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# The EU as a public sphere

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## Abstract

This Living Review takes stock of our current theoretical and empirical knowledge with respect to a European public sphere. It first outlines the notion of a public sphere and the incompatibilities between the notion of a public sphere in the nation state and the current state of European integration. It is then argued why a notion of a (Europeanized national) public space for debate between citizens and with power-holders is eminent for the legitimacy and accountability of the EU.

A three-fold typology is proposed that organizes previous research on the European public sphere: the Utopian, the Elitist and the Realist perspective. The diverging conclusions stemming from extant research are reviewed in the light of the methodological pluralism in the studies. It is demonstrated that most signs of Europeanization of national public spheres stem from studies focusing on the quality broadsheet press, whereas studies focusing on the popular press, television and new media provide some, albeit limited evidence (yet) of a Europeanization trend. The review looks ahead in both theoretical and methodological terms and also assesses the consequences of the (absence of) a European public sphere and current policy initiatives in this area.

**Keywords:** European identity, European public space, Europeanization, legitimacy, media, multilevel governance, public opinion

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**24 August 2012:** This Living Review is an updated version of the original from 2007. 24 references were added. All parts of the text were revised, with paragraphs added on the coverage of the 2009 European Parliament elections, the role of journalism and online sources in the EU public sphere.

**Page 7:** Added definition by de Beus (2010)

**Page 7:** Added reference to Koopmans and Statham (2010).

**Page 8:** Expanded paragraph below.

**Page 9:** Added concluding statement.

**Page 9:** Added reference to Stepinska (2011).

**Page 11:** Removed statement: “In addition to Greece, the elections were most visible in Denmark, Slovakia, Austria, and Ireland, taking up more than 15% of the news in these countries. In addition to Germany, the elections were least visible in Belgium and the Czech Republic, where less than 5% of the news was devoted to the elections.

**Page 11:** Note on Schuck et al. (2011) replaces statement: “Also the results for the new member states give a rather positive outlook. Visibility was relatively high, both of EU news and EU actors. Furthermore, the tone towards the EU was considerably more positive in the new member states. However, if these findings mainly have to be ascribed to the novelty of the elections in the new countries, then caution with respect to the optimism is warranted.

**Page 13:** Added paragraph on ‘EU-ropean journalism’.

**Page 14:** Added paragraph on ‘EU-rope online’.

**Page 16:** Updated closing note.

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## 1 Introduction

Research on the emergence and nature of a European public sphere is accumulating, but divided. In some sense, a European public sphere can be said to have existed for centuries, long before the establishment of the European community, the EU, and its institutions. From the late 17th century onwards the ideas of European civilizations were the object of deliberation across Europe and a pan-European elite public sphere emerged in the 18th century with academia, churches and courts. In the 19th and 20th century the public spheres of Europe expanded and are now more integrated and linked than ever before (Schulz-Forberg 2003).

However, today a public sphere is most commonly referred to as a space or arena for (broad, public) deliberation, discussion, and engagement in societal issues. This is also how the term will be used in this review. In the context of European integration the underlying assumption is that a shared European space, a European public sphere, may contribute to the public legitimacy of the EU polity and its policies, in much the same ways as have been suggested for national public spheres.

In this Living Review the notion of a public sphere is discussed, in particular in the light of European integration and a European polity. Extant research in this field is organized into different strands of research. The review takes stock of our current knowledge and in the discussion future avenues for research are outlined. In addition, the effects and implications of a public sphere are discussed and current policy initiatives are reviewed.

### 1.1 The public sphere

The public sphere is in the words of Fossum and Schlesinger (2007), ‘intimately linked’ to democracy. Research on the public sphere often departs from Jürgen Habermas’ work and in particular his “The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere” (Habermas 1962). The original Habermasian notion of a public sphere conceives it as an arena for ‘the perception, identification, and treatment of problems affecting the whole society’ (Habermas 1962, 1996). It is here that ‘new problem situations can be perceived, discourses aimed at achieving self-understanding can be conducted, and collective identities and need interpretations can be circulated’.

The term ‘public sphere’ itself has sparked a long debate about the appropriate translation and implied meaning of ‘Öffentlichkeit’. Some have argued that “openness” or “openicity” are more accurate terms. Moreover the notion of the public sphere has been critiqued (e.g., Fraser 1990). Implicitly the term refers to events that are open and accessible to all. It has a meaning of making something public or discussing something in public, but there are constraints and limits to any version of a public sphere which is typically not open and accessible to all.

