”
approach. Democracy is a ‘bottom-up’ process and we must never forget that. The role of the Commission in policy-making is to strike a balance, a middle of the road between extremes, to be an honest broker in the political landscape of Europe” (Wallström SPEECH/05/396: 4).

This is particularly curious in combination with the emphasis placed on improving communication by improving the _persuasive skills_ of communicators acting on behalf not only of the Commission, but also of the other EU institutions, representations and delegations that are urged to play their role in communicating the EU. The action plan argues explicitly that “more and better training on communication and the organization of recruitment competitions for communication professionals” are “key” to the development of its own objectives (European Commission 2005b: 7). Aspects such as “[b]ecoming more professional in communication through specific training and recruitment of communication specialists” (ibid.: 4) may have a peculiar public relations ring to it, in the early Habermasian usage (cf. Habermas 1962) and tend to indicate an ambition to _persuade_ audiences in a manipulative way rather than to _convince_ them in the sense of communicative rationality. The point with emphasizing this ambiguity is however not to indulge in any sort of exercise in speculative hermeneutics about the intentions underlying the communication strategy, but merely to point out that there is a certain level of tension – some sort of fine balance, if we will – between communicating in the two-way sense of giving the people a voice (and taking this voice into account) and communicating in the more one-way sense of explaining and persuading. Such questions are better answered out in the field in empirical research.

At best (in terms of deliberative value), “becoming more professional in communication” can mean having better-trained staff precisely for the purpose of interacting with the citizens in the sense of “two-way dialogue”, i.e. by listening and responding to their concerns in an open-minded way. At worst, it can mean simply improving the level of rhetorical skill among those Commission staff employed for the purpose of “communicating a Europe in stormy waters” (SPEECH/05/396); simply for the sake of winning the argument, so to speak. Which of these two options – easily translatable into the language of instrumental versus communicative rationality – prevails in practice is an issue that we can attempt to answer empirically by analyzing in detail the processes of reason-giving observable e.g. at the sort of event publics envisaged here, mainly by focusing on the aforementioned procedural elements of
deliberative politics: that arguments be based on references to the common good (cf. Eriksen 2005: 9).

3.3 Going Local: Event Publics in Practice

At this point, the empirical record is still too thin to be able to speak about a full-fledged empirical analysis of the deliberative potential and role of event publics in the construction of a European public sphere. Event publics organized by or with the participation of the Commission and its Representations and Delegations do occur, but they do not occur every day. Therefore, this part of the paper – which draws on survey material collected, speeches delivered and the dialog between speakers and audiences observed at two event publics during the last month\footnote{“The debate about the future EU – reflections on the verge of the summit”, (“Debatten om det fremtidige EU - refleksjoner i forkant av toppmøtet”, author’s translation), Oslo, 2005-10-21; “A larger EU and a stronger voice in the world – a seminar on the continued enlargement and EU’s foreign policy”, Stockholm, 2005-11-17.} – is at best a sort of pilot study guiding further research in the sense of giving us an idea about the sort of processes to look for.

3.3.1 Orientations towards European Integration: Contestation or Acclamation?

The most important aspect to analyze, as has been emphasized, is the sort of framing processes observable at event publics, i.e. the dialogical interaction between speakers and audiences in making sense of issues relating to the future of Europe. However, if we want to arrive at any meaningful statement about event publics’ deliberative potential, more is necessary than this only sort of information. The sort of public sphere we are interested in is the place where civil society meets the political system; therefore, it is one characterized by contestation rather than mere acclamation. As Risse & van de Steeg have argued, contestation in transnational communication is not a sign of the lack of a European public sphere, but much rather a vital sign (Risse & van de Steeg 2003). In fact, deliberation essentially depends on the clash of different views and opinions. Deliberation is a procedure for producing democratically more legitimate outcomes by requiring individuals to provide arguments for their preferences.
with references to ideas of the common good. Therefore, speakers need to have different views in order to be able to challenge one another’s claims and actually have something to deliberate about. This has methodological consequences for the analysis of framing processes at event publics. One relevant piece of background information necessary for assessing the deliberative potential of any event concerns fairly basic orientations towards the integration process among audiences: are the orientations represented in respective audiences sufficiently diverse so as to allow for contestation in the impending dialog? If only dedicated pro-integrationists show up to discuss with Commission representatives, this of course affects the level of contestation in the dialog between speakers and audiences. The limited number of questionnaires collected at this point already gives an indication of that. The dominant majority of respondents in both cases support both the integration process in general and their own country’s (future) EU membership while at the same time believing that the EU represents the adequate level for decision-making in at least certain policy areas.13

3.3.2 Event Publics in Practice: How Transnational?

Furthermore, we need to know how audiences are composed in terms of national backgrounds. The transnational element in this context may look quite different from the sort of transnational communication we analyze in the mass media, but is actually quite similar in the sense that what we are after is the extent to which contributions on issues of European politics by speakers from other national contexts are heard, i.e. listened and responded to. In the mass media, we are looking at reporting about and references to what speakers from other national contexts have said (e.g. Wimmel 2004), as well as at the extent to which their claims are being challenged and discussed in the national arena (Conrad 2005). In the context of event publics, however, we may in certain ways have to expect a lower level, or better said a different kind of transnationality: the fact that event publics are highly confined in time and space makes

