

“Bringing Civil Society In: The European Union and the rise of representative democracy”

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Multi-level accountability via civil society associations?

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Introduction

The EU, above all the Commission, has been actively advocating the involvement of civil society in European policy-making. In recent years the lead principles of good European governance have been translated into corresponding norms, rules and procedures that regulate the exchange between EU institutions and civil society organisations. Whereas *openness*, *transparency*, and *participation* have been advanced by the Commission’s consultation regime, the institutionalisation of *accountability* is still deficient.

The paper will (1.) outline the accountability problems in EU governance from a theoretical perspective; (2.) suggest a multi-level concept of accountability with the support of civil society organisations; (3.) present findings from an empirical research project on the contribution of civil society organisations to information and communication which is a key element in any accountability relation.

Since EU policy-making is dominated by negotiations between a multitude of actors that span over different territorial levels of jurisdiction and because the capacity of the European Parliament to exact accountability is considered to be deficient, it has been suggested that electoral accountability ought to be supplemented by other forms of political – as distinguished from legal or administrative - accountability. CSOs are seen as agents of accountability but the exact role attributed to them differs with the different concepts of democracy. From the perspective of *liberal democracy* CSOs serve democratic accountability

* The theoretical part has been developed in Kohler-Koch 2008 and the empirical part is based on Christina Altides research within the DEMOCIV project at the MZES, Mannheim University; see http://www.mzes.uni-mannheim.de/frame.php?oben=titel_e.html&links=n_projekte_e.php&inhalt=projekte/auswahl_e.php; 20.02.2009.

by acting as watchdogs alerting their members or constituencies to any infringements on their preferences and by holding public agents on account in the name of those whom they represent. From the perspective of *deliberative democracy* the role attributed to CSOs is to promote the emergence of a European trans-national public sphere through active and controversial debates in public. In both conceptions CSO communication has to bridge the multi-level system of the EU.

In order to gain empirical insight we engaged in a comparative research project and investigated how CSOs inform and communicate with members (or constituencies) and with the wider public. We compared the information and communication activities of different types of associations concerning EU policy issues of different salience in four member states.

Conceptualising accountability

It is widely acknowledged that accountability is a key to making democracy work. We start with a parsimonious definition of accountability: According to Mark Bovens (2007a: 450) “Accountability is a relationship between an actor and a forum, in which the actor has an obligation to explain and to justify his or her conduct, the forum can pose questions and pass judgement, and the actor has to face consequences.” Unfortunately, when applied to the European Union (EU) we face a reality that is far more complex than this straightforward relationship suggests. The EU is noted for its policy-making by negotiations in networks that take in a multitude of actors and span over different territorial levels of jurisdiction. Yannis Papadopoulos (2007) has drawn our attention to the many accountability problems of network governance. The multi-level feature of EU governance and the composition of policy networks work to the detriment of accountability: The lack of visibility of the responsible actors impedes accountability, but what makes matters worse is that many actors share responsibility and only some of them are, at least in principle, politically accountable while in practice they are more often difficult to reach due to a long chain of delegation from the level of citizens up.

Network governance is not unique to the EU or international relations (Bovens 2007b). It has been spread also in the European member states by upgrading the executive and by increasing stakeholder participation in the attempt to profit from the expert knowledge of private actors and to ensure compliance through cooperation instead of through hierarchy (Pierre and Peters 2000). Why is it that we are less worried about the accountability trap of network governance at the national as compared to the EU level? The reason is that, despite the lack of visibility

and the “problem of many hands” (Bovens 2007a: 457) obscuring responsibility, government must nevertheless take the blame while party competition and elections ensure that those in power will have to face consequences. The long chain of delegation is cut short by (the?) administrators’ expectation of accountability and those administrators are usually well aware that they are working ‘in the shadow’ of potential politicization: political issues are always susceptible to contestation and a spill over into a wider public debate. By contrast to politics at the national level, politics at the EU-level shy away from politicization; the EU is not a majoritarian system responsive to elections and party competition. The EU polity rather functions according to the logic of consociation; it is geared towards consensus and derives legitimacy from uncontested expert knowledge and direct links to ‘civil society’. It is consistent with the logic of consociationalism that, since the turn of the century, the ‘involvement of civil society’ has gained high prominence in EU governance (Commission 2001). Civil society is seen as a remedy for the democratic deficit of the Union, enhancing democratic participation and accountability. But how, if at all, does civil society remedy to the democratic accountability problems of EU governance?