Several scholars have pointed out that there is a gap between the theoretical (and ideal) and observable (and ‘real’) public sphere. Some of these criticisms relate to the public sphere relying on the assumption that public and private is distinguished. However, since this boundary is rather fluid and arbitrary there is a bias as to what issues are ‘admitted’ to the public sphere (Kunelius and Sparks 2001). Similarly the public sphere has been critiqued for being inherently based on reason and rationality. This basis of the public sphere, neglecting emotions and passions, also causes bias. Others have pointed out that the public sphere notion is too focused on discussion vis-à-vis action. The relationship and step from discussion and deliberation to political engagement and action is poorly defined. Finally, the public sphere largely assumes homogeneity and consensus whereas public and political life is often characterized by heterogeneity and disagreement (de Vreese 2006).

There is a strong body of scholarship in Europe sparked and inspired by Habermas’ work. Many of these ideas have in the past two decades resonated in the Anglo-Saxon literature, in particular following the translation of some of Habermas’ key pieces. Shortcomings, limitations or differences in conceptualization of the public sphere notwithstanding, the public sphere can be defined as an

*arena which enables citizens to interact and talk about (the same) political issues.*

## 1.2 What does it mean when applied to Europe?

Habermas' ideas have been applied to developments in Europe and in relation to European integration in particular. Taking some of these ideas at face value neglects the spatial limitations and implications of the ideas. Habermas' original work was not concerned with collaboration in Europe across nation states. His writing pertained to localities defined by the nation state such as France and Germany. The writings initially do not concern issues of trans-nationality or international perspectives, but all take their starting point in the rather confined and homogeneous nation state. Needless to say that the European Union (by 2007) has only some features of a state and many more differences including behind-closed-doors decision making, a weak parliament and a fragmented media system (Kleinstüber 2001).

In later work, Habermas himself (1996: 365) pointed out that the EU is challenged to be related to a meaningful public sphere: "the political public sphere can fulfill its function of perceiving and thematizing encompassing social problems only insofar as it develops out of the communication taking place among *those who are politically affected*. It is carried by a public recruitment from the entire citizenry". Habermas (2001: 65) is very explicit about the necessity for the emergence of a European public sphere: "The deficit in democracy can only be eliminated if a European public sphere comes into existence in which the democratic process is incorporated. . . . the pan-European political public sphere is the solution to the problem of insufficient social integration in the processes of Europeanization".

In this vein, Habermas is thus advocating a European political public space much akin to the national public sphere. Such a sphere would imply spanning sovereign states within a common system and with shared messages and meanings occupying this space. However, as will become evident later in this review, research has tended to discard this 'ambitious' notion of a European public space.

In the discussion of which notion of the public sphere is most suitable to the advent of European integration a vast number of metaphors have been suggested: Forum, space, arena, and network are some of the most common. Summarizing previous research, a European public sphere would fulfill many (if not most) of the following functions:

- it would have a transparency function (being a space for all social groups and opinions),
- it would have a validating function (being a space for voicing, debating and possibly revising one's own opinion),
- it would have an orientation function (being a space for voicing and being confronted with opinions), it would have a legitimating function (being a space where opinions and policies are made visible, a forum for gaining (or not) public resonance and legitimacy),
- it would have a responsive function (being a space for policy makers to infer opinions of the citizenry),
- it would have an accountability function (being a space where power holders would be discussed and held accountable), and
- it would have a participatory function (being a space in which contributions would be encouraged).

### 1.3 Definitions: (A) European public sphere(s)

In specific relation to one or more European space(s) and following the different functions of a public sphere several definitions have been proposed:

- A public sphere is “an intermediate sphere of public actions, affiliations, and relations beyond the state and the market, where citizens as relatively free and equal members of society and its polity use many, independent, and party rival associations and media to learn, discuss, organize collective action, and bargain, among other things, and where such practices of citizenship tend to protect and promote constitutional democracy under preconditions of maturity” (de Beus 2010: 14);
- It is a “space for communication between political actors and citizen for discussions of matters of common interest” (Brantner *et al.* 2005);
- A public sphere exists if “the same topics are discussed at the same time with the same intensity and structure of meaning” (van de Steeg 2002);
- A public sphere is “the place where civil society is linked to the power structure of the state” (Eriksen 2005: 342);
- The public sphere is “a system of communication where issues and opinions are being gathered (input), processed (throughput) and passed on (output)” (Neidhardt 1994: 8);
- The public sphere is dynamic, it can “no longer be seen as one uniform national public sphere, but as a polymorph, polyphonic and even anarchistic” (Eriksen 2004: 6);
- It is an “arena of communicative discourse to which citizens have access and may freely contribute to rational discussion of issues collectively deemed of societal importance” (Jankowski and van Os 2004).

