

An online European public sphere?

The Web and Europeanization of political communication in the EU

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Renée van Os & Nicholas W. Jankowski

Renée van Os
Ph.D. Candidate
Department of Communication
Radboud University
Nijmegen, The Netherlands
(+31) 24 3612348
R.vanOs@maw.ru.nl

Nicholas W. Jankowski
Associate Professor
Department of Communication
Radboud University
Nijmegen, The Netherlands
nickjan@xs4all.nl

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Renée van Os & Nicholas W. Jankowski,
Radboud University Nijmegen

Introduction

This paper commences with a sketch of the manner in which Europeanization of political communication and ‘European public sphere’ have been formulated and investigated during the last decade. We elaborate on our interpretation the Europeanization of the public sphere, emphasizing that political actors, including citizens, are engaged in *communication about Europe*. We review a number of studies related to this interpretation. The first part of the paper concludes with the potential of the Web to contribute to or enhance a pan-European public space; here we argue that attention should be paid to communication about Europe by political actors as provided on Web sites. In the second part of the paper, several research projects are presented that focus on the Europeanization of political communication with direct reference to the Internet, specifically the World Wide Web. The research designs and outcomes of these studies are examined. Finally, the paper concludes with recommendations for a more overarching empirical investigation of the concept European public sphere within an Internet environment.

Europeanization of the public sphere

Against the background of the democratic deficit of the European Union, scholars recognise that the process of European integration must be accompanied by a Europeanization of political communication in order to overcome the lack of legitimacy and popular involvement in the EU by European citizens (Koopmans & Pfetsch, 2003). The concept of public sphere, initially elaborated by Habermas in *The structural transformations of the public sphere* (1962/1989), has more recently begun to play a central role in discussions about European integration. Various models regarding the Europeanization of the public sphere have been presented in the last decade by a variety of scholars, and several of these are outlined in this section. In general, scholars seem to agree that the mass media serve as the main venue for public representation of a Europeanization of the public sphere. The actual process of Europeanization of the public sphere, however, is lagging behind economic and political integration at the European level, according to Gerhards (2000).

Despite the considerable attention to the idea of a European public sphere, it remains uncertain how the notion of ‘Europeanization’ is to be understood in relation to the concepts public sphere and

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political communication. Not only is ‘Europeanization’ a contested notion – social scientists have been accused of ‘concept stretching’² – but in the increasing body of academic literature the term ‘Europeanization’ has mainly been used for understanding and describing European transformations at the institutional and political level (Olsen, 2002). For example, Howell (2002: 2) conceptualises Europeanization “in its most explicit form as the process of downloading European Union directives, regulations and institutional structures to the domestic level.” On the other hand, however, Howell also recognizes that this conceptualisation has been extended “in terms of up-loading to the EU, shared beliefs, informal and formal rules, discourses, identities and vertical and horizontal policy transfer” (Howell, 2002: 2).

Related to Howell’s second conceptualisation of Europeanization, Delantly and Rumford (2005) view Europeanization from a social constructivist approach, which gives particular weight to the way that the social is constructed under conditions not fixed or reducible to institutional structures. Delantly and Rumford account for the need to apply the theory of social constructivism to the process of ‘Europeanization’, because “it is simply not possible to explain major European transformation alone by reference to changes in the nature of statehood, such as sovereignty, citizenship and constitutions” (Delantly & Rumford, 2005: 2-3). They refer to Habermas (1987), who differentiates between system integration and social integration, the latter term referring to integration through the mediating of cultural and social structures, specifically through communicative and symbolic forms of integration (Delantly & Rumford, 2005: 10-11). Also, McNeill describes Europe as a social construction and argues that European integration “is something that operates discursively and symbolically, talked into being by politicians, bureaucrats and ordinary people, rather than being a simple description of the final state of an integration project” (McNeill, 2004: 36). In this context, McNeill, like many others (e.g. Gavin, 2000; Risse, 2003b; Sassatelli, 2002), refers to Europe as an ‘imagined community’, a notion introduced by Anderson (1991).

