

WP 5 – Civil Society and the Public Sphere

Mediating European integration: Online political communication in European Parliamentary election campaigns

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Introduction

Research on the interrelation between European integration and the media has thus far focused merely on the Europeanization of national public spheres and less on the mediating infrastructures through which the EU is justified and contested in front of a wider public. It has asked what impact European integration has on the news media in the national context and not what impact the enhanced media salience of the EU has on the actors, processes and outcomes of European integration (Koopmans & Statham, 2010; Wessler et al., 2008). This is not so peculiar, as the consensual style of politics that marked European integration over the first decades has frequently not created sufficient news value to make European politics salient in the media (Trenz et al., 2009).

However, more recently the progressively intensifying politicization of European integration has been subject to substantial news coverage and public debate, the Treaty of Lisbon being a case in point. The mediation of the political system of the EU has, therefore, been advanced in the sense of affecting the work of its political institutions and its basic legitimacy (Meyer, 2009; Trenz, 2008). There is, thus, a correlation between the increasing contestation of EU issues and mediating infrastructures understood here as the repercussions of media amplification and salience on how legitimacy of the EU political system is perceived, which merits further research attention (Trenz et al., 2009).

It is precisely this relation between EU politicisation and mediation that we focus our research on. As the so-called 'traditional' media (press, television, radio) have repeatedly been found to re-affirm the nation state and the legitimacy of contextualised national politics (Gerhards & Schafer, 2010; Hafez & Skinner, 2007; Risse & van de Steeg, 2003; Trenz, 2004), we revisit the proposal that the online public sphere allows for the development of a more cosmopolitan perspective that can in turn help promote the legitimacy of such 'beyond the nation-state' democratic designs as the EU polity (Blumler & Coleman, 2001; Engström, 2002; Leonard & Arbuthnott, ©2001; Weiler, 1999). This hypothesis has been tested in several studies thus far but the focus has been on the use of the internet by political input providers, such as national and transnational political actors, EU institutions and/or social movements (Braghiroli, 2009; Foot et al., 2009; Michailidou, 2008b; Tønnevd, 2009; Zimmermann et al., 2004). We argue that, although these approaches are undeniably useful, 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. This is particularly relevant in the case of the European Parliament (EP), which claims legitimacy in front of a new type of transnational constituency, comprising several national constituencies not necessarily interrelated or linked through offline communicative channels.

In this context, our research focuses on the analysis of online debates during the 2009 EP elections.¹ The first key question we ask is if there is a European online public sphere emerging that is substantially and qualitatively different from the existing public and media spheres of the member states. Secondly we ask what the implications of such an online public sphere are for EU politics and the legitimacy both of the EU as a polity and of the EU as a legitimate 'other' in the public debate.

In the first part of the paper we present our conceptual scheme, which is based on three interrelated conditions, which have to be met by the media to fulfil its legitimating function as part of the political process, namely publicity, participation and public opinion

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formation. We argue that these are necessary conditions for the generation of EU legitimacy through public debate. We then proceed to root our conceptual scheme in the literature concerning the increasing socio-political significance of online media in general and in relation to EU politics more particularly. In this part of the paper, we formulate our research questions and hypotheses in the context of existing research on online political communication and its implications for the public sphere and legitimacy. In the final part of the paper, we outline our research design for recording and systematically comparing publicity, participation and public opinion formation in online EP election debates across countries (horizontal axis) and between national and supranational levels of public debate (vertical axis).

Contesting EU legitimacy

A public sphere approach

Drawing on the extensive literary tradition of the public sphere as an analytical concept that links processes of political communication in its input, throughput and output dimension (Gerhards & Neidhardt, 1991; Trenz, 2005), we propose in the following that research on the generation of EU-legitimacy (and of public legitimation in general) should focus at the complex processes of intermediation as they are facilitated by the mass media. While inputs in the form of institutional performances and outputs in the form of individual attitudes and public opinion have been researched extensively, there is a noticeable gap in analysing the throughput dimension of political communication. This regards the crucial role of the mass media in focusing public attention on the political process of the EU, including plural voice and enabling informed opinion-making.

We further argue that 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 (Calhoun, 1993; Fraser, 2007; Habermas, 1989; Habermas, 1992; Trenz, 2009). Again, the mass media are crucial in giving shape to the intrinsic normativity of the public sphere by a) distributing information about the political process (publicity), b) enabling plural voice and debates (participation) and c) expressing informed opinions and evaluations (public opinion making). In doing so, the mass media internalise the normative script of the public sphere in the form of quantitative and qualitative standards for the mediation of political communication, which should be informative, inclusive and conclusive. In the following, we take *publicity*, *participation* and *opinion-formation* as the three dimensions of our analytical assessment of the performance of the EU online public sphere.