The two faces of civil society

When examining the widely alleged virtues of civil society for EU democracy, we have to sort out the many uses and ambiguities of the term. Opting for a parsimonious approach we can conceptualise civil society’s relationship to the EU in two ways.¹ Firstly, there is the concept of the emergent active citizenry of the Union that constitutes the crucial democratic forum at which decision-makers are held to account. Both liberal and deliberative theories share the view that democracies need a demos with active citizens but deliberative theories bring civil society to the fore. It is generating the public sphere, evaluating EU governance and passing judgement in public discourse. But while communicative power may be generated in the public sphere, in this conception it is difficult to make out a civil society actor. By a second, more agential concept, civil society is equated with civil society organisations. Only *organised* civil society can be the relevant other in the above mentioned accountability process and as such it is an important actor in both theories of democracy. Civil society organisations (CSOs) can pose questions and pass judgement, but it cannot be taken for granted that CSOs can impose consequences on the responsible actor “to turn matters right”. Furthermore, even if CSOs had the capacity to exert sanctions, it would constitute a case of accountability, but not necessarily of democratic accountability.

¹ For a survey based assessment of the two dimensions of civil society see Kohler-Koch and Quittkat (2009).

Moreover, the potential role of CSOs in EU accountability itself can be conceptualised in quite different ways. They can be instrumental as agents of public accountability, either as intermediaries of public accountability or as accountability actors in their own right; and they can contribute to make accountability a ‘virtue’ that is alive and strong in EU governance.

But before exploring the potential accountability functions of CSOs we should clarify what qualifies an organisation as a ‘civil society organisation’. It is widely agreed that CSOs share some common features: They are *voluntary* associations; *independent*, i. e. not bound by instructions from outside bodies; and they are *not-for-profit*. Furthermore, civil society organisations are expected to *act in public* and in a *civil* way. In this very broad understanding also associations representing trade, industry, and agriculture or professional interests qualify as CSOs since they are not profit oriented despite the profit orientation of their members. Thus in principle, they are not different from trade unions or many grass roots organisations, which also represent the interests of their memberships. The European Commission has propagated this relatively wide understanding of CSOs in the White Paper on Governance (Commission 2001: 14).²

CSO as agents of public accountability

The Union has made much progress with respect to transparency by providing easy access to documents, giving information on the decision making process through the publication of legislative roadmaps, and opening comitology and expert groups. But transparency is just a necessary and not a sufficient prerequisite for public accountability. Democratic accountability needs publicity so that citizens may be alerted and able to judge whether or not the conduct of those in power matches their interests and aspirations. CSOs are seen as agents of accountability but the exact role attributed to them differs with the different concepts of democracy (Kohler-Koch 2007; Finke 2008).

- *Deliberative democracy* in the tradition of Habermas suggests that democratic decision making, ideally, rests on *public deliberation aiming at reasoned consensus*. Consequently, the role attributed to CSOs is to promote through active and controversial debates in public the emergence of a European trans-national public sphere. The presentation of a wide diversity of views on the essence of envisaged policies and their likely consequences is supposed to further the ‘enlightened

² The category of ‘non-governmental organisation’ (NGO) is by tradition defined more narrowly; in addition to the general criteria mentioned above, NGOs are to serve *public interests*. They are expected to be dedicated to the pursuit of rights and values constitutive for society or to act in the interest of third parties.

understanding' of citizens and enable them to pass a rational and well reasoned judgement. Just because the diversity of views is so essential, all different kinds of CSOs are supposed to participate in this debate. It is a controversial issue whether all associations should be included irrespective of whether they represent economic or social interests or pursue rights and value based political ends or whether self-interested lobby groups should be excluded. Since in our view publicity and reciprocity are the key elements in public deliberation that serves democracy (Hüller 2009), we take an inclusive approach. CSOs' contribution to democratic accountability thus depends on their capacity and willingness to contribute to reasoned public deliberation.