It is within this context, that the scholarly debate on the (non-)existence of a European public sphere should be situated. As outlined in this section, the key issue seems to be whether one considers Europe and the process of Europeanization a social construction or merely an economic, political feature or outcome of an institutional integration process. Related to this issue is the ongoing discussion about whether a European(ized) public sphere in some sense is separate but comparable to national public spheres. From this perspective, there is a direct link between the European public sphere and the EU institutional structure and decision-making process. As emphasized in Habermas’ original definition of the public sphere (Habermas, 1989: 25) this conceptualization is seen as “the space within which the affairs of the state could be subjected to public scrutiny” (Kunelius & Sparks, 2001: 11).

² ‘Concept stretching’ is referred to by Buller and Gamble as “a practice where scholars choose a strategy of least resistance by adapting existing terms to news situations for which they were not designed or suited” (Buller & Gamble, 2002: 3)

Early scholars, dealing with the possibility of a public sphere functioning at the European level, such as Gerhards (1993), Grimm (1995) Graham (1992), Kielmansegg (1996) and Schlesinger (1996; 1999), retain the original, Habermasian notion of the public sphere and are willing to consider the possibility of a European public sphere at the supra-national level only on the condition that Brussels becomes more of a political centre in which decisions are taken independently of national governments. These authors, to different degrees, place emphasis on the lack of political actors, such as political parties and interest groups, operating at the European level. They also refer to the lack of European-level mass media, to the diversity of languages across Europe, and to the absence of a collective European identity. Schlesinger, for example, considers the lack of a single European public problematic: “without the broad mass of European media consumers organized transnationally as common audiences or readerships, there is no basis for talking about a single European public for political communications” (Schlesinger, 1999: 276-277).

Other scholars have criticized this view as being excessively strict and based on an idealized notion of an essentially homogeneous national public sphere that is to be replicated at the European level (Eder, Kantner, & Trenz, 2000; Koopmans et al., 2004; Risse, 2002, 2003a; Van de Steeg, 2002, 2004). In this regard, early scholars such as Schlesinger, Gerhards and Grimm “base their conceptualisation on unsubstantiated assumptions concerning the character of the public sphere and its relation to key concepts such as language, the media system and the state’s frontiers” (Van de Steeg, Rauer, Rivet, & Risse, 2003: 2). Instead of considering a pre-existing community that almost automatically translates into a public sphere, Risse and Van de Steeg propose to consider public sphere as a discursive community, that emerges from debates on specific issues (Risse, 2002, 2003a; Risse & Van de Steeg, 2003; Van de Steeg et al., 2003).³ As Risse argues: “A European public sphere does not fall from heaven, and does not pre-exist outside social and political discourse. Rather, it is being constructed through social and discursive practices creating a common horizon of reference and, at the same time, a transnational community of communication over issues that concern ‘us as Europeans’ rather than British, French, Germans or Dutch” (Risse, 2003a: 2). Similarly, Eder and Kantner place emphasis on the ‘parallelisation’, or transnationalization, of public debates across Europe as indicators of the Europeanization of national public spheres, and the development of a European public sphere (Eder & Kantner, 2000; Eder et al., 2000; see also: Koopmans et al., 2004).

Although it is not the intention here to take a position in this debate about the (non-) existence of a European public sphere – this seems to be essentially a matter of definition – we do agree with Risse and colleagues that central in the process of Europeanization of the public sphere, are the communicative interactions on common European issues or events, either directly or indirectly through media or Internet-based representations. Therefore, scholarly research should focus foremost on the extent to which people are engaged in *communication about Europe*.

³ Closa (2002) and De Beus (2002) make a similar argument and suggest that the (European) public sphere should be considered a social construction.