Publicity

The first, and seemingly self-evident, condition for a public sphere to come into existence is publicity. However, 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 analyse the political process in a format suitable for the wider audience.

In contrast to 'publicness', publicity refers to a quality of discourse, which cannot be achieved only by the 'good will' of the communicators to enhance the transparency of the political process but relies on the mediating infrastructure of the public sphere to spur public resonance. Publicity, therefore, refers to a medium's capacity to make the political process and debates accessible, understandable and salient. In this sense, publicity links the performance of political actors to provide political information (inputs); with the performance of journalists to select, report and analyse (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 centralised channels of distribution we can expect audience focalisation. If, on the other hand, political communication is decentralised and specialised with low and shifting attention of the audiences, we can expect audience fragmentation.

We, therefore, argue that publicity needs to be analysed 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. This brings us to the second component condition, participation.

Participation

The condition of participation relates to the plurality of voices that are raised in public and media debates. This 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 normative assumptions here are that the mass media should build a forum for the participation of plural actors in debates and should activate audiences to intervene and to express informed opinion in ongoing debates.

Whereas publicity relates to a passive audience, participation refers to the more active processes that define the relationship between those that produce and distribute input and those that receive it. Therefore, 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. The question here is whether citizens who are regularly informed about the political process develop a propensity to become active and to intervene in debates, in fact might even be encouraged by the media to do so.

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; a classic example here being what Habermas described as the reading publics of the bourgeois public sphere (Habermas, 1989). 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 final requirement of informed and conclusive public opinion formation.

Public opinion formation

Public opinion is generally discussed as the outcome of the process of political mediation through the public sphere. As such, public opinion is conceived as an attribute of the populations (e.g. the electorate) that constitute the audience of the political process. It is usually measured as the aggregated opinion expressed by individuals in opinion polls. This statistical measurement neglects 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 & 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).

Through public debate, participants formulate their views on contested issues but are also exposed to opposing views and arguments. 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 recognising the 'other' as a legitimate partner in the debate (Davidson, 2001; Kantner, 2002); 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.

The figure below summarises the public sphere approach and illustrates its three interrelated component conditions of the media's role.

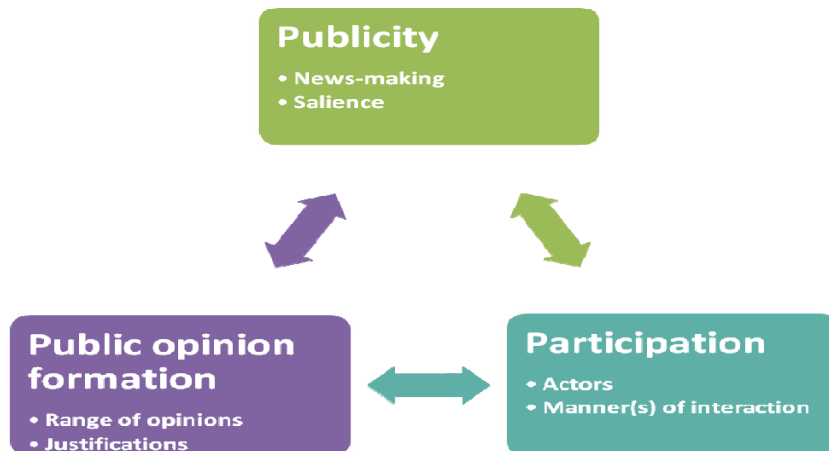


Figure 1: The three components of the media's role in the public sphere

EU legitimacy

Applying the public sphere approach

Although the EU's legitimacy has been under fire for quite some time now, the most recent ballot of European Parliamentary elections in June 2009 really brought the message home: Not only did abstention levels rise to a record 57% EU-wide (The European Parliament, 2009a), but the Eurosceptic 'voice' of Europe is now represented by more MEPs and from more member-states than ever before (The European Parliament, 2009b). How can we account for this widening gap between the EU and its citizens, in spite of the intensified communication efforts of EU institutions and governments? Particularly, as far as the June 2009 EP elections are concerned, how do we explain the unbroken trend of a Eurosceptic backlash against European integration?