These definitions imply that the public sphere may be more or less explicitly present in different spaces. One important space is constituted by the media. The media and communication can facilitate discourses. Media content can reflect public opinion and be directed at polities and the actions of a (sub-)system. The media traditionally have been taken as the best ‘proxy’ and ‘location’ for expression of the public sphere (see also Koopmans and Statham 2010). There are indeed good (and practical) reasons to almost equate the media and their contents with the public sphere: Mass media enable public communication as speakers are unable to reach their audience and democratic political entities need mechanisms to link the political arenas. The media function as ‘glue’ for the segmented public spheres (Erbe 2005). Indeed most of what citizens experience about politics involves media to some extent and the media represent an organized and confined space where speakers and actors can provide input for public discussions. News media are an arena in which political actors, civil society and even citizens can express views and make announcements. However, the structure of media content is not neutral, but follows professional, organizational and cultural conventions (Shoemaker and Reese 1996) and the content also includes commentary and interpretation.

In relation to Europe, a European public space can be equated largely with ‘European political communication’ being any form of communication which refers to European governance in the wide sense, expressing consensus or dissent with regard to particular issues (Trenz 2004). A European public sphere then emerges or is visible whenever and wherever we can identify public communication that takes place between particular communicators.

Indeed, in the European case, the media are important locations for manifestations of the public sphere. Very few people have direct experiences with EU politics and many policy competences

of the EU do not spark interpersonal discussions without being prompted by the media. In sum, when studying the public sphere the media is an inevitable component as they can be seen as a market place of idea, statements and images of Europe, nations in Europe and the process of European integration

#### 1.4 Why should we care?

The existence, scope, structure, and quality of a public sphere are closely related to questions of the legitimacy of a political system. As a general principle, the legitimacy of a political system hinges on the consent of the governed. Peters (2005) suggests that legitimacy requires citizens to hold beliefs about a political system. These beliefs should motivate them to support, accept obligations vis-à-vis the system, and act according to its rules. Crucially, these beliefs and attitudes should be articulated in public discourse. In the specific case of the EU, public communication can further advance democratization of the EU and it is a necessary condition that public communication contributes to knowledge about European affairs. The assumption behind the notion of a public sphere is that citizens are enabled to participate in a (reasoned, rational) debate. A European(ized) public sphere is therefore expected to not only inform about the EU but also to contribute towards the legitimacy of the polity and the understanding of EU politics. Indeed it can be argued that a Europeanized public sphere is a precondition for democratic decision making in the EU. This is not to say that a Europeanized public sphere can be equated with support for EU politics, a well-functioning set of Europeanized public spheres may contribute to, facilitate, and mobilize anti-EU sentiments.

There is disagreement about the nature of the EU's democratic shortcomings (see the debate between Moravcsik 2001 versus Føllesdal and Hix 2006 and Hix 2008, for example). Some argue that the EU is fully democratic due to the central role in decision making of elected national governments, whose actions are followed by parliaments, media, and voters at home. Moreover the European Parliament has increased its powers since its inception. Others argue that the European issues play only a marginal role in domestic politics, that power holders are thus not scrutinized, that the European Parliament is still too insignificant and that the Commission (a non-elected body) is too powerful. Regardless of one's stance in this disagreement, it is safe to say that a well functioning public sphere would alleviate some of the concerns with regard to the democratic quality of the EU. A viable public sphere not only contributes to the legitimacy of a system but also to the accountability by showing political actors in action and providing a forum for evaluating their performance.

The argument for the importance of a viable European public sphere is augmented by the end of the 'permissive consensus.' The situation in which participation in EU politics was low, politicization absent, but public support high has changed so that EU politics can at times mobilize segments of the electorate but more importantly that the large silent majority is not necessarily approving in silence of the progress. Under such circumstances questions about the public sphere become even more pertinent.

## 2 Different studies, different indicators, different conclusions

Turning then to taking stock of our current knowledge we can distinguish *three* strands of research. (1) One group of studies has concentrated on the necessity and prerequisite for a “truly” European public sphere. (2) A second group of studies has focused on specific cases and specific segments amongst which a European public sphere is or has been in existence. (3) A third group of studies has focused on the indicators and extent to which Europeanization in the national public spheres can be identified. The first two strands are, in terms of empirical explorations, much more limited than the third strand which is where the majority of studies are located.

### 2.1 The Utopian

In the literature we can observe a development from focusing on a ‘public sphere heavy’ notion of a singular, pan-European public sphere to focusing on a ‘public sphere light’ notion of co-existing national public spheres in regard to European politics. The by now largely rejected notion of a singular, supra-national, pan-European public sphere was conceptualized as communicative space requiring a common language, a shared identity and a transnational media system (Kielmansegg 1996; Habermas 2001; Grimm 2004). Theorists were quick to acknowledge that a European public sphere is close to impossible due to communication barriers imposed by, e.g., the different languages. However, as later acknowledged by Kielmansegg (2003) and critics of this notion of a European public sphere (e.g., Schlesinger 1999; de Vreese 2002), the European Union “is not a community of communication, hardly a community of shared memories; it is merely, and in a limited sense, a community of shared experiences” (my translation, Kielmansegg 2003: 58).

