

(W)e the peoples of Europe: Assessing the contours of the EU online public sphere

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Abstract

This paper tests the potential impact of online political communication on citizens' perceptions of the EU's legitimacy. Following a public sphere approach, we examine how online debates about the EU unfolded during the 2009 EP elections in 12 member-states and at trans-European level. Our analysis covers three core elements of the media's role in the public sphere, namely publicity, participation and public opinion making. We show that, despite the multiple, often contradictory, processes simultaneously at work, political e-communication on the EU is substantial. It thus focuses the attention of a mass audience that is informed about EU-affairs and actively empowered to participate in debates about the legitimacy of the EU. The EU elections e-sphere emerges homogeneous in terms of voice (citizens and domestic actors), opinions (negative towards the current EU institutional set up) and justification (mainly concerned with democracy). It is also homogeneous in that it mainly replicates the national public sphere and the national political community as the principal reference point for democracy.

Keywords: online debates, public sphere, EU elections

Introduction

Research on the legitimization of European integration has focused primarily on political parties and opinion polls. This measurement of party positions or aggregated opinions of individuals misses an adequate understanding of the ‘making of’ EU public legitimacy in terms of discursive contents, performance and resonance of public debates. Moving beyond attitudinal research and party politics, we propose that research ought to turn to the mass media where the struggle about the legitimacy of the EU is made salient and accessible to the wider public (Schneider et al. 2007, Trenz et al. 2009).

In the same period as the EU has become more contested and communication efforts have increased, the internet has come to play an important role in the media landscape of European countries. The rising importance of this medium is so far not reflected in scientific research on communication of EU issues, which remains largely focused on television and printed press. We argue that the online media offer an ideal environment for analyzing contestations of the EU’s legitimacy, precisely because they allow us to systematically link public salience and media framing with political contestation and citizens’ participation. Among the new dynamics of the internet in relation to traditional ‘offline’ media, two are particularly relevant for the extent to which online media mediate contestations of EU legitimacy. First, the internet has the potential to actively involve citizens in political communication through such interactive features as commenting functions and online discussion forums. Debates taking place in these forums could be a key piece to the dynamics of public opinion making about the EU. Secondly, the internet has the potential to regroup the audience that pays attention to European politics. With regard to news coverage on EP elections, online debates could involve European citizens in transnational debates and meet the requirements of a public sphere, in which the legitimacy of the new type of polity is negotiated.

The main purpose of this paper is therefore to map online contestations of EU legitimacy in the context of 2009 EP election campaigns. In presenting our data, we assess if the EU online contestations meet three functional requirements for the formation of a public sphere? More specifically, we investigate a) if the internet has the capacity to contribute to the formation of knowledge of citizens on the political process of the EU; b) if the internet engages citizens to actively contest EU legitimacy and participate in EU debates; and c) if the internet contributes to public opinion formation concerning EU legitimacy.¹

Online media and EU legitimacy

No longer a ‘new’ medium, the internet has been found to impact politics and the contestation of political legitimacy in at least three ways:

¹ This research is funded by the RECON project, <http://www.reconproject.eu/>.

- a) Its establishment as an integral source of political news/information that is made salient for a large proportion of the voting population (Eurobarometer 2009, Smith 2009,);
- b) The engagement of the users, rise of 'citizen journalism' and establishment of political discourse and action also outside the realm of the strictly defined public sphere of political institutions (Graham 2008, McNair 2009, Stanyer 2009);
- c) The shaping of political attitudes and opinions, including those of otherwise disengaged and hard-to-reach audiences, particularly young people (Esser and Claes H. de Vreese 2007, Karlsen 2009, Lusoli 2005).

In light of this broad and well-established knowledge on the impact of online media on the generation of political legitimacy, the debate about the role of the Internet in EU political communication has been rather limited. The research agenda has been narrowed down to the analysis of the new quality of political information provided by institutions such as the European Commission and the enhancement of new forms of participatory e-governance. Research has thus focused primarily on the internet performance of the input providers of political communication, such as national and transnational political actors, EU institutions and/or social movements (Foot et al. 2009, Michailidou 2008, Zimmermann et al. 2004). In this regard, the internet has undoubtedly contributed to make EU-governance and administration more transparent and more open. In the digital era, information on the daily business of the EU is often made available instantaneously through multiple channels that allow for interaction and consultation between political decision-makers, experts and affected parties. While these merits of online political communication as a tool of governance are unchallenged, little is known so far about how the internet is de facto used for political mass communication.

In order to understand the dynamics of online EU contestation and its possible repercussions on the legitimacy of the EU polity, it is necessary to investigate the way these political inputs are reproduced by online media and processed by citizens through online public debates. By focusing on the use of the internet for political mass communication, we look at EU online communication from the perspective of the public that is addresses and engaged in ongoing political debates and events. To address this question, we cannot limit our focus on the information providers and the type of communicative offers that are made by institutional actors but need to analyze intermediation of EU political communication from the sources to the potential audiences. This requires that we view the internet as a mass medium that not only multiplies information inputs but also accounts for the throughputs and outputs of EU political communication in terms of selecting, amplifying and framing political news about the EU and EU politics. In this respect, we investigate EU online communication in light of the functional requirements of the public sphere.

From a public sphere perspective, intermediation of the political process follows a particular normative script: it relies on transparent political institutions; an active (or at least attentive) citizenry and the creation of a collective will (Fraser 2007, Habermas 1992, Habermas 1989, Trenz 2009). Political intermediation through the traditional mass media, however, is found

to be deficient in many ways. It is inherently linear, highly selective and exclusive, in the sense that citizens remain, with few exceptions, mere observers of the political game. In the case of the EU, the so-called 'traditional' media (press, television, radio) have also repeatedly been found to re-affirm the nation state and the legitimacy of contextualised national politics (Gerhards and Schafer 2010, Hafez and Skinner 2007, Trenz 2004).

The extent to which the internet is capable of overcoming these well known deficits of offline media and revitalizing the normative script of the public sphere is a highly contested issue that continues to divide scholars. On the one hand, the technical innovation introduced by the internet has a potential to transcend all boundaries to communication, be these identity-, space-, -time or content-related. This 'transcending' ability of online communication has been highlighted by a host of scholars, who have suggested the coming of a new era of democratic deliberation in local, national and global politics (cyber-optimist perspective) (see Chadwick 2006, Castells 2009, Dahlgren 2005 for relevant discussions). Transcending communication boundaries (or barriers) is expected to a) enhance the transparency of the political process through distributing a wide range of information about politics (publicity), b) enable plural voice and debates through new participatory formats (participation) and c) express informed opinions and evaluations (public opinion formation). In doing so, the internet renews the validity of the normative standards for the mediation of political communication, which should be informative, inclusive and conclusive.