Communicating about Europe – review of empirical studies

Few empirical studies have been conducted that measure elements of Europeanization of political communication and/or the public sphere. One study by Eder and Kantner does take on this challenge and the authors suggest a valuable point of departure (Eder & Kantner, 2000). For them, the key indicator of a shared public debate and, at the same time, of a European public sphere, is whether similar European issues are being simultaneously addressed in different national media. Eder and Kantner are inspired by Habermas' notion of the public sphere as "a political public sphere which enables citizens to take positions at the same time on the same topics of the same relevance" (Habermas, 1996: 190). Gerhards, extending the proposal made by Eder and Kantner, advocates a more normatively demanding stance towards what constitutes Europeanization (Gerhards, 2000). He argues that, in order for a process of Europeanization to take place, it is not only important that actors communicate about a European issue or event; they should also "evaluate it from a perspective that extends beyond one's country and interest". This position, formulated succinctly, emphasized that Europeanization involves communication from a European perspective (Gerhards, 2000: 293).

Related to these differences in interpretation, Risse and Van de Steeg, in a review of recent empirical studies, distinguish two approaches in measuring the Europeanization of political communication (Risse & Van de Steeg, 2003). The first approach essentially counts how often indicators such as Europe, European institutions and European affairs are mentioned in the mass media (Gerhards, 1993; Groothues, 2004; Hodess, 1997; Kevin, 2001). For example, De Vreese has investigated the extent to which news on European affairs is domestically focused, focused on the EU level, or whether stories have an international, but non-EU focus (De Vreese, 2003).⁴ De Vreese considers indication of the focus of a news story a prerequisite for "any further advances in the discussion about the implications of news for, for example, a European public sphere" (De Vreese, 2003: 81). Similar, Semetko, De Vreese and Peter have investigated the extent to which European issues, problems, events and persons in national news are framed as 'European' or 'domestic' (Semetko, De Vreese, & Peter, 2000). They conclude that European and Brussels-based news has become more important in the last few years for national news media. European integration and the EU are not only present in news coverage of genuinely European issues, but are also increasingly an integral part of national political and economic coverage. Another example is the empirical investigation conducted by Trenz (2004), who differentiated between (1) European articles – articles that discuss European topics as the dominant issue, (2) Europeanized articles – articles that discuss national topics as the dominant issue with reference to one or several European sub-issues, and (3) articles with a European referential frame – articles that discuss non-European issues but make different rhetorical references to Europe (Trenz, 2004: 293-294). Trenz concludes, similar to De

⁴ In this research, focus was determined by assessing "where does the story or actions it depicts (mainly) take place, in terms of prominence in the story or length" (De Vreese, 2003: 88).

Vreese, Risse and Van de Steeg that the issue salience (visibility) of European affairs in the mass media has increased during the last decennium.

A second, more qualitative, approach concentrates on analysing media reporting on particular European issues (Eder & Kantner, 2000; Trenz, 2000; Van de Steeg, 2002, 2004). Studies from this approach observe that European issues are being discussed and reported in the various media across Europe at the same time, at similar levels of attention in the issue cycle of media reporting, and in a similar fashion. Risse and Van de Steeg argue that the framing of particular European themes in similar ways across national media lead to similar interpretative schemes and structures of meaning, which they consider an important pre-condition for the emergence of a “transnational community of communication” (Risse & Van de Steeg, 2003: 4). In their empirical research, Risse and Van de Steeg focus on the debate that emerged across Europe in 2000 regarding the rise of a right-wing populist party in Austria, Jörg Haider’s FPÖ, investigating to what extent newspapers from various countries used similar frames of reference when addressing the so-called Haider issue (Risse & Van de Steeg, 2003; Van de Steeg et al., 2003). Risse and Van de Steeg discovered that similar meaning structures emerged across all 15 newspapers within five EU member states; of the 22 frames identified, six appeared frequently in every newspaper. Two of the frames were directly related to Europe: “Europe as a moral community” and “European legal standards” (Risse & Van de Steeg, 2003: 6-7). Risse and Van de Steeg consider these common collective understandings of what the EU is about a precondition for a viable European public sphere.