Habermas and Derrida (2003) argued that developments in international relations (and most notably the rift between the U.S. and Europe) fostered public demonstrations on a common cause which could be seen as the beginning of a “real”, transnational European public sphere. In addition, it was claimed that the time was ripe for the articulation of a European identity beyond the ‘legacies of eurocentrism and the logic of nation states’. A response to this interpretation was offered by Hands (2006) who rejected that ‘February 15, 2003’ (the day of the mass demonstrations) could be seen as the birth of a European public sphere. It was rather a manifestation of the ‘maturing of global civil society’ and not an expression of a European public sphere.

The notion of a monolithic, singular and pan-European public sphere has also been largely discarded in the light of the evidence in this area where attempts to create pan-European media (including for example the newspaper *The European* and the heavily subsidized *Euronews*) have failed (de Vreese 2002, see also Stepińska 2011).

### 2.2 The Elitist

Other research has distinguished *segmented transnational public spheres* which have been conceptualized as issue-specific communicative spaces, largely dominated by political and economic elites (Eder 2000). In this vein, communication is perceived at the national level, but concentrates on specific topics and in specific segments, typically ‘elite quality newspapers’. However, elitist national newspapers and a handful of commercial news outlets with a global outreach and a significant European audience, such as the *Financial Times*, at the end of the day have a limited, elite readership that makes it hard to speak of a *public* sphere (de Vreese 2002, 2003a; Koopmans 2007).

## 2.3 The Realist

The final strand of research focuses on one or another version of Europeanized public spheres. Gerhards (1993, 2000) has rightly emphasized that a more realistic scenario is not a genuine supranational European public sphere in the singular and monolithic sense, but rather a Europeanization of national public spheres. Two criteria are listed by Gerhards (2000: 293) for such a Europeanization of national public spheres: an (increased) proportion of coverage of European themes and actors, and, on the other, the evaluation of these themes and actors from a perspective that extends beyond their one country and its interests. The latter has been critiqued for being restrictive (e.g., Trenz 2004). The major bulk of empirical research has been developed within the ‘Europeanization’ perspective. Different distinctions in Europeanization can be made. One important difference is between news about the EU, its policies and institutions on the one hand and news about events and issues from other European countries. This distinction has been coined *vertical* and *horizontal Europeanization* (Koopmans and Erbe 2004; Koopmans and Statham 2010). Vertical Europeanization refers to national actors addressing European actors, national actors addressing European issues or European actors partaking in national debates on European issues. Horizontal Europeanization is referred to as national media covering issues in other EU member states and national actors addressing issues or actors in another EU member state.

The notion of Europeanized national public spheres has found most resonance in large scale comparative studies of the media’s coverage of European integration and political issues in Europe. The media coverage of European affairs is in lieu of a constant flow of news and is best described as cyclical, with occasional peaks and long periods of little news (de Vreese 2002; de Vreese *et al.* 2001; Peter and de Vreese 2004). Key events, such as national referendums on EU issues (e.g., de Vreese and Semetko 2004; Hobolt 2009), EU summits (de Vreese and Boomgaarden 2006; van der Brug *et al.* 2007), and European Parliament elections can take up a substantial part of the news (de Vreese *et al.* 2006; Maier and Maier 2008; Schuck *et al.* 2011b). But most of the news is seen through the prism of the nation state.

There is no consensus about the extent to which Europeanized national public spheres exist. These might be ‘imperfect’ compared to the (theoretical, ideal type) pan-European benchmark, but – very importantly – the contours of a European public sphere can be sketched. This development is perhaps taking place as a result of the growing contestation over the shaping of the EU polity (as evidenced in the constitutional process) and its growing policy reach and scope (as evidenced by the proportion of EU law that is ratified by national legislatures).

Research, however, is divided about the extent of Europeanization of national public spheres measured by news media coverage of European matters. The Europub project (<http://europub.wzb.eu/>), investigating print news in 1990, 1995, 2000–2002 found strong Europeanization in the Swiss public sphere, the UK to be a deviant non-Europeanized case, and public spheres in Italy and the Netherlands to be less European because discussions about European issues take place among national actors. Issues such as monetary politics and immigration show signs of vertical Europeanization while horizontal Europeanization is virtually absent (Koopmans 2004). In their overview volume, Koopmans and Statham (2010) conclude that by ‘normalizing’ and getting European politics in to national politics, we are most likely to see a ‘legitimate Europeanized public politics’ develop (Statham 2010: 305).