On the other hand, several studies point to the limited scope of online political communication and its restricted deliberative capabilities, thus outlining a more sobering reality of 'politics as usual' but with the added layer of electronic communications (cyber-pessimist perspective) (Albrecht 2006, Van Alstyne and Brynjolfsson 2005). Scholars also agree that, while online fora provide an ideal environment for debate due to their asynchronous character (contributors have the opportunity to read and think about other postings before engaging in discussion), there are few signs so far that this interactive potential is explored efficiently; or that it leads to mutual understanding and agreement (Brundidge and Rice 2009, Sunstein 2007).

The online public sphere: Three functional requirements

In developing our research agenda, we move forward in the debate between the cyber-optimists versus cyber-pessimists and propose that the internet's impact on political communication can be assessed on the basis of three functional requirements of the public sphere as the organizational/communicative infrastructure for the contestation of political legitimacy (Trenz and Michailidou 2010). To speak of an online public sphere implies that online media are seen as more than a cognitive space, in which information is made available and political discourse is rationalised. The public sphere further relates to a social space of encounter and interaction and to a cultural space, a symbolic public forum, in which different individuals and groups battle about the authoritative interpretation of events. By addressing these cognitive, social and cultural elements of the public sphere, we analyze the online public sphere and the scope of online political communication in terms of publicity, participation and public opinion formation.

Publicity

The first requirement for a public sphere to come into existence is publicity. We do not use this term simply to denote the 'publicness' of a political space or a set of debates. Rather publicity is a dynamic condition. It comprises the processes of news making and salience. The former relates to the quantitative and qualitative aspects of selecting political facts and providing information in the form of news reports and stories. The latter refers to the process of making political news publicly available and known to a broader audience. The media's role in this process is fundamental, as they are the main, if not sole, distributors of selected information inputs on a broad range of issues that are of potential public relevance. At the same time, the quality of information is crucial: The 'publicness' of the raw material of information that is daily produced in the political process does not necessarily make this information accessible. Again, the role of the media is crucial here, as it is mostly the role of journalists to turn political information into accessible and understandable news, i.e. to select, frame and analyze the political process in a format suitable for the wider audience.

Publicity links the performance of political actors to provide political information (inputs); with the performance of journalists to select, report and analyze (throughputs); and the potential reception and resonance of the audience (outputs). Moreover, the patterns of news making distribution set the framework within which public exchanges take place, and subsequently affect the way that political communication unfolds. If participants of a public sphere are addressed as a whole (one public) through centralized channels of distribution we can expect audience focalization. If, on the other hand, political communication is decentralized and specialized with low and shifting attention of the audiences, we can expect audience fragmentation. We, therefore, argue that publicity needs to be analyzed primarily in terms of the news-making capabilities of the media combined with the salience of political news to the wider audience. Media salience also determines a public sphere's composition in terms of who can access public debates and how.

Participation

This brings us to the second component condition, participation, which relates to the plurality of voices that are raised in public and media debates. Participation is measured in a) the range of political actors that appear as providers of political information and opinions and b) the possibility of audience participation in debates. The assumption here is that the mass media provide a forum for the participation of plural actors in debates and are able to activate audiences to intervene and to express informed opinion in ongoing debates. Participation concerns the internal dynamics of a public sphere and the contested nature of debates that are held within it: Depending on who contributes to the public debates, a public forum or a medium can be exclusive and elitist; inclusive and accommodating popular voice; epistemic based on specialised knowledge or open for matters of general interest.

Of particular relevance for assessing the dynamics of the public sphere is also whether communication flows are mainly organised in a hierarchical top-down way with politicians addressing their constituents through the media or whether public debates are organised in a more horizontal manner allowing for plural responses and bottom-up interventions from

the audience. A decisive aspect for assessing the participatory structure of the public sphere is therefore whether actors from the periphery can act as input as generators of public debates.

Last but not least, the condition of participation implies some form of community: Either a public sphere comes to shape because a specific community of actors consciously decides to come together and debate issues of common concern; or the users of a medium are passively bound together, for instance, through the consumption of the same news or by the shared knowledge and opinions among the readers of a specific newspaper. We argue that community building is not to be understood simply as a primary effect of user interaction and networking but also as a secondary effect of 'staging' user interaction in front of a wider audience that passively reads and follows the users' comments and interactions. The degree to which a public sphere is dynamic, inclusive and plural also facilitates the third requirement of informed and conclusive public opinion formation.

Public opinion formation

We understand public opinion formation as the processes through which opinions are given public expression, are formed, transformed and exchanged. Again, the mass media are the principal forum of public opinion making. Media debates allow political actors and journalists to interpret and evaluate political affairs and to express support or opposition with government. In order to convince, political actors need to provide arguments and justification that relate back to some form of principles or standards of political legitimacy (Boltanski and Thévenot 2006). The spectrum of opinions expressed and the justifications delivered in the mass media are the horizon for interpreting politics and thus become decisive for public opinion formation at the level of the political community. An analysis of how political opinions are given public expression through the mass media is thus a more accurate measurement of political attitudes and perceptions of political legitimacy at the mass level (Schneider et al. 2007).

One important function of the media is therefore to hold public opinion in flux. New arguments are brought in all the time and actors might shift between different justificatory logics and change their opinions on an existing situation/political issue. How public opinion is shaped depends on the form of participation (i.e. the dynamic aspects of public debates) and the type of publicity generated by the media (quantity and quality of news and their salience). In the case of participation, the degree of inclusion and the conditions under which actors participate (dynamics of interaction) directly impact on the range of opinions made available in public. The salience, as well as the quantity and quality of the information and opinions available (news-making) also impact on the range of opinions offered for debate, as the mediators (journalists) have the capability to reframe inputs or produce their own, as well as to restrict and even silence opinions/information. In turn, the range of opinions available, in combination with the dynamics of interaction (i.e. how participants interact), impact on the manner(s) in which deliberation (in the broader sense of debate) takes place. This means that the way in which participants qualify/justify their opinions depends not only on the profile of the participants themselves but also on the conditions

that govern their public exchanges (linear or multi-dimensional communication, participants' role and position in the public forum hosting the debate).

The condition of public opinion formation is conducive to legitimacy, firstly, in the sense of recognizing the 'other' as a legitimate partner in the debate (Davidson 2001); and secondly, in the sense of evaluating the political system/regime as a whole on the basis of particular principles that justify the 'worth' of the polity. In practice, this leads to justified expressions of regime support/opposition mediated through the contested debates on particular policy issues. As such, the legitimacy of the polity is perceived as the outcome of informed opinion-making.

Taken together, the enactment of these three functional requirements *unifies* the public sphere as the place where all affected citizens have a possibility to participate and be exposed to the relevant arguments in order to ensure political equality and the reference of arguments to the public good as a basis for collective will-formation based on shared values.