Similar to Risse and Van de Steeg, Trenz speaks of “the specific meanings, expectations and world views that are channelled through/conveyed by debates” as important indicators for the Europeanization of political communication (Trenz, 2004: 308). He criticizes studies that only measure the visibility of European affairs in the news media, considering this a “minimalist indicator for the emergence of a European public sphere.” He argues that scholars should not only observe what is communicated, but also how and why it is communicated. Gavin makes a similar argument, stating that “we need not to think just about the level of prominence of European news; the way it portrays Europe’s political institutions and processes is also important” (Gavin, 2000: 369). It is, according to Trenz and colleagues (Eder, Kantner, & Trenz, 2002, 2000), the interpretative context, the ‘frame’ in which European topics are discussed in the media, which tells us whether and why an issue is relevant and should therefore be considered “the qualitative criteria for the existence of a European public sphere” (Trenz, 2004: 308-309). Eder, Kantner and Trenz identify three frames, or ‘patterns of interpretation’: whether and to what degree interests, identity and values are shared across European countries within the different national news media (Eder et al., 2000). In an analysis of news coverage of European governance and policy making during the year 2000, 85% of the articles in the sample contained an interests frame, 38% were coded in normative terms (values frame), and only 27% contained an identity frame. Typical issues which were linked to interest negotiations among Europeans are institutional reform, competition policy and the debate on the Euro. Few articles

referred to purely normative or identity-based framings; 45% of the articles made use of multiple framings, raising issues in the context of interests and/or values and/or identities. The enlargement of the EU with countries located in eastern Europe, for example, was predominantly framed in instrumental terms (interests), but was regularly linked to normative questions and questions of collective identity. The relationship between the EU and Turkey was mainly framed in identity-related terms (Trenz, 2004: 309-310).

Trenz also mentions a third analytical element of a (European) public sphere: the *connectivity* of communication within a given, but changeable, communicative context. This aspect corresponds to what others have referred to as the 'structure of communication' (e.g. Koopmans & Erbe, 2004). In this regard, Koopmans and Pfetsch argue that "the spatial reach and boundaries of public communication can be determined by investigating patterns of communicative flows and assessing the relative density of public communication with and between different political spaces" (Koopmans & Pfetsch, 2003: 13).⁵ First, they define three levels of communication: the national public sphere, other national public spaces – which comprise the EU (candidate) member states, and the transnational, European political space – in which the European institutions and common policies are situated. The degree to which public spheres can be deemed national, transnational or European depends, according to Koopmans and colleagues, on the density of communicative linkages within and between these spaces (Koopmans & Pfetsch, 2003: 11-12). Accordingly, they speak of "horizontal Europeanization" when, for example, the German media report on what happens in other national public spaces, and of "vertical Europeanization" when communicative linkages are made between the national and the European public space (Koopmans & Erbe, 2004: 103-104). Second, in order to assess the role of the media as compared to other actors, they recommend moving "beyond the usual article-level types of content analysis to consider individual public claims by different collective actors" as a means to measure communicative linkages (Koopmans & Pfetsch, 2003: 13-14). Thus, their units of analysis are individual acts of political communication, which they term 'public claims'.⁶ One of the main conclusions of the EUROPUB project was that for all countries included in the study (except the non-EU country Switzerland), the number of claims on European integration is higher in 2002 than in 1990. Especially in the interests fields of 'monetary politics' and 'agriculture' the number of claims with a European scope (claims made by European-level actors – vertical Europeanization) increased from respectively 40% and 36% in 1990 to 78% and 61% in 2002. Within other issue fields only a modest increase in vertical Europeanization could be observed; no clear vertical tendencies could be found within fields in which the EU has very little power and influence (e.g., education and pension issues). For horizontal Europeanization, they observed a slightly decreasing trend – from 18% across all countries in 1990 to 17% in 2002 (Koopmans et al., 2004).

⁵ Koopmans is co-ordinator of the EUROPUB project, see <http://europub.wz-berlin.de> for more information.