In an analysis of broadsheet newspapers in 2000 in Germany, France, Britain, Italy and Spain, Trenz (2004, 2005) found evidence of a ‘transnational resonance of political communications’ implying that in relation to specific actors and institutions there are cross-references. Three types of ‘European’ news were distinguished: news characterized by a shared meaning of European events and issues; Europeanized news characterized by the secondary impact of European events and issues on national news coverage; and national news on domestic events and issues characterized by evolving forms of European monitoring and rhetoric. Trenz (2004) concludes that despite

cross-national differences, there are positive indicators of an absolute degree of European public sphere.

Siftt *et al.* (2007), focusing on the quality press in Germany, Great Britain, France, Austria and Denmark, also distinguish different types of transnationalization. In terms of what they label ‘monitoring governance’, i.e., reporting about the EU and its institutions they find a clear process of Europeanization between 1982 and 2003. However, in terms of horizontal integration they report negative developments over time. This means that European countries are not reporting more about each other today than 20 years ago. In terms of referring to discussions and topics and European speakers, they report a relative stability over the past two decades. Finally, this team reports that references to ‘Europeans’ as a collective or ‘we’ is virtually absent, albeit marginally increasing over time. In the overall summary of the project, they label this a “significant and steady, albeit modest process of increasing Europeanization over the past two decades” (Wessler *et al.* 2008: 168).

Focusing in particular on the European Parliamentary elections, de Vreese *et al.* (2006) found that the 2004 EP elections took up around 10% of the national television news in the two weeks leading up to election day in the 25 EU countries. The average visibility of EU news in 2004 was marginally higher in the new member states (10.4%) than in the old member states (9.2%). The EU-wide average contains significant cross-national variation. In Greece, for example, the elections took up 21% of the news, whereas in Germany the elections took up only 3% of the news. On average, in the old member states there was an increase in the news devoted to the EP elections from 6.6% in 1999 to 9.2% in 2004, and 10 of the 15 old member states showed an increase in visibility. Among the new member states, seven countries showed more than 10% EU news. De Vreese *et al.* (2006) also assess the representation of ‘Europe’ in terms of actors in the news and the evaluative nature of the news coverage. They conclude that in terms of an emerging Europeanization of national public spheres in relation to the European Parliament there seems to be reason for a bit of optimism. In terms of visibility and share of EU actors, the trend between 1999 and 2004 is one of increase. The 2009 European Parliament elections were more prominent in the news than in previous elections (e.g., Schuck *et al.* 2011a). Moreover, it was found that media coverage of the 2009 EP elections was more evaluative, polarized, and positive towards the EU compared to previous EP elections. Importantly two different components of this overall evaluation were distinguished: In most countries, news evaluated the EU positively with regard to more utilitarian benefit considerations and, at the same time, negatively with regard to the democratic nature and functioning of the EU. As Schuck *et al.* (2011a) conclude, the picture – overall – is highly balanced, but evaluations are clearly polarized into a (positive) benefit and a (negative) democratic deficit dimension.

Finally, looking at EU news outside the elections, i.e., during routine periods when there are no scheduled events of the magnitude such as European Council meetings for example, EU politics is marginal in national news (Gerhards 2000; Peter and de Vreese 2004; Peter *et al.* 2003). Television news, in particular, is virtually oblivious of a large-scale development in Europe and has not (yet) left the nation state.

Taking stock of our current knowledge leads to diverging conclusions with respect to the extent, scope, nature and consolidation of Europeanization of national public spheres. Much of the difference in conclusions can be traced back to different criteria, operationalizations and foci of the studies. The key indicators for assessing the Europeanness of public spheres include the visibility of European topics (and issues with a European perspective) and some degree of mutual observation and quotation, typically in the form of inclusion of EU-actors and actors from other EU countries (see de Vreese 2002; de Vreese *et al.* 2006; Schuck and de Vreese 2011). Several scholars have formulated minimal criteria for a European public sphere. The criteria indeed include corresponding media coverage in different countries with shared points of reference in which ‘speakers and listeners recognize each other as legitimate participants in a common discourse that frames the

particular issues as common European problems' (Risse and van de Steeg 2003: 22). Koopmans and Statham (2010) list visibility, inclusiveness, and the presence of contestation. At the very least, a European public sphere should reflect national media reporting on the same topic using common sources, including EU sources and sources from other EU countries.

By and large, studies that rely on analyses of broadsheet, quality newspapers tend to find some evidence of Europeanized news coverage (e.g., Eder and Kantner 2002; Wessler *et al.* 2008; Trezn and Eder 2004). Much to the contrary, research that has focused on (national) television news, which is the most widely cited source of information about the EU for citizens in Europe (Eurobarometer), has concluded that there is virtually no trace of a European public sphere and only occasional, and brief, indications of Europeanization (Peter and de Vreese 2004).