Measuring the EU online public sphere

By focusing on the 2009 EP Parliamentary campaigning in 12 Member States we can systematically analyse variances in the shape and scope of online political communication across the European political space. EP election campaigns create a transcultural and cross-national media event (Dayan and Katz 1992) that breaks the normal routines of media broadcasting over the EU. By turning their attention to the ritual of election that stands for the redistribution of power and the most powerful act of European citizenship, the media bring in a host of actors, including candidates, that interpret the relevance of the event and, most importantly, that address the audience in its quality as the electorate. As a media event, the EP election attracts the largest possible number of audiences, but these are still mainly addressed as national electorates and not necessarily interrelated through traditional offline media. In this context, the internet's mobilising effect in EP election campaigns is measured in terms of number and type of evaluative statements in which actors transmit an opinion on the legitimacy of the EU polity to the public.

We disregard campaigning in terms of politics (profile of party candidates, polls and election results) and policies (policy choices and substance of particular regulations) and focus instead on EU polity evaluations (Trenz and de Wilde 2009). In order to demarcate the European elections online public sphere we first investigate where and to what extent online public debates were mobilised in relation to the EP elections in June 2009. In this context we identify the main online outlets and platforms for circulation of EU news and opinions, to be assessed in terms of *salience* of news-making with regard to political communication in general, and coverage of EP elections, in particular. This results in a map of the principal news sites where opinions on the EU are presented outside institutionally funded, supported and controlled fora with the potential to focus attention of the mass electorate on EP elections.

Subsequently, we measure *participation*, in terms of inclusion and community-building potential. This is done by systematically mapping a) who participates in EP election debates

online; b) what kinds of topics are contested in these debates and c) by whom. We further compare participants and contents of online debates across different media formats and countries. This concerns the presence of EU, foreign and domestic actors, of state and non-state actors, as well as of news on domestic, foreign or European issues. Our data also allows us to examine the particular group dynamics unfolding in contestations on EU legitimacy online and the type of interaction between the core communicators (bloggers, journalists and political elites) and their audiences (citizens).

The third step in our research is to measure public opinion formation, i.e. the process during which citizens develop their political positions on the EU polity. This requires that we examine not only the statement of preferences made in public but also the way and extent to which these preferences are justified (Trenz and Michailidou 2010). The following table summarises the three functions of the public sphere and how these are empirically measured in order to investigate the EU online public sphere:

Table 1: Operationalising the functional requirements of the EU online public sphere

Functional requirements of the public sphere	Operationalisation	Indicators
Publicity	Salience	Website profiles (centralization/decentralization of media ownership) Website visibility and salience of EU news within it (focalization/fragmentation of audiences)
	News-making capacity	Quantity of EU elections coverage (number of threads)
Participation	Inclusion	Range of actors Scope of actors
	Community-building	Framing of debates Manners of interaction
Public opinion formation	Expressions of EU regime support/opposition in online EU debates	Evaluations of EU legitimacy Regimes of justifications

Methods

To be able to investigate the EU online public sphere comparatively, we have developed a mixed-methods design, which combines the measurement of online platforms of communication (how? where?) with the content of public communication (what? by

whom?). This is done through the combination of a qualitative content analysis of public messages (message level of analysis) with a quantitative profiling of the selected websites in the same coding scheme (thread level of analysis). In the resulting coding model, qualitative findings are used to illustrate and contextualise the quantitative coding results and vice versa. This has enabled us to identify any transnational trends in public opinion formation concerning the EU polity in a standardised manner, but without over-generalising and thus filtering out crucial qualitative variations at national level. At the same time, in order to avoid over-emphasizing the national (internal system) dimension of public opinion formation when interpreting our coded findings, we have triangulated these with:

- a) Quantitative data concerning online visibility of the selected websites; and
- b) Qualitative observations concerning the political public spheres of the selected member-states, within which the legitimacy of the EU is debated.

We are, thus, able to capture the content of political communication and the dynamics of public opinion formation more accurately, whilst maintaining a strong comparative dimension of analysis.

In order to create a representative map of the EU elections web sphere, we have looked for EU debates in all publicly available (where no paid subscription is required) online outlets encompassing debates that took place during the last three weeks of the EP election campaign in May-June 2009, as well as the first few days following the elections. Our sample comprises only the most popular web spaces per country and at trans-European level.² In total, we have included 36 professional journalism websites and 24 independent blogs of national scope,³ while at European/transnational level we have included one professional journalism website and two blogs. In addition, Facebook groups focused on the EU elections and two Twitter threads with EU election-related hashtags have been included as representative of social networking communications popular with younger audiences.⁴

Besides the criterion of popularity, and in order to be able to measure impact in terms of inclusion, web spaces were selected based on their potential to open an interactive space between proponents and users. In most cases, this referred to the widespread practice of publicly available user feedback and comments on articles or blog entries. If this commenting option was not available, a website needed to host at least an online debate forum in order to be selected.

² See Annex for all selected websites. Popularity is measured by visitor numbers and influence within the blogosphere, using the Top 100 websites per country listings on Alexa.com (Alexa Internet 2009) and blog aggregator popularity and influence lists, such as Wikio (Wikio.com 2009). For Facebook threads, popularity was determined by the number of members subscribed to a group, while for Twitter threads we identified the hashtags linked with the EU elections, and selected all threads ascribed to them. All but four of the professional journalism websites and four independent blogs were in the Alexa Country Top 100 websites lists, while the majority of the independent blogs were in the top 500 websites in their country.

³ Independent blogs are understood here as not sponsored or run by EU or national institutions.

⁴ Hashtags are a 'Twitter community creation', invented by users to easily group tweets and/or add extra data.

In total, our website monitoring through RSS feeds resulted in the ‘clipping’ (selection) of 4815 articles that covered the EU elections in the selected websites. We have used a multi-stage, random (probability) sampling design to select 50 articles per country (25 for Belgium, as only the French-speaking websites were included in the monitoring). In the end, 638 threads were drawn for further coding, after stratification by country, website and time period during which a thread appeared (18 May – 28 May; 29 May – 6 June; 7 June – 10 June).⁵ The coded threads contained 1126 EU-polity evaluations, which were coded as ‘messages’.⁶

Findings

Publicity

In terms of salience, the 2009 EP elections online public sphere has emerged as a sphere which mirrors the offline media debates rather than an altogether separate, independent public debate forum. The majority of online sources selected for monitoring during the period 18 May-10 June 2009 are either online versions of well-established, high-circulation newspapers or of popular TV channels, or are owned by media conglomerates, which control a host of other audiovisual and print media enterprises.

Moreover, quality and tabloid media outlets are represented in the sample on almost equal measure, even though the type of journalism offered by an online media outlet was not part of the sample selection criteria. News-making outlets classified as ‘quality’ press are, in fact, more popular online than their printed versions, often surpassing in online visibility ‘tabloid’ newspapers, which outsell them offline. The fact that the selected websites have very high saliency in the respective countries (the large majority are among the top 100 websites per country) also increases the significance of the observed EP elections e-sphere, in terms both of the websites’ role as multipliers and drivers of EU debates and of the impact that citizens’ views expressed online may have on the direction of the public discourse concerning the EU’s worth.