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13 76.5% of respondents expressed that their general support for the European Union was fairly high or very high; 75.5% expressed that their support for their own country’s (potential future) EU membership was fairly high or very high (51.0% very high); 89.2% found the EU to be the adequate level for decision-making in at least certain fields.
them less accessible for audiences from other national contexts. On the other hand, even in the context of the mass media, audiences are most frequently national, even if to a (maybe significantly) lower extent. Unsurprisingly, the results from the initial survey support this assumption, indicating that as far as audience composition is concerned, event publics are a predominantly national arrangement. Consequently, the transnationality of event publics – particularly in the context of the period of reflection – lies in another element: similar to the analysis of the mass media, transnationality resides in the dialog between foreign (in this case Commission) speakers and domestic audiences. This is where the interesting observations are to be made as regards framing particular issues of the future of Europe. To what extent are the claims of speakers from other national contexts picked up and discussed? Are the claims discussed as expressions on shared concerns, or are they used as arguments to redress claims for a shared future of Europe?

This is where we move from a mainly quantitative background analysis of the present audiences to the qualitative analysis of what forms the main research interest in this paper. Here, the initial assumption that we can look at mainly two aspects seems to work out in the field. As a first step, we can look at the propositions or claims raised by a speaker, in this case representatives of the Commission visiting Member States or third countries. Second, we can look at the kind of questions asked from the floor and interpret the frames employed to make sense of a given issue. The first step is fairly uncontroversial and resulted in no particular surprises at the two events visited so far.

3.3.3 Empirical Illustrations from Two Event Publics

The first event, organized by the Commission’s Delegation to Norway and Iceland in Oslo, featured Brussels correspondents from three European newspapers and discussed the implications of the referenda on the ratification of the Constitutional Treaty in France and the Netherlands. The three speakers addressed the issue from a

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14 Of course, one could interject that manuscripts of the public speeches delivered by members of the College are also made available to the public, usually on the Commission’s website on the Europa server. Nevertheless, the publication of speeches on the web is certainly not as conspicuous as the publication of an editorial in for instance a national newspaper. Also, the dialogical element of the interaction between speakers and audiences is not captured anywhere.
15 80.4% of respondents came from the respective host country of the event in question.
16 Horst Bacia, Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung; Rolf Gustavsson, Svenska Dagbladet; Frank Rossavik, Bergens Tidende.
highly European perspective, discussing what the outcomes of the referenda meant in terms of how the European integration process was to continue, i.e. what the EU is to do next. Rolf Gustavsson (Svenska Dagbladet), arguing that the referenda were an expression of genuine discontent and distrust particularly about the EU’s technocratic working procedures since the Maastricht Treaty, and as an expression of which “real political discussion” is often avoided, claimed that the Commission is correct in proposing a much-needed period of reflection. Nevertheless, he argued, what we are currently witnessing would more appropriately be described as “a lot of pause and very little reflection.” Picking up the theme of the period of reflection, Frank Rossavik (Bergens Tidende) on the other hand argued that it would be more appropriate to speak of a major crisis instead, emphasizing that the big countries have been starting to act more in their own rather than in the Union’s interest.

Regarding the dialogical element, the event was quite well-suited for this sort of analysis, as equal amounts of time were dedicated to the speakers’ contributions and to the subsequent panel debate with questions from the floor. Here, the discussion turned at least somewhat controversial, with e.g. representatives from the Norwegian no-to-the-EU movement challenging the EU’s perceived “tendency towards more market liberalism” (with Frank Rossavik’s response being that a comparison between the developments in the EU and Norway in that respect “would result in a photo finish”); another debater questioned to what extent the EU could effectively find solutions to the challenges of globalization that would suit all member states despite their heterogeneity. Much of this debate was transnational at best to the extent that contributions from foreign speakers were picked up and challenged, but it did not represent an instance of self-reflection or self-inspection about what kind of EU is considered desirable in the future; the debate was framed much rather in terms of the EU’s inadequacy as compared to the nation-state as a provider of welfare and solidarity. However, the debate also addressed issues that were framed as European concerns. Examples of this were questions about the EU’s potential for addressing issues such as human trafficking, or the extent to which future eastward enlargements and “destabilizations of the Eastern external border” affect popular support for the EU. In this sense, the overall image of the Oslo event was somewhat ambiguous, featuring elements both of the sort of communicative exchanges that we conceive of as instances of transnational communication, and of the sort of argumentation that dismisses EU membership based on an image of the EU as an undesirably organized political system.
The second event was a seminar organized by the *Alliance for Sweden* and dealt with questions pertaining to the EU’s Common Foreign and Security Policy, but also to the future of EU enlargement, featuring amongst others Enlargement Commissioner Olli Rehn. Unsurprisingly, Rehn’s speech itself – on the question of some ultimate external border of the EU – was characterized by a clear EU perspective, arguing for the advantages of EU enlargement as being in the interest both of the EU and the respective applicant countries. Rehn also emphasized the integration process’s basis in shared values, arguing that although “geography matters, it is ultimately values that define Europe as a political project. Enlargements are about spreading European fundamental values such as freedom and democracy, rule of law and human rights, tolerance and solidarity” (speech Rehn 2005). Rehn also emphasized that enlargements are an enterprise beneficial for all of us as Europeans, addressing specifically the cases of Bulgaria, Romania and the recently begun membership negotiations with Turkey. “If these countries can fully adopt the EU’s values, Europe will become more peaceful, democratic and well-being. We all have a lot to gain” (ibid.: 3f.). Needless to say, the fact that the Enlargement Commissioner frames the enlargement process as an issue of all-encompassing benefit – as a case of the “spread of security, democracy and economic well-being” (ibid.: 7) – is not particularly surprising. More interestingly, however, also the following debate between the Commissioner and his audience predominantly adopted a European perspective, asking questions e.g. about the EU’s potential for contributing to democratization processes in the Arab world, about the Commission’s view on the membership ambitions of Eastern European countries such as Ukraine and Georgia, or about the EU’s duty to allow for Turkish accession. In that sense, the interesting observation is that there were no fundamental objections to the enlargement process *per se* or any fundamental skepticism towards the idea of the EU as a value-based community to which any European country can accede, provided its full subscription to these values; rather, the debate focused on the EU’s potential for constructive contributions in promoting these fundamental values. We might speculate to what extent these processes would correlate