In sum, we may assess our current knowledge about a European public space – in 2012 (much in line with the observations made in the first edition of this Living Review in 2007) – in the following manner. The notion of a pan-European public sphere fulfilling the requirements of a national public sphere has been discarded both from a theoretical and empirical point of view. This 'utopian' notion of a European public space would imply a supranational public space, EU level actors dominating, truly European themes being addressed, ideally in (pan-)European media. Transnational, segmented European spheres have been identified in relation to relatively confined issues and time spans. Moreover these 'bubbles' of discourse primarily involve specific, elitist segments of society and can hardly be said to be a public sphere but rather an 'elitist' notion of a European public space. The third and 'realistic' notion refers to the *Europeanized national public spheres*. This notion is based on observations of parallelization and synchrony in topics and an increase in salience of European issues and actors, a horizontal and vertical dimension of Europeanization. Research differs on the extent to which this development is emerging, consolidating or already present, but it is evident that virtually all current research takes on this perspective. Most of the divergence in the literature can be explained by the focus on different media (e.g., national broadsheet, quality newspapers vis-à-vis television news).

Given these observations, we can conclude that research is crystallizing around the notion of varying degrees of (increasing) Europeanization of national public spheres.

### 3 Discussion: The way ahead

Following the stock-taking part of this review, the discussion will focus on a number of aspects relating to theorizing, methods, arenas, and also to the implications and consequences of a European public space in addition to reflections on some of the ongoing policy initiatives in this area.

*Theorizing the public sphere:* While the first version of this Living Review concluded that there was a mismatch between the level of theorizing on a European public sphere on the one hand and the availability of empirical studies on the other, this shortcoming is becoming partly alleviated. A catalyst for this development has been the completion of a number of large scale international and comparative studies and the accompanying availability of systematically collected data. But there is still much work needed on the conception of a European public space (see also [Fossum and Schlesinger 2007](#)) and one important question to ask is if traditional, in particular print media, are the sole and most appropriate ‘proxy’ for a public sphere. To start with we need to broaden the scope beyond the quality broadsheet newspapers. These outlets might provide most in the way of finding ‘improvements’ in the European public sphere. But that sphere is limited if only reaching a shrinking elite audience while a growing majority of citizens might rely on media whose contents look different. Moreover, especially given fragmentation, the emergence and significance of non-mainstream sources of news and information have to be considered.

In addition, the very notion of a European public space will continue to be important to revisit: What is emerging is hardly a replacement of national public spheres, i.e., not a structural supra-national level but rather a constitutive part of national public sphere. This notion of a European public sphere is indeed far removed from Habermas’ (1996) criteria for a monolithic European public sphere. However, core elements in Habermas’ notion refer to citizens being affected by policies and to the debate involving individuals recruited from the entire citizenry. At this point there is little emerging in this sense. It will thus be important for future studies to be concise and specific in their theoretical foundations and criteria regardless of the conception of the public sphere underlying their study.

*Measuring the public sphere:* With the proliferation of empirical studies and assessments of the scope and parameters of a European space future research is also charged with the challenge and necessity to arrive at comparable operationalizations and shared measures (see also [Esser et al. 2012](#)). One inhibiting factor stemming from previous research is the incompatibility and lack of comparability across studies. Key features of a communicative European space involve a classification of topics, actors, degree of cross-references, and the framing of issues ([de Vreese 2002](#)) or visibility, inclusiveness and contestation ([Koopmans and Statham 2010](#)). While some of the former are relatively straightforward (is the topic an EU competence area? Is the actor EU affiliated? Is there reference to the EU or European countries?) the notion of framing should be central in future assessments of Europeanization of media content and the public sphere. The underlying question is not only whether issues are addressed simultaneously, but also how these are discussed. In terms of news framing, European news has been found to be framed both along the lines of conventional journalistic frames and by using Europe-issue specific frames ([de Vreese 2002](#)). In terms of how citizens make sense of Europe various audience frames have been suggested (e.g., [Díez Medrano 2003](#)) and research on the (failed) ratification process of the Constitutional Treaty (e.g., [Fossum and Schlesinger 2007](#)) and later the European debt and economic crisis is opening for a whole new area of analyses of transnational debates.

*A EU-*ropean journalism?** A key question inextricably related to the notion of Europeanized public sphere(s) is the role played by journalists and journalism. While media contents are explicit manifestations of the public sphere, it can be illuminating to turn to research on journalism to understand some of the antecedents and dynamics underlying the media coverage. Early work on EU correspondents ([Morgan 1995](#)) raised very important points with regards to the access, constraints, and sources defining EU news stories (see also [de Vreese 2003b](#)). The question of the

relationship between EU institutions and journalists (Bijsmans and Altides 2007; Martins *et al.* 2012; Meyer 1999; Morgan 1995) remains center-place, and a series of studies have addressed the role of journalism in the European integration trajectory (Baisnée 2002; Balčytienė and Vinciūnienė 2010; Gleissner and de Vreese 2005; Statham 2008, 2010; Lecheler 2008). In a recent overview, Statham (2010) concluded that journalists still find the EU to be a difficult topic to cover and to entice editors and audiences about. This underscores earlier findings (de Vreese 2002) and the topic thus remains an important research venue to understand the constraints and opportunities within a news room that may inhibit or spark processes of Europeanized news coverage.