- From the perspective of *liberal democracy* CSOs serve democratic accountability by acting as watchdogs alerting their members or constituencies to any infringements on their political concerns and by holding public agents on account in the name of those whom they represent. CSOs are thus instrumental in a pluralistic system where each CSO (or an advocacy coalition of CSOs) demands accountability in order to induce EU institutions to be responsive to the preferences of their membership. When assessing the democratic value of CSOs' engagement, by contrast to the deliberative democracy approach, it is the nature of the association and the equal (or un-equal) endowment with resources that matters. Civil society associations acting in the public interest get better marks than CSOs defending the focussed interests of their own membership. The yardstick for democratic accountability is the fair and equal representation of the plurality of interests.

From the perspective of deliberative democracy and also from the perspective of liberal democracy information and communication is a central issue. Only when CSOs are an efficient information provider and communication broker they qualify as agents that further democratic accountability.

Analysing the communication performance of CSOs

In our empirical study we wanted to explore to what extent CSOs engage in European public-policy-formulation and can be considered to act as "agents of accountability" – be it in a deliberative or a liberal understanding. We thus sought to find out, in how far CSOs who actively participated in consultation-procedures by the European Commission could be held accountable either by their members or by the broader public for their European engagement. Information and communicating has to reach these publics and, based on sound evidence, the

national associations are best suited to provide it as there is “no genuinely transnational public sphere at the EU-level” (Kriesi et al. 2007, p.52). National CSOs are expected not just to focus their communication at their members but also to “target the nationally-based mass media in order to get news coverage and to attract the public’s attention and support” (ibid.). The research project accounted for this by exploring the information and communication of selected CSOs addressed to their members and the media as it can be retrieved through a content analysis of associational websites and the resonance in the national press media. Altogether, the research was designed as a two-step-analysis.

Analysing the associational websites

In the first step, we analysed information provided on the websites of 31 national interest associations. We were interested to what extent and on what issues these 31 associations provided information on their participation in EU-policy-making – i.e. Commission consultation procedures. We selected associations in the four largest EU member states, namely Germany, Great Britain, France and Italy in order to control such variables as political relevance and resources which come with the size of countries and organisations (see *table 1*). In order to differentiate the impact of high or low salience, we selected two rather politicised consultations – the Green Paper on “Labour Law” and “Labelling” – and two relatively low politicised consultations – namely the Green Paper on “Active Inclusion” and “Health and Diets”.

Each of the selected 31 national associations participated in at least two of the four selected consultation procedures, either directly as national organisation or indirectly by their European umbrella association. Thus, we could examine whether the different levels of active involvement at EU-level had any effect on the character of their communication activities at national level. The selection of associations of different member states furthermore allowed us to control for communication differences caused by varying associational traditions. Associations in Germany and the UK are known for their active involvement in EU affairs while France and Italy are characterised by a more reserved attitude. Additionally, we differentiated between different types of interest associations representing business, trade unions and public interests and we selected a large or established, as well as a smaller or less established association for each associational type. This differentiation followed considerations that particular associational cultures or the unequal distribution of resources and associational power could have a decisive impact on the communication performance of an association. We are well aware that the large choice of variables makes it difficult to attribute the effect of the independent on the dependent variables but since we wanted to

generate rather than test hypotheses and are well informed on the cases we have studied, we consider this research design to be appropriate.