By deploying a public sphere approach we move beyond the narrow scope of party politics in the analysis of election campaigns (Marsh, 1998; Thomassen et al., 2004). In order to assess how successful established political actors (like MEPs, political parties or EU commissioners) are in gaining public attention, it is important to look at current media debates unfolding outside the fora/spaces provided by parties, institutions and politicians. Particularly during election campaigns in Europe, PR-efforts and campaigns (in terms of political communication through party manifestos, speeches and institutional websites) are not always sufficient (Coleman, 2005). Political parties interact and debate in a public arena. The task is not only to reach particular parties constituencies or user communities, which are relatively small in size, but also the mass electorate. For this purpose political parties rely on the mass media to amplify their messages and to promote their candidates.

Moreover, in order to assess the divide between the EU and its citizens, it is not sufficient to understand the mechanisms through which political actors gain *publicity*. An adequate understanding of mediation and public contention of the EU is also crucial. The legitimacy impact of EU political communication can only be understood by taking into account the dynamics and effects of mediation (participation and public opinion formation) through which political parties' performances are interlinked and meaning is transmitted to the potential audiences. Research on EU legitimacy therefore needs to turn to the heart of

the public sphere where the struggle about the legitimacy of the EU is made salient and accessible to the wider public (Trenz, 2008).

From existing research, we know that the national public sphere as constituted by traditional offline media such as newspapers and television, is only Europeanised to a limited extent (Trenz, 2008; Wessler et al., 2008). We, therefore, turn our attention to the legitimising potential of the online public sphere. No longer a 'new' medium, the internet has established itself as an integral source of political news/information for a large proportion of the voting population. In the most recent US presidential election, 55% of the entire adult American population (74% of internet users) used the internet to find, receive and share political news, participate in political e-debates and follow the electoral campaign (Smith, 2009). Crucially, for the first time the internet became the third major source for news on elections after television and radio, displacing print newspapers (ibid.). Europeans continue to trust conventional media more than the internet for their political information. Still, 27% of all citizens in 25 member states and the candidate countries would prefer the internet as their source of information on politics (Eurobarometer, 2009).

Central to our research is an assessment of the impact of the online public sphere in amplifying EU political debates. In line with our public sphere approach, impact is assessed in terms of publicity, participation and public opinion formation. What is proposed here is that these conditions for amplifying EU political communication are met by online media with two possible outcomes:

Hypothesis 1) The emerging EU-online public sphere is substantially different from the existing offline public spheres of the member states in terms of scope, participation and legitimacy.

Hypothesis 2) The emerging EU-online public sphere is merely a reproduction of the exiting offline public spheres of the member states, the features of which in terms of publicity, participation and legitimacy are magnified through online mediation.

In the following part of the paper we ground our hypotheses with regard to each of these dimensions in the scholarly debate between cyber-optimists and cyber-pessimists and formulate the research questions that will guide the country case studies to be presented in the subsequent chapters of this paper.

Publicity

Online news-making and news salience

As a global communication tool, the Internet provides instant access to world news. This shift from national to global news production and distribution is further expected to have far reaching consequences for the demarcation of the public, which can no longer be confined to the national community.

The optimistic argument is that the online news mechanism enhances transnational democracy by no longer exposing the public to national perspectives only but also to cosmopolitan ones (Hannerz, 2004; McNair, 2006). The internet is thus seen as a global meeting space where world citizens meet and exchange opinions. In particular, this concerns the building of a global news room, in which the boundaries between domestic and foreign news become blurred. The multitude of sources and opinions means that mass exposure to relatively uniform political content can no longer be taken for granted (Rasmussen, 2009), while political discourse and action are now also located outside the realm of the strictly defined public sphere of political institutions (decentralisation of online media sources) (Graham, 2008).

On the other hand, cyber-pessimists point to empirical findings which highlight the national context within which political news on the internet is produced and consumed (Domingo et al., 2008; Paterson & Domingo, 2008). In line with this is the increasing fragmentation and marginalisation of political news. Internet critics such as Claes Sunstein have predicted that political news will remain a niche product on the internet, which develops mainly as the medium for social networking and individual profiling (Sunstein, 2007). Consequently, the internet would create biased echo chambers instead of focal points for political news (ibid.). It would provide an infrastructure of cultural chaos instead of centrally controlled information and ordered debates (McNair, 2009).