In terms of the news-making capacity of the EU elections e-sphere, coverage of the elections event was 305 articles per country (median) for the observed period (18 May- 10 June 2009). However, a closer look at the individual article coverage values reveals great disparities among the selected countries (Figure 1), with no clear pattern between old and new member states, northern and southern, or bigger and smaller ones.

⁵ The number of threads selected for coding exceeded 50 in the case of certain countries, due to the debate function being available on a separate webpage/thread from the main article/thread.

⁶ Regarding the commenting area of threads, only the first 20 comments visible on the webpage were examined for EU-polity evaluations.

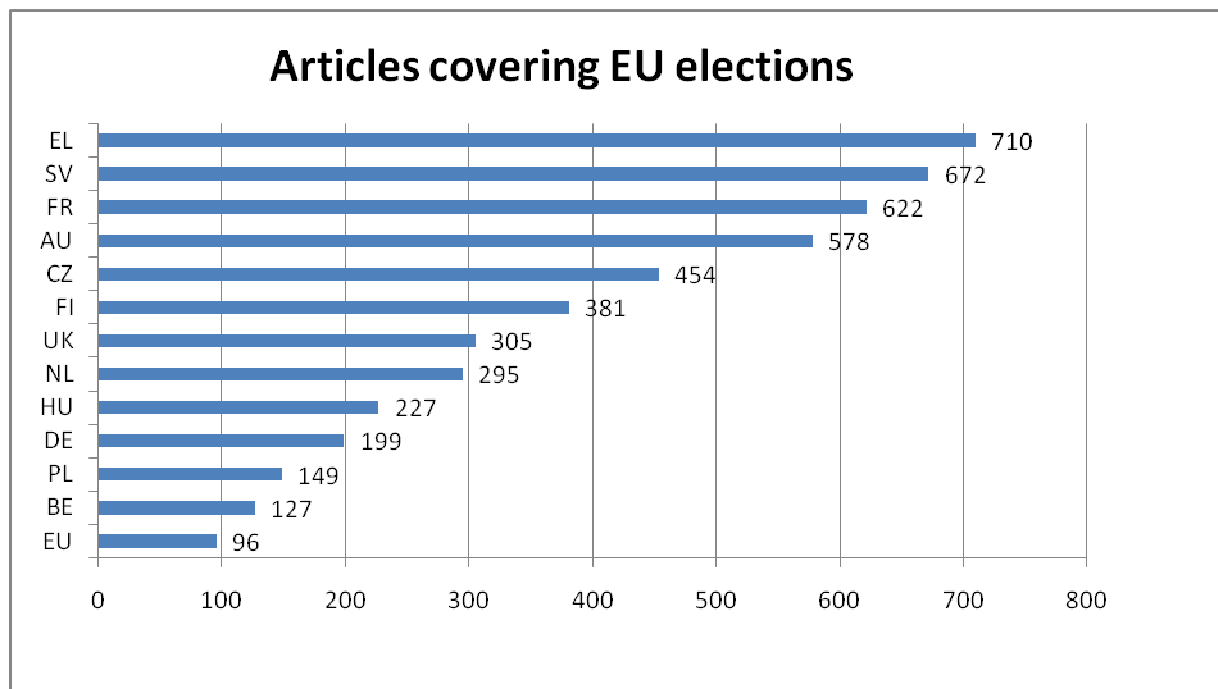


Figure 1: Articles covering EU elections on the selected websites of 12 member-states and at trans-European level

From the above we can conclude that the EP elections e-sphere largely meets the first functional requirement of a public sphere, i.e. publicity, in terms both of salience of EU election coverage (elections covered in the most prominent professional journalism websites and blogs) and of news-making capacity. Insofar as the latter is concerned, the qualitative aspect of news-making is met in all countries (coverage of EU elections by professional journalists in both 'quality' and 'tabloid' style media and across the political ideology spectrum). However, the quantitative aspect of news-making, represented by the actual number of articles covering EU elections in each country, varied widely across countries.

Participation

The EP elections e-sphere is dominated by the voice of a category of actors that is largely absent in offline media, namely citizens. They are the unquestionable protagonists of the evaluative debates concerning the project of European integration in its principle, present and future forms. Of the 1126 evaluative messages coded, nearly 63% were generated by citizens (707 messages), with the large majority of these directly transmitted (604 out of 707 messages with citizens as their originators). The inextricable link between citizens and active participation in the EU elections e-sphere was verified even after the actor/transmission relation was controlled by country of origin, type of website and actor scope.

Party actors are (distant) second most visible group of contributors in the EU evaluative discourse, but their evaluations are merely attributed to them by third parties (either journalists/bloggers or citizens). This means that party actors do not have an active role in online debates regarding the EU's legitimacy. Of the 308 messages identified as having originated from party actors, 124 were directly transmitted (40% of all party-actor generated

messages). Crucially, only 6 of these messages were unsolicited, spontaneous contributions of party actors to the online debates, i.e. messages located in the commenting area/discussion forum. All other direct evaluative messages generated by party actors were located in the main text of a thread/article.