Type of association	Nationality	Germany	UK	France	Italy	EU umbrella association
	Consultation					
Business interest associations	Labour Law Active Inclusion	Bundesvereinigung der Deutschen Arbeitgeberverbände e.V. – <i>BDA</i>	Confederation of British Industry – <i>CBI</i>	Mouvement des Entreprises de France – <i>MEDEF</i>	Confederazione Generale dell' Industria Italiana – <i>CONFINDUSTRIA</i>	Confederation of European Business – <i>Business Europe</i>
	Health & Diets Labelling	Bund für Lebensmittelrecht & Lebensmittelkunde – <i>BLL</i>	Food and Drink Federation – <i>fdf</i>	Association Nationale de l'Industrie Alimentaire – <i>ANIA</i>	Federazione Italiana dell'Industria Alimentare – <i>FEDERALIMENTARE</i>	Confederation of the Food & Drink Industries of the EU – <i>CIAA</i>
Trade Unions	Labour Law Active Inclusion	Deutscher Gewerkschaftsbund Bundesvorstand – <i>DGB</i>	Trades Union Congress – <i>TUC</i>	Confédération Française Démocratique du Travail – <i>CFDT</i>	Confederazione Generale Italiana del Lavoro – <i>CGIL</i>	European Trade Union Confederation – <i>ETUC</i>
	Health & Diets Labelling	Gewerkschaft Nahrung-Genuss-Gaststätten – <i>NGG</i>	Britain's General Union – <i>GMB</i>	Fédération des Services CFDT – <i>FdS-CFDT</i>	Federazione Italiana dei Lavoratori Commercio, Turismo Servizi – <i>FILCAMS-CGIL</i>	European Federation of Food, Agriculture & Tourism Trade Unions – <i>EFFAT</i>
General interest associations	Labour Law Active Inclusion	Bundesarbeitsgemeinschaft der Senioren-Organisationen – <i>BAGSO</i> Kuratorium Deutsche Altershilfe – <i>KDA</i>	Age Concern England (National Council on Ageing) – <i>NCA</i> National Pensioners Convention – <i>NPC</i>	Fédération Nationale des Associations de Retraités – <i>FNAR</i> Union Française des Retraités – <i>UFC</i>	Associazione Diritti Anziani – <i>ADA</i> Associazione Nazionale Terza Eta' Attiva – <i>ANTEAS</i>	The European Older People's Platform – <i>AGE</i>
	Health & Diets Labelling	Verbraucherzentrale Bundesverband – <i>VZBV</i> ; <i>Stiftung Warentest</i>	National Consumer Council – <i>NCC</i> ; <i>Which?</i>	Que Choisir – <i>UFC</i> ; Consommation, Logement et Cadre de Vie – <i>CNCV</i>	<i>Altroconsumo</i>	European Consumers Organisation – <i>BEUC</i>

Table 1: National interest associations, structured along nationality, associational type and participation in different Commission consultation procedures.

Analysing the national press coverage

In the second step, we examined the extent to which the EU-related activities of the associations are transparent to the broader public by analysing the national associations' presence in the national press coverage of the above mentioned four Commission consultations. Following a standard procedure in press analysis, we selected two national quality newspapers – a more conservative and a more left-oriented paper – per country: the *Süddeutsche Zeitung* (SZ) and the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* (FAZ) for Germany; the

Guardian und the *Times* for the UK; *Le Figaro* and *Le Monde* for France; and *La Repubblica* and *Corriere della Sera* for Italy. Each paper was screened for articles that appeared in the timeframe of the four different consultation procedures and addressed either the consultation procedures directly or the policy issues closely related to the consultation topic. Altogether, we found 358 relevant articles (see *table 2*). They were analysed with respect to their mentioning the selected associations, and how these references compared to the mentioning of other political actors.

	German Press		French Press		British Press		Italian Press		Articles total
	SZ	FAZ	Figaro	Le Monde	Guardian	Times	Repubblica	Corriere	
Labour Law	15	26	13	28	6	6	9	12	115
Active Inclusion	11	18	4	11	7	3	6	6	66
Labelling	25	24	16	15	10	17	6	10	113
Health & Diets	13	6	2	8	7	14	1	3	54
Articles total	64	74	35	62	30	40	22	31	358
	138		97		70		53		

Table 2: List of selected press articles per country, newspaper and case study.