⁶ The EUROPUB project analyses the communication through which political actors make public demands on selected issues. A claim is defined as "an instance of strategic action in the public sphere" (Koopmans & Erbe, 2004: 98). A 'claimant' can make a claim on its own Web site, or on a Web site owned by another actor.

Public sphere and the Internet

The Internet and, more specifically, the World Wide Web (WWW), are often asserted to have the potential to provide a public forum where everyone is able to obtain and maintain a virtual presence (e.g. Mitra & Cohen, 1999: 180). Especially for the politically concerned – interests groups, NGOs, political parties and candidates, governments and lay citizens – the Internet potentially serves as a space where information can be shared, issues discussed and where the interested can engage in political action. These elements are often considered important components of the political process and accordingly the public sphere.⁷ Expectations have, however, lowered considerably since the rise and popularisation of the Internet in the 1990s. Early ‘cyber optimists’ like Rheingold (1993), who claimed that the Internet could fuel the process of democratisation through opportunities for deliberation and direct decision-making, have been succeeded by ‘cyber pessimists’ like Margolis & Resnick (2000), who warned that the Internet would even widen the gap between the engaged and the apathetic. Scholars like Norris (2000; 2001), Foot and Schneider (2002; Schneider & Foot, 2002) and Ward, Gibson and Lusoli (2003) take a more ‘middle ground’ position, suggesting that a balance should, and can be found between these two extremes. First, Foot and Schneider stress the importance of independent political Web sites developed by national and state advocacy groups, civic organizations and mainstream and alternative press. In their research, they concentrate upon the online structure of politically oriented Web sites, and the political action such online structure facilitates: information gathering and persuasion, political education, political talk, voter mobilization and candidate promotion (Foot & Schneider, 2002). Second, Norris mentions the existence of Web sites prepared by minor and fringe parties, and considers these an asset for democracy, enabling citizens to learn more about the range of electoral choices than was previously possible (Norris, 2003). In this context, she speaks of the emergence of a ‘virtual political system’ (Norris, 2001: 95).

During recent years, more and more Web sites, produced by a variety of political actors, have become available to citizens of European countries for political communication on European issues and events. Especially in the case of European (political) issues and events, it seems important for political actors to maintain Web sites as a means of communication with their supporters and with the electorate at large, since these issues are generally less intensely covered by the mass media than are national political issues (Hix, 2005: 193; Thomassen & Schmitt, 1997). In this paper, it is argued that similar to other mass media research, one could investigate the notion of Europeanization of the public sphere by looking at the amount, extent and form of communication about Europe on Web sites of political actors. Moreover, it is assumed that political actors express particular perspectives when discussing European issues and events on their Web sites, and that, in doing so, these online documents provide indicators for the Europe envisioned. In this manner, ‘interpretative reporting’ of

⁷ These components have been considered in other studies; see, e.g., Tsagarousianou (1999), Jankowski and Van Selm (2000) and Van Os & Jankowski (2004).

the mass media is circumvented (see also: Zimmermann & Koopmans, 2003); one can directly investigate the opinions and views of political actors themselves. Each actor type in the public sphere is then treated as an equal participant in the public sphere, including press organizations, who should not only be considered conveyors of information, or channels of communication through which other political actors communicate with the public, but as political actors who raise their own concerns (Page, 1996; Pfetsch, 2004).

Empirical research: Europeanization of the public sphere and the Web

This section elaborates on empirical research conducted within the online environment of the Web, and is structured around the previously mentioned three analytical elements of the Europeanization of the public sphere: visibility of communication, interpretative context, and connectivity of communication.