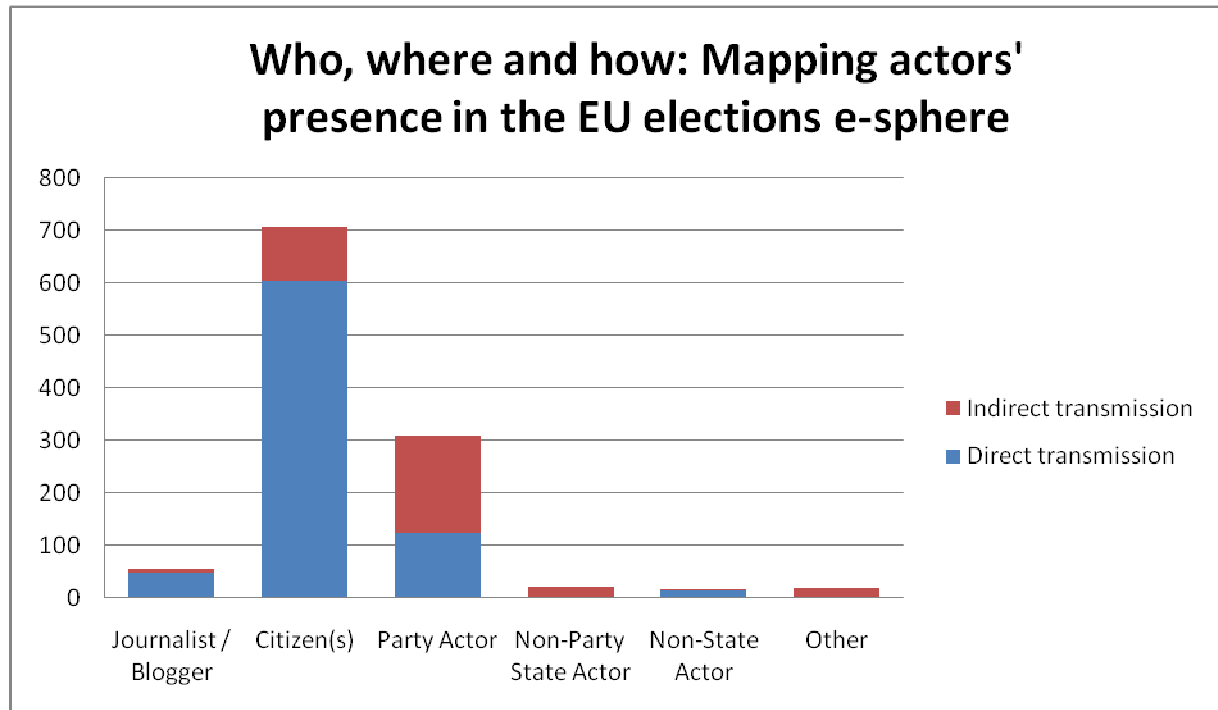


Figure 2: Amount of messages per actor category, location of message and type of transmission (12 member-states and trans-European level)

Furthermore, analysis of the actors' scope, i.e. the capacity in which a participant directly or indirectly contributes to the online debate, shows that nearly all online discussions about the EP elections are national in character. Transnationalisation of EU debates can be observed only within the trans-European websites and social networking groups, where the highest number of non-national actors was identified.

Another important finding pertaining to inclusion is that negative evaluations of the EU's institutional/constitutional set-up dominate (60% of all cases contained a negative evaluation of this dimension; 648 cases) across countries and at trans-EU level and irrespective of the source/platform hosting the EU debate, as well as irrespective of the actor's position (i.e. acting in his/her capacity as journalist, citizens, political or NGO actor) and scope (national, transnational, foreign/non-EU) (Figure 3). The importance of this finding is twofold: Firstly, it contradicts the "audience fragmentation" proposal put forward by scholars, as discussed earlier in this paper, according to which the plurality of media and information sources online leads to fragmentation, and ultimately isolation of audiences, as users seek out only like-minded websites for their information and interaction with other users. In the case of the observed EU election debates, we would have expected to find more positive evaluations of the EU in explicitly pro-EU websites, such as Cafe Babel or the EU Observer. This, however, has not been confirmed by the data.

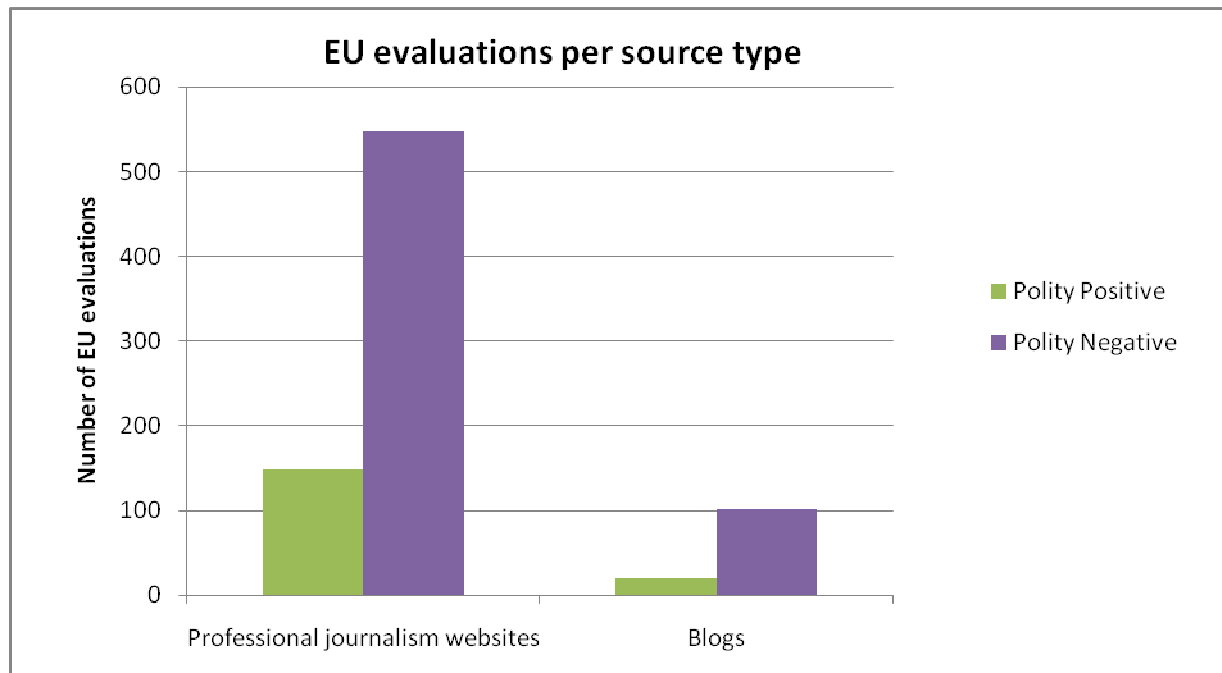


Figure 3: EU evaluations per source type

Secondly, and in combination with the earlier finding concerning the homogeneity of actors participating in EU election e-debates (mostly citizens), the homogeneity of views expressed in assessment of the EU's legitimacy points to the emergence of a community online, which comes together above all in order to debate the current state of EU affairs. While the main articles/threads varied in theme and tone concerning the EU and despite a plurality of views appearing both in the main articles and in the comments, the majority of the EU evaluations was negative towards a specific aspect of the EU (its current state of polity) and originated from citizens. Moreover, the type of evaluations is independent of the type of source, meaning that in spite of the more plural range of topics and opinions hosted in the main articles of professional journalism threads, the majority of EU evaluations in these threads was Eurosceptic, coinciding with the majority of EU evaluations in the blogs, which are certainly more partisan and subjective in tone and audience orientation.

In general, the data points to two categories of debates: a) participation-intensive, whereby the main entry/article of a thread stimulates an intense debate, with users leaving comments in their hundreds, or even thousands; and b) participation-limited, whereby there are few or no comments generated in response to a main entry/article of a thread. In some countries, such as Austria, Poland and the Czech Republic, participation-intensive debates occur more frequently in professional journalism websites. In other cases it was the blogs that generated the most intense online debates in relation to EU election topics.

Moreover, analysis of the manner in which participants interact shows that the EU elections e-sphere is rational and polite (Figure 4).⁷ This is in spite of criticisms concerning the poor quality of citizens' journalism and/or online fora. Specifically, of the 1126 evaluative messages coded, the vast majority was relevant to the thread topic introduced in the main text/article (90.7%) and was expressed in an acceptable (i.e. polite and coherent) manner (93.7%).