Empirical Results

The results present a sobering picture with regard to information provided and channelled into the wider public.

Associational communication on consultation participation

The analysis of the associations' web-based information and communication activities led to five central observations. First: communication seems to be a *matter of resources and organisation* (or established-ness). Market-related actors (business interest associations, trade unions) have been found to be more actively engaging in communication than general interest actors. This is not only due to the more frequent active participation of national business associations and trade unions in the Commission consultation procedures (on top of the activities of their European representatives³) compared to public interest associations. After all, a number of web-based information on the selected EU policy was provided by the latter (particularly in the less politicised issues, Active Inclusion or Health and Diets), even if these associations had not participated in the consultation on their own account.

³ All three associations types examined were represented in the consultation procedures by their European umbrella organisations. The market related associations however showed a much stronger tendency to add "national" position papers to those of the EU umbrellas than the public interest associations.

In fact, we have encountered not only differences between business and trade unions on the one hand and general interest actors on the other, but also differences among general interest associations. Here, too, the organisational capacity and established-ness seems to play an important role. The eight national public interest associations being represented by the *European Older People's Platform* (the so called *AGE-Platform*) in the Commission's consultation on Labour Law and Active Inclusion, for example, have been the least active in terms of both, direct participation *and* web-communication on the given policy issues. In contrast, the national public associations directly or indirectly involved in the consultation on Labelling and Health and Diets, were considerably more "communicative" on this topic. These associations (like the consumer associations *VZBV*, *Que Quoisir*, *Which?*, and *Altroconsumo*) are better established and organised than those representing the rights of elderly people – something which is also reflected at the European level, where they are represented by a formal organisation (*BEUC*) and not just a network.

Communicating what happens in Brussels and explaining what the EU organisation does in order to serve the interests of members, however, is not only a matter of resources and organisation. It is also a *matter of the cultural environment* in which the respective national associations are embedded. In this respect the empirical analysis reveals considerable differences between the intensity of web-based information provided on EU-consultation issues by German and British associations on the one hand, and French and Italian associations, on the other hand. These differences cut cross all CSO types, but are particularly noticeable among economic interest associations and trade unions.⁴ This may be explained on grounds of different associational cultures in different national political systems. While Germany and the UK have a strong tradition of associational participation in policy-making, France and Italy are rather 'closed' policy-making systems, in which associations do not have a prominent role to play.⁵

Thirdly, the associations' communication performance varied according to the *subject* a consultation is about. Depending on the issue different actors engage in communications more prominently. As expected, in the consultations on "Labour Law" and "Active Inclusion" we found a clear prevalence of business and trade union communication compared to communication activities of general interest associations'. In comparison, general interest associations were rather active in communicating "Labelling" and "Health and Diets"

⁴ In fact, German trade unions have an exceptionally good web-presentation compared to all others in each of the four cases.

⁵ Another explanation could be the differentiated use of the internet though previously existing differences have been levelled out in the meantime.

(together with business associations), while the trade unions (with the exception of Germany) did not provide any form of online information on the matter.

The associations' communicative engagement quite obviously also depends on the *national news agenda* in the given period: Concerning the issue of labelling for example, Germany's consumer organisations showed a considerably poorer communication performance than the consumer organisations from the UK, France and Italy. This observation might be related to the fact, that at that time, Germany's news agenda concerning consumer issues was governed by various meat scandals and the issue of the "Flaschenpfand". On the other hand, Italian associations – not overwhelmingly communicative in total – showed a particular interest in providing information on the topic of "Health and Diets" – possibly because the subject of obesity has also been an issue of national debate at that time.