*Understanding the consequences:* Underlying the research and focus on the parameters and scope of a European public space is an interest in the implications and consequences of such a sphere or space. As argued above a healthy public space can provide a forum for exchange between citizens themselves and between citizens and elites. A public sphere can thus improve the democratic quality of a system and contribute to the legitimacy and accountability of power holders. Research on a European public sphere has focused more on the sphere itself and the access to and diversity of the debate than on the effects and consequences. Given the centrality of media for public sphere, we need to know more about media and public opinion and the responsiveness of politics to public opinion.

With public opinion about European integration being volatile, new information can change citizens' opinions and policy preferences (Page and Shapiro 1992). Indeed, "where people know and care little about the issue, and where it is remote from their everyday experience of life and their values, then the impact of the media may be greater" (Newton 2006: 218). New information, as provided by the media, can therefore contribute to public thinking about and support for or aversion against different aspects of European integration. To the extent that public support is seen as part of the legitimacy of European integration, the media play an important role in affecting citizens as to which topics to consider and what to think about these when conceiving of European integration. How then may the media matter? In media effects research, agenda-setting, priming, framing and persuasion as a result of tone of the news are amongst the most applied concepts to understand media impact on public opinion formation (McLeod *et al.* 2002).

For example, de Vreese and Boomgaarden (2006) demonstrated media effects on public support for the enlargement of the EU using panel survey data mixed with media content analyses. Schuck and de Vreese (2006) experimentally examined the news framing of the 2004 European Union enlargement in terms of risk and opportunity and the effect both frames had on public support for the enlargement. The opportunity frame produced higher levels of support compared to the risk condition. Suffice it to say that empirical assessments of the consequences in the developments of Europeanized public sphere should be high on the research agenda.

*EU-ropo online:* While the media such as newspapers and television news remain crucial sources and indicators of a European public sphere, online sources play an increasingly important role. This role pertains to communications from the EU institutions themselves and individual parties or actors that may communicate directly through the usage of social media (including Facebook and Twitter), but also pertains to news sites, fora etc. Koopmans and Zimmermann (2010), however, caution that political communication on the internet with respect to European integration is remarkably similar to communication in the media.

Wright's case study of the online discussion forum linked to the Convention on the Future of Europe (Wright 2007), warns that although the debates were discursive and had an institutional context, which met the public sphere requirement, they did not feed well enough into the convention process and did not have a balanced set of participants. In a study of the Europeanization of the internet, van Os (2005) analyzed websites around the 2004 EP elections and found that political parties do address European themes and approach the elections from a somewhat European angle. Lusoli (2012) also points to the potential of the Internet but also calls for more and comparative research before solid conclusions can be made.

### 3.1 Playing the blame game I: The media's fault?

This review might lead some to conclude that the media are at fault or perform 'poorly'. It would, however, be stretching the observations made. The media are not, *ceteris paribus*, responsible for the public sphere falling short of normative standards, elite dreaming or decreasing support for advanced European integration. Indeed, as [Trenz \(2004\)](#) and [van de Steeg \(2002\)](#) also emphasize, the media know a number of constraints that limit them in performing this role. This review – very deliberately – takes the media coverage of European issues as the starting point and almost as a given fact. This position comes from the observation of strong market-driven forces and developments in the media and communication landscape ([Semetko et al. 2000](#)) which imply that any discussion of alternative roles and responsibilities on the side of the media are less likely to materialize in significant change. Hereby, the 'prime responsibility' becomes a political one with problems to be addressed (or solved) on the side of institutions, parties and politicians.

This position is obviously debatable and the position has more nuances. The media's role in society can be seen as a pure market driven business, a 'business with a public interest' or a special business that requires government intervention, legislation and provisions. In other words, ideas ranging from a notion of the media as acting in 'self-interest' to the media acting in the 'public interest' ([McQuail 1992](#)). [Hallin and Mancini \(2004\)](#) distinguish three models of media systems in the western world which all foresee a different role for the media. In the first model, the Polarized Pluralist model (found in most Mediterranean countries) there is strong state intervention, the media industry (in particular the press) is heavily subsidized and 'obligations' and expectations from the political side for editorial content is possible (but not necessarily desirable). In the second model, the Liberal model (found most pronounced in the U.S. and Britain), the market domination is strong, the level of professionalization is high, and the possibility for political influence (except in cases of the press where the party-paper parallelism remains high) is minimal. The third model, the Democratic Corporatist model (found in north-western Europe, including the Netherlands), is characterized by state intervention in the provisions of public broadcasting and press subsidies, but also by a strong degree of professionalization and editorial autonomy from political influences.