Visibility of communication

Zimmermann and Koopmans (2003) investigated the online spheres of political communication found via search engines within six EU member states⁸ and Switzerland. The study analysed the textual information and the prominence of ‘claimants’ on Web sites selected by search engines when searching keywords within six general policy categories⁹ and one ‘European integration’ category. All search strings included ‘2002’ in order to secure material recent to the time of the study. For the seven countries included, 64% of the claimants turned out to be state actors; only 7% of the claims found on the Web sites were made by NGOs and social movement actors. Institutionalised interest groups and social and educational groups together made up 20% of the claimants (Zimmermann & Koopmans, 2003: 25). Second, in order to determine the degree of Europeanization of political communication on the Internet, Zimmermann and Koopmans looked at various dimensions of transnationalism at the level of the Web site: (1) language used; (2) external linking to actors from other EU countries or from the EU level; (3) reference to actors and the information provided on the site from other EU countries or from the EU level; (4) reference to sources from other EU countries or from the EU level; (5) actors that become visible as ‘claimants’ on the site and their (European/national) scope; and (6) the perceived (European/national) scope of the issues they address. For the entire sample,¹⁰ 23% of the cases included a European dimension, either because one of the actor types involved was organised at the European level or because the issue was seen in a European frame of reference. Zimmermann and Koopmans refer to this situation as ‘vertical Europeanization’ (Zimmermann & Koopmans, 2003: 41-42). They distinguished a second form of Europeanization: ‘horizontal Europeanization’, meaning the establishment of horizontal communicative linkages between EU member states. A considerably lower

⁸ The EU member states included in the study were: Denmark, Spain, France, Italy, the Netherlands and the UK.

⁹ The six categories were: monetary politics, agriculture, immigration, troops deployment, retirement & pension schemes, education.

¹⁰ Six policy categories are included here, the category ‘European integration’ is excluded.

amount of this kind of Europeanization (10%) was found as compared to vertical Europeanization (Zimmermann & Koopmans, 2003: 42).

In contrast to Zimmermann and Koopmans who investigated online communication with regard to general policy issues, Van Os, Vergeer and Jankowski studied the specific online communication about Europe provided by a variety of political actors on their Web sites in the context of the 2004 EP election (Van Os, Vergeer, & Jankowski, forthcoming 2006). This study focused on nine EU countries, including three new member states.¹¹ For each country, in the two months before the 2004 EP election, coders searched for sites they expected to be involved in the 2004 EP election campaign by consulting search engines, politically-oriented portals and other depositories of potential Web site addresses. Stratified samples of 100 sites were drawn from the collection of identified sites per country within five actor-type categories: candidates, political parties, governmental sites, NGOs & labour unions, and other actors. For each site, four features were coded as contributors to the Europeanization of the public sphere: 'EP election content on front page', 'European content on front page', 'European content within the news section' and 'European content elsewhere on the site – within two links from the front page'. In this study only 67% of the Web sites within the national samples actually had EP election related content on the front pages at the time of the election. The researchers interpreted this limited referencing of the election as indication that the election was not considered particularly important for these political actors (Van Os, Vergeer & Jankowski, forthcoming 2006). Especially NGOs and labour unions, and actors in the category 'other' scored low on this feature: respectively 38% and 56%). However, when examining the second feature, 'European content on front page', which included not only EP election-related content, but also more general content on European issues, NGOs and labour unions scored much higher: 46% of the NGOs and labour unions provided this type of content on the front page. For all actor types together, the total was 73%. Apparently some actors considered Europe sufficiently important to note on their Web sites, but not the 2004 EP election. A possible explanation for this difference may be the negative reputation of the European Parliament regarding legitimacy and power in relation to the other EU governmental bodies.