The level of politicisation of the four consultation issues did not seem to have a noticeable effect on the communicative performance of the associations. We have registered a higher level of active participation in the more politicised consultation topics "Labour Law" and "Labelling" compared to the less politicised topics "Active Inclusion" and "Health and Diets". This greater involvement, however, is not reflected in the intensity of website-information provided by the participating associations on these topics. On the basis of the limited choice of case studies, one might even say that general interest associations in fact have communicated more intensely on the little politicised issues than on the highly politicised issues.

Finally, from the perspective of accountability we have to ask if the information provided is related to the associations' performance. The empirical findings provide clear cut evidence that this is hardly the case. Irrespective of the fact that associational communication (via the public accessible websites⁶) ranges anyway at a rather low level the reference to the associations' activities is even smaller. The national CSOs might take up the substantive issues which have been dealt with in the EU consultations but they do not report what part they have played in it. Only 17 of 67 of the information items that were found to be relevant on the associations' web pages explicitly referred to the associations' positions on the respective issues or even to the mere fact that they participated in the respective consultation process initiated by the European Commission.

⁶ One has to be careful with general statements as 19 of 31 associational websites offer domains that are reserved for members and can only be accessed by a special password given to members only. These members' areas could therefore not be part of the analysis. It is yet possible that they offer the kind of information we were looking for.

In the case of “Labelling”, for example, 10 of 15 associations of the selection pool (seven of whom participated directly in the consultation procedure) were found to provide online information on the subject.⁷ However, when analysed more closely, it became evident that less than half of the direct participants have actually publicised their actual positions or mentioned their participation in the consultation procedures. Only the *BLL* and *Which?* explicitly referred to the Commission “Green Paper on Labelling”; the *FDF* publicised somewhat belatedly a press release on retailers discussing the EU food labelling revision with a link to their official positions.⁸ The remaining four directly involved participants did not mention the consultation procedure at all. The *VBZB* publicised a guest commentary by the Commissioner for Consumer Protection and Health Markos Kyprianou (“The power of the consumers”) in the bi-monthly associational magazine (May 2006). *Que Choisir* referred to Labelling issues only at national level. The *CLCV* as well mentioned a national campaign aiming at an improved legibility of labels (13. May 2005) and reported on a survey on food labelling that had been ordered by the French ministry in view of an announced legislative EU-reform in this policy area. The *NCC*, finally, informed merely on the participation of the national Food Safety Agency in the consultation on food labelling; the participation of its own Scottish member in the same policy area does not become manifest neither on the *NCC*, nor on the *SCC*-website, despite a link to “consultation responses”. Last but not least, the three associations communicating on labelling – despite the fact that they have not directly participated in the EU consultation – refer a lot to the legislative proposals resulting from the consultation procedure from 2007 onwards (regarding the labelling of food, origin, food safety or allergens), be it by explanatory notes, press releases or official associational position statements towards these proposals (see *ANIA* 06.02.2007 and *NGG* 28.03.2008). *Altroconsumo* is even open with its non-direct participation, stating on the 13th of March 2007 explicitly that its positions are represented by its European counterpart, *BEUC*.

Altogether, the public web-communication of associational positions is limited, both with regard to members and with regard to the media. On top, position information is mostly provided ex-post only – that is after they have been sent off to the European Commission, or even after the consultation has ended. Perhaps the more sensitive process of associational opinion formation could have been tracked in the password-secured members’ areas of the

⁷ Only *Federalimentare* and the trade-unions, except for the Germans, did not provide any information on the subject.

⁸ In fact, the *BLL* website includes a thematic site on the special issue of labelling, with explanations on the current state of EU-regulations, information on the General Directorates responsible for this subject in the European Commission, pointing at the consultation procedure in March 2006 and presenting the associations’ position on the matter.

majority of websites. The public web-communication, however, is definitely not aimed at engaging members in a debate and eventually in the consultation procedures, but at best to report on previous activities and de-brief them with regard to the associational position on a certain topic.