The different legal provisions and conceptions of the role of the media in society have implications for the degree to which media content and journalistic approaches to, for example, the EU can be influenced. In a market driven, corporatist model such as in the Netherlands, expectations about the coverage of economic and political issues (including European integration) can only be set for public broadcasters (and the partially subsidized segments of the press).

Increasing the visibility of EU news, boosting the presence of EU level actors or sparking the number of cross-references across EU countries in such a system can therefore only be achieved indirectly. First and foremost by making it politically more relevant. This (again) places the responsibility on the side of 'politics' (see also [Schuck et al. 2011a](#); [Statham 2010](#)) and only in the second place on the media. On the one hand, ensuring that editors and journalists are sufficiently aware of and trained to cover European issues and on the other hand, by feeding the media with information that fit the formats of different media and outlets. Should efforts to increase visibility of European affairs be successful, there is the legitimate concern that these efforts will only reach those who are already politically interested and predisposed for paying attention. Nonetheless, the efforts are necessary to create a general news and information environment in which the EU has a (more central) place on the agenda. It is common knowledge that the media monitor each other's agenda and are influenced by elite media which is why it is crucial to be established in the leading outlets. However, beyond the public broadcasters it would be almost naïve to seriously expect that any media outlet would be responsive to a call for additional attention to the EU.

### 3.2 Playing the blame game II: The institutions' fault?

If the media fall short of taking the bulk of the 'blame' for the inadequate European public sphere we may turn to either EU citizens or the EU institutions themselves. The latter launched a number of policy initiatives stemming from the notion that the legitimacy of continued European integration hinges upon public support. However, it is only in recent years that the importance of communication and interaction with citizens has become part of the agenda. The most comprehensive initiatives ever to put 'communication' on the agenda stem from former Commissioner Wallström's Cabinet that was in charge of Plan D (for Democracy, Dialogue and Debate) and of the White Paper for a European Communication Policy. The actual outcomes of these initiatives still remain to be seen.

The self-defined strategic principles underlying the initiatives are 1) listening to citizens – taking their views and concerns into account, 2) communicating how EU policies affect citizens' everyday lives, and 3) connecting with citizens by 'going local' and addressing citizens in their national and local settings. While these principles may appear somewhat trivial, they do in fact represent and embody a real change of taking 'communication seriously' within the EU institutions. As Meyer (1999) noted, there was – prior to the mid 1990s – virtually no interest in or awareness of media coverage of European politics from the side of EU institutions. In that sense, the Wallström Cabinet should be applauded for putting it on the agenda with considerable effort. But a few reflections on the current initiatives: First, the initiatives seem a decade late. Second, there appears to be an insufficient distinction between short-term and long-term goals. While educational programs etc may be excellent to achieve certain things, these are likely to be long-term. Short-term goals should be aimed at raising the visibility of Europe in debates, however not just in debates about European issues, but also in national policy discussions that have an international (often European) perspective. Third, the final goal of increased communication efforts should not be to make citizens love the EU. The aim must be to equip them with sufficient knowledge and awareness to appreciate the role of Europe in global and regional developments and to have sufficient considerations available to form a (quasi-)informed opinion. Fourth, and in the light of this review, the communication efforts should discard the notion of a monolithic pan-European public sphere. Citizens in Europe prefer *national* (news) media and efforts should *not* be geared at pan-European initiatives (unless seen as marginal, complementary tools for feeding into national public spheres). In that process, the role of television is crucial and the most promising for reaching the majorities across Europe (see also Adam and Berkel 2006). Looking into the future some might be tempted to turn to 'new' media and in particular the Internet in a search for new strategies and opportunities. But so far there is little encouraging in the evidence online where the structure of the offline public sphere seems to be reinforced (Koopmans and Zimmermann 2003, 2010).

As a closing note: In 2007 it was concluded that while research on the European public sphere is entering a phase of empirical maturity and richness, the *consequences* of the composition and qualities of the Europeanized public spheres should be high on our agendas. In 2012 the research on the Europeanized public spheres is indeed focused on specifying trends over time and identifying conditionalities for the development, while also focusing on the consequences of these constellations for citizens' civic and political engagement with issues of European integrations. For the coming years, it will be pertinent to assess the questions raised above, as well as revisiting some of the earlier questions in the wake of the financial, economic and debt-based crisis in which the EU plays an important role and which stirs up the political landscape, the media coverage, and the public debate.

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