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17 *Allians för Sverige*; the Alliance for Sweden is the shared platform on which the four bourgeois parties intend to run in the 2006 elections to the Swedish *riksdag*.

18 ”Geografin spelar roll, men till syvende och sist är det värderingar som definierar Europa som politiskt projekt. Utvidgningarna handlar om att sprida demokrati, rättstat och mänskliga rättigheter, tolerans och solidaritet” (author’s translation).

19 ”Om dessa länder fullt ut kan anamma EU:s värderingar så kommer Europa att bli mer fredligt, demokratiskt och välämände. Vi har alla mycket att vinna” (author’s translation).
with the high levels of support for the EU among the present audience; however, this is not the ambition of this paper – and neither is it possible given the limited amount of data available. Much rather, the conclusion to draw from this in terms of event publics as deliberative arenas is that no hasty conclusions should be drawn about the existence of a European public sphere as a transnational communicative context, controversially debating the EU’s current form for the sake of critical self-inspection and self-reflection about what sort of EU Europeans want, at least not without taking aspects of a given audience’s fundamental orientations towards the integration project into consideration. To reiterate: if only (or even predominantly) dedicated pro-integrationists come out to meet the Commission going local, we can say very little about the prospects or the emergence of a European public sphere, and maybe even less about the deliberative potential of event publics as local expressions of such a public sphere – at least not unless the membership issue ceases to be a contested issue.

4. Concluding Reflections

This paper has been a first attempt at outlining an exploration into the role and deliberative potential of event publics in the construction of a European public sphere. It has been a first attempt to the extent that while events either featuring speakers from or organized by the European Commission are an increasingly frequent phenomenon, my observations have thus far only covered two events. On the other hand, since event publics and their role in stimulating transnational debate have been overlooked, the benefit of this first attempt may very well be to stimulate debate on the mere possibility of face-to-face transnational communication, beyond the implicit equation of the public sphere with the media sphere.

Where it is possible to speak of empirical results, a couple of remarks are in order. In a sense, we need to maintain a certain level of skepticism towards the finding that transnational communication in the sense of self-reflection or self-inspection did occur quite frequently at both events analyzed. Here, it seems quite evident that aspects related to the organization and particularly to the organizers of the respective events, and similarly the respective audiences’ fundamental orientations towards the integration project matter at least to a certain extent, and that this is an aspect in need of further
exploration in the continuation of this project. We conceptualize the public sphere as a social space for communication that is inclusive in the sense in principle allowing any bystander to enter into an ongoing debate. Sure enough, the events analyzed here were in principle open this way. However, audiences turned out to be fairly uniform, prompting questions about the sort of transnational dialog that we would observe in settings where the pendulum swings to the more so-called Euroskeptic side.

Transnational reflection about the character of a desired European polity will not amount to any meaningful European public sphere unless it becomes inclusive to the extent that these deliberative arenas become inclusive not only in theory, but also in practice. A European public sphere is only meaningful if it actually comes to life with contributions also from speakers skeptical either of the idea of European integration, or more importantly about the specific content or direction of European integration and current EU policy-making. Contestation, to reiterate, is a crucial precondition and a vital sign of the public sphere, as of deliberative politics per se. As Swedish MEP Cecilia Malmström frequently points out, the Swedish EU debate – even after ten years of membership – still boils down to the fundamental opposition between advocates and opponents of the integration process instead of engaging in a more substantive debate about the direction for European integration desired by its citizens; the question is often “Do we want Europe?” rather than “What do we want Europe to be?” As long as these dichotomous oppositions continue to dominate the debate on Europe, the outlook for a genuinely European public sphere may be bleak.

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