Media resonance

Altogether, in all the articles addressing the EU consultations we found only very few references to associations - be it explicitly or indirectly. Consequently, it is very difficult to draw general conclusions regarding the media coverage on associational activities. In fact, the only general statement we can give is that irrespective of the policy issues and the countries of origin associations hardly play any role in media coverage on EU-related topics. This rather sobering finding can be complemented by a number of more detailed observations.

Thus, we found that in general associations who had directly been involved in the consultation procedure at EU-level displayed a higher rate of press coverage than associations not having directly participated. In general, the press material mentioned 20 of 23 associations that directly participated in the consultation procedures at least once, and ‘ignored’ 33 of 47 associations that did not directly participate in the consultation procedures. The remaining 17 associations⁹ were either not named despite their direct participation (the *BLL* in both consultations as well as the *NCC*), or mentioned despite their non-participation. Out of the 14 latter associations, 8 were French associations in the French press (*ANIA*, *MEDEF*, *CFDT*, *CGT*, *CLCV*, *Que Choisir*). However, also Italian associations (*Federalimentare*, *CGIL*, *Altroconsumo*) and the British *CBI* and *TUC* belonged to this category. On the basis of the limited data, it is difficult to draw conclusions on whether direct participation in fact triggers media interest or whether those who participate (and in some cases even chose not to directly participate) in EU consultations anyhow already enjoy the media’s special attention in their home countries. The press references to the 14 associations that have not participated in the consultation procedure, however, suggest that there is more to getting covered than merely the direct participation at EU consultations. In fact, some associations seem to be ‘established political instances’ in their national media, while others are not.

This impression is confirmed when we look at the relation between associational website-communication activities, on the one hand, and their media coverage, on the other hand. In fact, the associations who had engaged more actively in the communication of certain policy

⁹ The total of 70 associations stems from the fact that we analysed 35 associations, each in two different consultation procedures.

topics were *not* necessarily more present in the press coverage. Web-based communication does not seem to affect media coverage in any way. The French and Italian business associations and trade unions, for example, are cited no less in their national media than their considerably more ‘communicative’ counterparts in Germany and Great Britain. Other associations, again, who had been rather active in issuing press releases and providing the web-user with information, have not managed to ‘enter’ news coverage. In other words, some associations are regularly asked their opinion or quoted, no matter whether they have issued a press release or not. Others, who do not enjoy this privileged media attention can issue as many press releases as they like – they will not be ‘heard’.¹⁰

If looking at the media coverage more closely, it becomes quite evident that the media have a clear preference when and whom they quote or at least refer to. On issues which are dominated by established social or political cleavages they tend to refer to the respective conflict partners. Accordingly, press coverage on the social policy consultations (Labour Law, Active Inclusion) did regularly point to the interest cleavage between business interests and trade unions (most often referred to globally as “employers” vs. “employees” rather than by giving their concrete national names¹¹), whereas none of the general interest associations was ever mentioned in this context. Regarding the consumer protection consultations (Labelling, Health and Diets), again, press mainly reports on the political conflict between business and consumer interests; in this conflict trade unions had no role to play.

Again, the level of *politicisation* of the topic is little relevant for the intensity of the media coverage of associational positions and activities. Salience does make a difference regarding the media coverage of a particular issue in general. We have found about twice as double articles on Labour Law (115) and Labelling (113) compared to Active Inclusion (66) and Health and Diets (54). Yet, the intensity of the press coverage seems not to affect the media’s attention to the national associations’ (increased) contribution at EU level. The media role and presence of national associations cannot be generally attributed to the political salience of an issue.

As much as associational web-communication displays *cultural divergences*, as much does associational press resonance do so, as well. We have encountered a noticeably greater media significance of associations in the British and German press than in the French and German press. We have also mentioned that trade unions figure under the general term of „employees“

¹⁰ Although one has to acknowledge that online press information, press releases and the online-announcement of press conferences are usually complemented by other active press strategies, such as the establishment and maintenance of personal contacts to journalists – activities which we did not explore.