Although the maxim of quantity was the most frequently breached one, the majority of contributors adhered to this maxim also (56.4%), which means that they articulated their comments/responses in a consistent yet concise way, appropriate for online communication. Crucially, this standard of communication was maintained across countries and despite most websites either following an *a posteriori* monitoring process (messages may be reported by other users for breaking rules of communication and removed by moderators after they have been posted) or not having a monitoring system in place at all. In addition, although the amount of evaluative messages in breach of any of the three maxims of communication is very low, we can observe a hierarchical link between the three maxims, which means that those who broke the maxim of manner were more likely to also break the other two maxims of communication (Figure 4).

Moreover, there is a clear link between the type of actor and breach of maxims, particularly that of manner: The latter is almost exclusively broken by commentators acting in their capacity as individual citizens (Figure 5). There is also an observed tendency for messages found in blogs to break the maxims of communication, but as the numbers are very small, we cannot be confident about the link between citizens' journalism and breach of the communication maxims.⁸

⁷ See (de Wilde et al. 2010) for further information of the maxims of communication.

⁸ Despite the overall positive findings with regard to the quality of the debates, it is necessary to clarify that this concerns the observed evaluative messages concerning the EU's legitimacy. Of the 638 threads sampled in total, less than 50% contained evaluative statements about the EU (298 threads). In turn, although these threads contained 56.3% of all comments (33,307 comments recorded in 207 threads with evaluative statements, out of a total of 59,194 comments), coding of a comment took place only if an entry was found to contain an evaluation of the EU polity dimension. This amounts to less than 2% of all comments. Consequently, the significance of the EU as a debate topic is very low compared to the wider political public sphere online. Therefore, although the coded data gives an accurate description of how the EU is debated, and encouraging though this may be, the observed quality of communication is not representative of the manner in which political debating takes place online in general.