Interpretative context

An exploratory investigation by Van Os (2005a, 2005b) is structured around the three frames or 'patterns of interpretation' identified by Eder, Kantner and Trenz (2000, 2002). Van Os investigated these frames in an online environment, focusing on Web sites maintained by the 11 largest French political parties in the context of the 2004 EP election. She argues, "it is through their Web sites that parties (as any other political actor) offer a particular perspective on European news, issues and events, suggesting whether and why discrete issues broadly concerning Europe are (or should be) socially and

¹¹ The countries included in this study were: Czech Republic, Finland, France, Hungary, Ireland, Italy, the Netherlands, Slovenia, and the UK.

politically relevant”(Van Os, 2005a). French parties may raise a European issue in the context of particular interests, identities or values, being nationally oriented, European or existing within other social groups or nation states. Included in the study are online-only texts plus images that accompany the text, produced by the party especially for this outlet, in which they elaborate on their positions regarding Europe. Van Os concludes that most political parties emphasized to some degree European interests in their online communication, usually in combination with an indication of benefits of European integration for the French electorate (Van Os, 2005a). Furthermore, only about half of the political parties addressed the 2004 EP election and its issues in affective terminology (e.g., using words such as ‘we’ and ‘our’ when referring to Europe), thereby suggesting a European orientation; others firmly expressed a French, national identity. Universal values, such as democratic principles and governmental transparency, were stressed by almost all parties in relation to the EU.

In a subsequent paper, Van Os (2005b) compared the clusters of French parties along the political spectrum in that country. An additional indicator was included, adapted from work by Eder, Kantner and Trenz, in examining whether Europe is portrayed as advantageous/positive, or merely disadvantageous/negative by parties in their online communication. This indicator provides a more qualitative measure as to whether actors communicate from a Europeanized perspective and reflect a sense of ‘belonging’ to Europe. Variation was observed in emphasis on the advantages and disadvantages of European integration, as expressed by political parties; this may partially be explained by the position of the parties within the French political spectrum. Sovereign parties and the extreme right party *Front National* mainly framed Europe and European issues as disadvantageous, stressing national interests and national identity. Parties at the other end of the political spectrum, the (extreme) left parties, provided a more mixed picture: both positive and negative aspects of Europe were addressed; this was often done in combination with expression of a distinct group identity, such as that of the working class. The three ‘mainstream’ French political parties (including *Parti Socialiste*) generally approved focus on EU economic development, such as the development of a pan-European internal market; as a result, these parties portrayed Europe mainly in a positive manner in their online communication; yet these parties communicated in a neutral, almost business-like sense, about Europe, stressing mainly interests and no affective terminology. Finally, the French Green party site referred frequently to universal values. This party seems to put much emphasis on Europe as a moral community. In a very general sense, this paper concludes with the suggestion that these findings show a certain degree of ‘feeling of belonging to Europe’ among some of the political parties in the sample, since these parties did communicate from a ‘Europeanized’ perspective (Van Os, 2005b: 15).

Connectivity of communication

In their 2004 report, Zimmermann, Koopmans and Schlecht investigated the EUROPUB conceptualisation of (horizontal versus vertical) Europeanization in an online environment by looking at hyperlink structures among Web sites of a pre-selected group of social actors already active in the

'offline' world, as related to the issues of agriculture, immigration and European integration in six EU member states and Switzerland.¹² The aim of this study was "to explore the degree to which newly emerged communicative and informative spaces on the Internet may contribute to a Europeanization of European public spheres" (Zimmermann, Koopmans, & Schlecht, 2004: 3). A Web crawler was employed that automatically collected the information (hyperlinks) from the selected URLs. Each (outgoing) hyperlink was then examined and coded for country of actor, actor type, party/issue affiliation and organizational scope (local, national, EU, etc.). The results suggest, first of all, that 50% of all hyperlinks were directed to national actors, followed by actors from other countries (19%). European actors received only 14% of the total number of hyperlinks (N = 17,951). Further, 68% of the hyperlinks provided by national actors directed visitors towards actors of the own country; only 11% of the hyperlinks provided by national actors directed visitors towards EU actors. Slightly more often hyperlinks to national actors from other countries (12%) were provided. More than half (54%) of the EU level actors provided hyperlinks to other EU level actors. According to Zimmermann, Koopmans and Schlecht, these figures suggest a low degree of horizontal Europeanization through hyperlinks. Forms of vertical Europeanization through hyperlinks from national actors to European actors were more developed, but strongly concentrated on state actors (Zimmermann, Koopmans & Schlecht, 2004: 26). The authors also report on the density of the hyperlinked groups of actors. No significant hyperlink relations appeared to exist between the countries in the sample. Significant vertical relationships were, however, observed between the national and EU level, the latter being mainly EU institutions.