¹¹ A fact that suggests that these associations are well established in the national societies.

especially the case in Germany and Great Britain, where employees are organised in centralised trade unions. There is no or hardly any equivalent in the French and Italian press. Instead, when articles refer to positions in the interest of the employees they rather mention the name of particular trade unions – which is not very surprising given the competition between several national trade unions. The mentioning of consumer organisations also differs considerably across countries. They are very present in the British press (16 of 21 articles in Health and Diets and 7 of 27 articles in Labelling include associational mentions¹²); not so present in the French and German press (in the French press associations are mentioned in 5 of 10 articles on “Health and Diets”, but only in two of 31 articles on “Labelling”; in the German Press, the figure only in 2 of 11 articles on “Health and Diets”, and in 7 of 49 articles on “Labelling” ; and hardly present in the Italian press (only two articles in total).

Finally, we compared the number of references to national associations to the number of references to other political actors in the national media (see *table 3*). This comparison allows a further interesting insight in the relative role of national associations in political press coverage. Compared to the number of press articles selected as relevant for each country, the UK press coverage displays the highest intensity of associational mentions (92 mentions in 70 articles). Only the national government is more often mentioned as a political actor in the selected issues (138 mentions). The European Commission comes third with 81 mentions in the British press¹³. In the German press, we have found even 99 references to associations. They are, however, spread over 95 articles and their number is inferior to references to the national government (120 mentions) and references to the European Commission (159 mentions). German associations are thus perceivable actors in the German media, yet only at third place if compared to the other two political actors. In France, too, the Commission plays the central role in the media coverage on the four selected issues (114 mentions). The associations range at second place (74 mentions). It is noteworthy that they are more present than the national government (54 mentions) – which is somewhat surprising in view of the less established associational culture in France. Finally, associations are least mentioned in the Italian press (23 mentions). This is, on the one hand, to be attributed to the limited number of Italian articles that were analysed (only 53 compared to 107 articles in the French press). On the other hand, within this limited press material, the 23 references to associations can be contrasted to almost thrice as many references to the national government (63 mentions). This

¹² One has to say that these two issues figured rather prominently in the British quality press compared to the other two policy issues (21 and 27 articles on Health and Diets and Labelling vis-à-vis 12 and 10 articles on Labour Law and Active Inclusion).

¹³ We have also looked for references to the European Parliament and the European Council. But these two actors were so seldom mentioned, that we did not include them in the table 3.

seems to confirm the low political importance of associations in Italian political press coverage.

		SZ / FAZ	Figaro / Le Monde	Guardian / Times	Repubblica / Corriere	In total
Labour Law	Associations	59	46	24	9	138
	Government	55	31	19	32	137
	Commission	79	35	11	11	136
Labelling	Associations	23	6	13	6	48
	Government	21	6	19	5	51
	Commission	47	54	17	1	119
Active Inclusion	Associations	11	7	8	3	29
	Government	25	14	37	26	102
	Commission	15	8	35	1	59
Health and Diets	Associations	6	15	47	5	73
	Government	19	3	63	0	85
	Commission	18	17	18	0	53
In total per actor	Associations	99	74	92	23	288
	Government	120	54	138	63	375
	Commission	159	114	81	13	367
In total		378	242	311	99	1030

Table 3: Overview of different actor mentions in the national press.

Conclusion

We investigated how CSOs give account of EU level interest representation to their members and constituencies and to what extent they managed to attain publicity. Our data present a sobering picture: Neither do CSOs engage particularly energetically in conveying the content of EU consultations and their participation therein to their members or the larger public. Nor do national (print) media give coverage to civil society participation in EU consultations, even if relevant information is provided. If the media take up a controversial issue the diversity of views is reduced to the conventional cleavage lines. Thus it is plausible to assume that publicity is mainly shaped by the (national) communication traditions of the media system and not by the input from CSOs. Consequently, in our assessment CSOs have only a limited role to play in strengthening EU accountability.

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