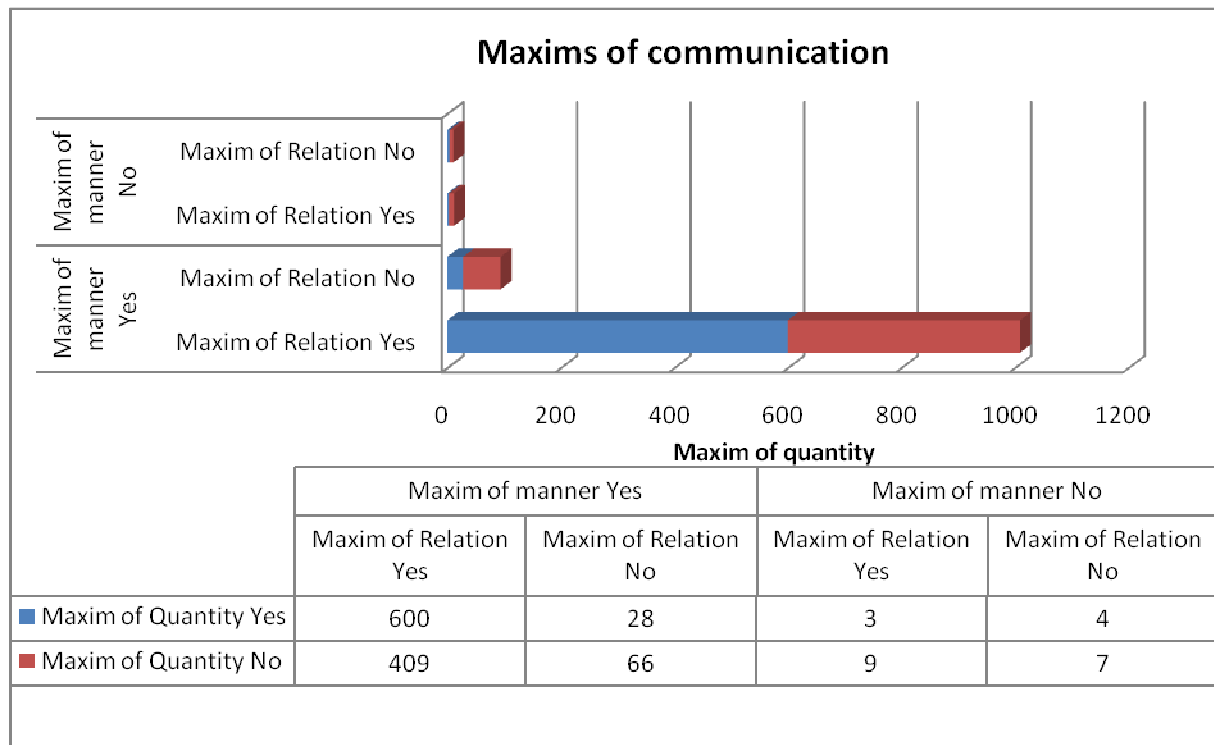


Figure 4: Maxims of communication crosstabulation

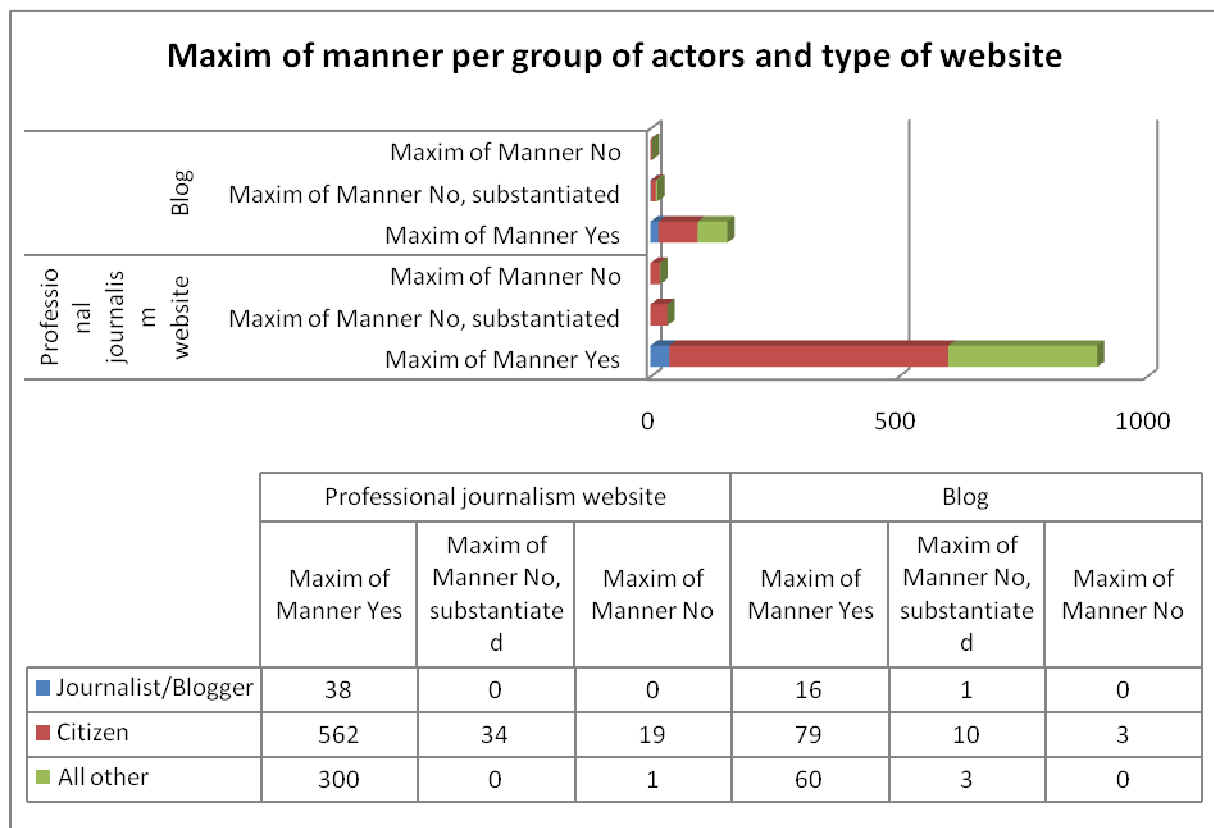


Figure 5: Maxim of manner per group of actors and type of website source

To sum up, the data discussed in this section allows us to conclude that online debates regarding EU legitimacy fully meet the second functional requirement of the public sphere,

namely inclusion. Debates are open to all, enabling individual citizens, who are otherwise largely absent from media debates on the EU, to express their views. Although citizens' comments are not always coherent or polite when concerning specific political actors or participants in the same debate, the majority of views concerning the EU polity are expressed in a manner that adheres to basic communication standards (relevance to topic, appropriate length of response, appropriate tone/style of response). Furthermore, there is plurality in the range of views on EU legitimacy available in online debates. At the same time, there is a consistent trend across all countries with regard to the type of views that are most prevalent in online debates (Euro-sceptic evaluations of the EU polity). This finding points to a form of online community of dissatisfied citizens, who go online to express and share their dissatisfaction, but who do not necessarily seek out like-minded websites where they can air their views. The only aspect of inclusion which is not fully met concerns the transcending of national boundaries, as we only find evidence of transnational debates in the pan-European websites. Nevertheless, this is not due to a conscious effort or decision of online media outlets to exclude non-nationals from debates, but can rather be attributed to practical issues pertaining to language and user habits.

Public opinion formation

One key finding concerning the potential of online debates to shape public opinion regarding the EU polity is that extensive coverage of EU issues (in our case, the EU elections) is not directly proportionate to the intensity of debate on EU legitimacy (number of evaluative messages) as Figure 6 illustrates. Even if online media fulfill their informative role in the case of EU elections, this is not sufficient to generate evaluative public debates on the topic.

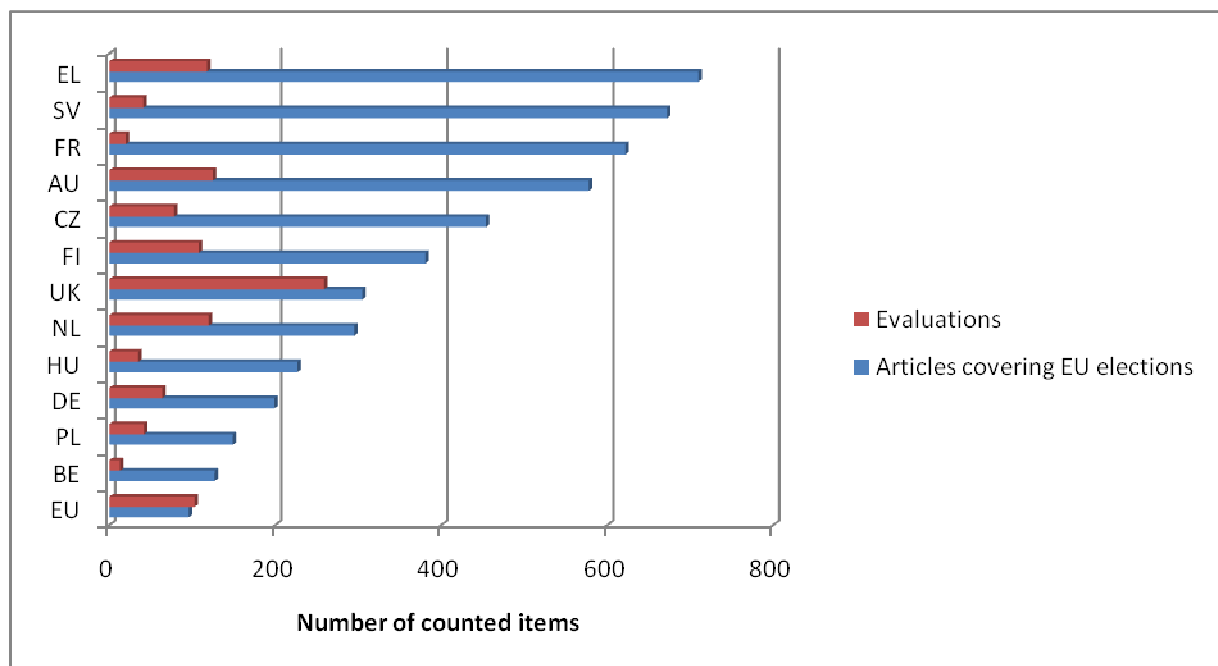


Figure 6: Comparing intensity of EU evaluative debates (number of evaluations coded per country) with overall coverage of EU elections per country

Therefore, in order to assess if the requirement for public opinion formation is met by EU polity debates, we further examined the framing of EU evaluations. For this purpose, we coded the justifications provided by actors in relation to their assessment of the EU's worth. The majority of messages (762) provided a justification of the EU polity evaluation it contained (68% of all messages coded). The fact that the majority of the evaluations were justified further strengthens our earlier observations concerning the quality of the EU elections e-sphere. As well as being rational and polite, the EU political e-sphere shows potential to foster deliberative (i.e. substantiated) discourse.

We can further observe homogeneity in the type of justification that is underlying the polity evaluation: Democracy is the most frequently used category to contextualise/justify an evaluation of the EU polity across the Europhile/Eurosceptic spectrum, with 422 evaluations (55%) out of a total of 762 justified on the basis of democratic principles/governance. This finding is unaffected by the type of actor formulating the evaluation and the type of source where messages are found. It is also independent of countries and country groups.

What can be said with regard to the online debates on EU legitimacy during the 2009 EP election period is that these meet the third functional requirement of the public sphere, namely public opinion formation. Participants do not limit themselves to merely stating their views on EU legitimacy but in the majority of cases provide a justification too. The public opinion formation process also points to a relatively homogenous space of opinions, in terms of how views are qualified. If participants are exposed to such a homogenous space during the process of opinion formation, we can expect to have a progressively homogenous public sphere as an outcome, but for this a longitudinal study is required.