A preliminary report about the debate around the European constitution in France in 2005, as played out on the Internet, has been prepared by Ghitalla and Fouetillou (2005). An assumption in this study is that those sites that address the same topics are the closest to each other in terms of hyperlinks. The objective was to obtain an overview of the political debate on the Web and to comprehend how the online debate on the European constitution was organized in terms of relations between the sites. Between 30 May and 1 June 2005, a Web crawler searched for Web site addresses by following hyperlinks present on other Web sites. The search started from a dozen sites addressing the European constitution identified by the researchers. Some 12,000 sites were collected, of which more than 6000 were in English and thus excluded from the study. Ultimately, 5000 sites were accessed and those sites dealing with the European constitution, 295, were selected for further study. These sites were classified as 'YES-sites', 'NO-sites', 'sites that do not take position', 'sites produced by institutions', and 'sites produced by media corporations'. First, two-thirds of the sites were produced by actors taking position against the European constitution ('NO-sites'). This is, the authors note, in contrast to the debate that emerged on the three largest television channels: in that medium, 70% of the speakers claimed to be in favour of the European constitution. Ghitalla and Fouetillou

¹² This study is also part of the EUROPUB project.

suggest that “the Web has served as a public outlet for those who feel rejected by the mainstream mass media of television.”¹³ They conclude that two, almost distinct “competitive communities’ emerged on the Web around the YES and NO camps. The NO camp turned out to be less open than the YES camp: 79% of the links provided on NO-sites were “intra-community”, in comparison to 64% for the YES camp.

Conclusions & suggestions for future research

In this paper, various conceptualisations of and empirical research about Europeanization of the public sphere are presented. In our interpretation, we place emphasis on political actors, including citizens, communicating about Europe. Despite the growing body of research focusing on the Europeanization of mass mediated communication, which investigates the visibility of European issues in the mass media, the interpretative context in which European issues are addressed and/or the structure of communication about Europe, almost no research has been conducted to examine online communication / Internet-based representations on European issues.

In the second part of this paper we have reviewed the few studies available on the Europeanization of political communication on the World Wide Web. As far as we know, only two studies have focused on the visibility of European issues on the Web. These studies apply different sampling methods and, as a result, are not comparable. Although network analysis as an approach to analyse the Web is becoming popular, only two studies could be found that investigate communicative interaction across national boundaries within ‘virtual’ Europe with this methodology. The focus and conclusions vary substantially: one study reports a concentration of state actors operating within a partially ‘Europeanized’ network of national and European level actors (Zimmermann, Koopmans & Schlecht, 2004); the other study notes two distinct competitive communities of mainly national actors emerging around one particular European issue (Ghitalla & Fouetillou, 2005).

Finally, an exploratory investigation conducted by the first author of this paper is reported with regard to the interpretative context in which political actors address European issues on their Web sites. Although more research is needed, this study provides a model for further investigation. As previously mentioned, the cross-national appearance of meanings, expectations and worldviews of ‘Europe’ should be considered indicators of the Europeanization of the public sphere. We intend to extend this study on the portrayal of Europe on Web sites of French political parties and include political parties from other European countries. Less institutionalised actors will also be included: NGOs, interest groups and social movement organizations. In a subsequent study, we will focus on these actors in the context of the referendum on the European constitution held in France and the Netherlands (May-June 2005) and investigate the portrayal of Europe within online communication. Much more research, in other words, is needed in order to assess the potential of the Web to

¹³ This text has been translated from French by the first author.

incorporate or enhance a Europeanized public sphere. Research is needed within all three areas discussed in this paper: visibility of communication about Europe on the Web, the interpretative context in which European issues are addressed on Web sites of political actors, and the online structure of communication about Europe.

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