Conclusion

This paper has investigated how and to what extent the internet functions as a public sphere, facilitating the formation of public opinion on the legitimacy of the European Union. Based on a public sphere approach in which we conceptualize the functioning of a public sphere in terms of publicity, participation and public opinion formation, our attention has specifically focused on internet discussions during the campaigns for the 2009 European Parliament elections in 12 Member States on frequently visited news websites. We questioned whether the internet provided a platform to inform citizens on EU legitimacy, whether it functions to engage citizens both individually and collectively in public opinion formation as political actors in their own right, and whether the internet functions to contribute to public opinion formation.

First, we find that the internet functions reasonably well to inform citizens about the EU. In all twelve member states, the most frequently visited news websites paid attention to the European Parliament elections and news items on these elections featured evaluations of EU legitimacy. As these websites increasingly reach European citizens and particularly younger age groups, this coverage and debate performs an important role. At the same time, there remain large national differences as to the extent of coverage of the elections and the extent to which such coverage facilitated evaluations on EU legitimacy.

Secondly, we find that the internet is capable of furthering a citizens' public sphere in the sense that citizens actively engage in public discussion forums to contest the legitimacy of the EU. Not only do we report a substantial amount of evaluations made on EU legitimacy online, we also find that they are in majority made by citizens as opposed to political elites and other societal actors. Furthermore, we find that evaluations of the EU polity are constructive in terms of meeting three maxims of communication. Contributions to the online debate on the legitimacy of the EU are predominantly polite, on topic and reasonably concise. However, we found little evidence of transnational debates as language and other barriers continue to fragment public debates along nation-state boundaries. Only on explicitly transnational websites did we find genuine transnational participation, but the reach of these websites remains limited.

Thirdly, we find that the internet functions as a public opinion formation forum. Irrespective of the country in which websites are based and irrespective of whether they are the internet portal of professional journalism organizations or independent political blogs, evaluations of the EU legitimacy are predominantly negative. Thus, although we have no information on which citizens visit which websites, such information is rendered less important by the fact that citizens will be exposed to more or less the same discourse on the legitimacy of the EU, irrespective of individuals' surfing habits. Finally, the internet's potential to contribute to a citizens' public sphere is substantiated by the fact that a majority of evaluations of EU legitimacy are justified referring to common principles of political legitimacy, thus positively contributing to the foundation of public opinion on commonly held values or 'worths'.

Overall, we may conclude that online contestations of EU legitimacy live up to the functional requirements of a public sphere. The debate taking place online is substantial, polite, justified and relatively homogenous in content, although there remain national differences and little transnational debate. In the contestation of EU legitimacy, the internet therefore should be taken into account as an influential factor. Yet, the extent to which such a functioning online public sphere may actually contribute to resolve the perceived legitimacy deficits of the EU and lack of citizen support depends among other things on how internet discussions are translated towards collective will-formation through the political process. This paper has already indicated that EU evaluations online tend to be predominantly negative in substance. What exactly is the target of these evaluations and how they are justified requires further analysis.

Annex

Websites and their political stance/affiliation selected per country

Country	Professional journalism websites	Blogs
Austria	Der Standard (pro-EU, centre-left) Die Kronenzeitung (anti-EU, populist)	Politikblogs (independent political blog aggregator) Rigardi (independent, journalism student initiative)
Belgium (French-speaking only)	Le Soir (plural) RTL (online news platform) Le Vif l'Express (weekly newspaper, politically independent)	Le Pan (daily updated blog, satirical) Le Blog Politique (politically independent, anti-elitist, mainly entries from France)
Czech Republic	Novikny (left-wing) Aktualne (centre-right) Lidovky (centre-right)	Blogy iDnes (blog platform, mostly centre-right blogs) Blogy iHNed (blog platform, mostly centre-right and business blogs)
Finland	Iltaalehti (politically unaffiliated) Iltasanomat (politically unaffiliated) Helsingin Sanomat (politically unaffiliated, pro-EU)	Kasvi (author: Green Alliance MP and EU Parliament candidate) Soininvaara (author: Osmo Soininvaara, former: MP, member of Government, and chairperson of the Green Alliance).
France	Le Monde (politically independent) Le Figaro (centre-right, affiliated to the UMP party of President Nicolas Sarkozy) Le Nouvel Observateur (centre-left, social-democratic)	Plume de Presse (independent blog written by journalist Olivier Bonnet) Sarkofrance (independent blog, written anonymously)
Germany	Spiegel Online (centre-right) Bild.de (conservative) Sueddeutsche.de (liberal-left)	Bildblog (author: Stefan Niggemeier, offers an opposition to the Springer group media content) Political Incorrect (author: Stefan Herre, pro-American, pro-Israel, 'against the islamization' of Europe)
Greece	Ethnos (centre-left, supporting the socialist party PASOK) Skai (centre-right, non-party affiliated) Ta Nea (centre-left, supporting the socialist party PASOK)	Press-GR (anonymous writers, populist) nonews-NEWS (anonymous writers, populist)
Hungary	Origo (politically unaffiliated) Index (politically unaffiliated) Figyelőnet (liberal)	W – For a Better Magyarland (author: young columnist Árpád Tóta W., mix of liberal and conservative views) Reakció – polgári underground (young conservative group of bloggers)
Netherlands	Nu.nl (politically independent) De Telegraaf (centre-right, supported Pim Fortuyn's LPF in the 2002 elections) NOS (plural)	Geen Stijl (independent blog, populist style, right-wing) Marokko.nl (independent blog platform aimed at young people)
Poland	Gazeta Wyborcza (centre-right) onet.pl (centre-right) TVN24 (politically unaffiliated).	Janusz Palikot blog (author is an active politician from PO government party, right-wing ideology). Janusz Korwin – Mikke blog (populist, right-wing and anti-EU, author: former dissident and monarchist).

Country	Professional journalism websites	Blogs
Sweden	Aftonbladet (centre-left, socialist) Expressen (liberal) Dagens Nyheter (politically independent)	Rick Falkvinge (PP) (the blog of the leader of the EP party Piratpartiet, liberal) Politiskt Inkorrekt (right wing, populist, written anonymously)
United Kingdom	BBC (plural) Guardian (centre-left) The Daily Mail (conservative, populist)	Iain Dale's Diary (author is an active member of the Conservative party) Guido Fawkes' blog (right-wing, libertarian)

Trans-European level	
Professional journalism	EU Observer (emphasis on human rights, environmentalism and the democratisation of the EU)
Blogs	Babel Blogs (blog aggregator, plural, pro-EU, funded partially by the EU) BlogActiv (blog aggregator, plural, mostly pro-EU)
Social networking websites	"European Parliament" Facebook fan page (unknown owner, 54,686 fans at the time of sampling) Voter registration campaign for European Elections 2009" Facebook group (unknown owner, 5,953 members at the time of sampling) "I will vote in the 2009 European Parliament elections" Facebook group, (2,719 members at the time of sampling) ⁹ Twitter #eu09 and #ep09

⁹ Facebook groups are primarily formed on the basis of shared interests of networks or in relation to a cause. Fan pages are created to support a specific person, a cause or an institution.

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