In terms of the online public sphere's news-making capacity, internet critics also suggest the rapid, if not imminent, demise of professional journalism and the multiplication of messages through political blogs (Gitlin, 1998). Indeed, to the extent that the internet is penetrated by commercial logics, the quality of impartial and objective political news is difficult to uphold. Online news are no longer provided by professional journalists but by news agencies and news tickers (centralisation of online news sources), while quality checks are random (Davies, 2009; Sunstein, 2001; Sunstein, 2007). In a survey of online journalists, the majority of respondents acknowledged that there is a loosening of standards and more carelessness in online news gathering. Online political news improves in quantity in terms of technical advancements and speed (30%) but not in quality in terms reporting skills such as storytelling or greater depth (Pew Project for Excellence in Journalism, 2009). Also the British Press Complaints Commission notices a decline of standards in online journalism as an effect of editorial cutbacks and pressures of time to put incoming news instantly online (McNally, 2009).

Certainly, the demand for continuous updates and information streaming has pushed the time for political and journalistic reflection to even tighter limits (Rasmussen, 2008; Rasmussen, 2009), simultaneously challenging traditional forms of journalistic writing with the rise of the 'private' or 'citizen' journalism style (Jouët, 2009; McNair, 2009; Ruellan, 2007; Schudson, 2009; Stanyer, 2009).

At the same time, there is an undimmed trend to make offline news also available online. Newspapers generally allow for open and free access of their whole spectrum of news and opinion. Journalists deliver news for the paying subscribers of the newspaper and for an unknown public that simply retrieves the news from the Internet. Thus, the internet allows for the blurring of the offline and online public spheres, by bringing offline debates to online audiences.

This trend, however, has had a profound impact on the already faltering editorial and business models of offline media, the press in particular (Davies, 2009; McNair, 2009; Stanyer, 2009; Steensen, 2009). As a result, several newspapers, mostly broadsheets or of specialised content, such as the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* in Germany, the *New York Times*, the *Economist* and the *European Voice*, have opted for exclusion and have restricted the access to certain or all political news and commentary to subscribed, paying online users. This leads to a fragmentation of online audiences, this time on the basis of users' willingness and/or ability to pay for content. Subsequently, newspaper websites become fragmented, so as to cater for the different types of users and, while publicity in terms of paid-for material is built primarily on offering qualitative news-making in order to attract subscribers, non-paying users are presented with more features that have little to do with political debates (such as advertisements, quizzes and online polls and/or games).

Research Question One

Based on the above, we formulate our *first Research Question* as follows: What is the impact of the internet on the publicity of EU political communication and news-making on EU political affairs in general? With regard to the two hypotheses we proposed earlier, two are the possible answers to this question.

EU online public sphere: Hypothesis 1a

According to the cyber-optimist approach, we would expect that the EU online public sphere facilitates political communication in a transnational context. The online hosts of EU debates enjoy high salience and are distinct from the mediators of relevant offline debates. The amplifying effect of the online public sphere is positive not only in terms of increasing the salience and quantity of information and debates on the EU but also the news-making quality of the mediators. With the advantage that EP election campaigns focus the attention of several, otherwise fragmented audiences, around the same event and within the same timeframe. As we focus our observation on a specific EU election campaign (May-June 2009), these publicity qualities ought to be more pronounced, as a certain degree of harmonisation of otherwise fragmented spaces of communication is to be expected because of the election event.

EU online public sphere: Hypothesis 2a

More pessimistically, our second hypothesis predicts that, despite the favourable conditions created by the EP election event (focus of fragmented audiences' attention on one issue within the same timeframe), the online public debates do not succeed in superseding national borders, both in terms of framing of EU debates and of creating cross-border communication channels. Moreover, the online hosts of EU debates remain the same or closely linked to their offline counterparts (offline media dominate online debates). The internet amplifies the news-making capacity of online mediators in terms of EU information quantity but this is not followed by an equal positive amplification of news-making quality. In other words, there is a lot of unprocessed, factual information concerning the EU elections, but very little and/or poor quality political analysis and commentary.

Online participation Access and dynamics of interaction

One of the internet's core characteristics is the blurring or reshaping of identity: In theory, who you are in 'real' life does not interfere with your access to and presence in the online public sphere. Gender, ethnicity, age and socio-economic status are irrelevant, as one's online persona can be completely different from their 'real', offline person (see Michailidou 2008 for a synopsis of the relevant discussion). As a result, the internet profoundly changes the representation of the political space and of the political community. It affects the distinction between private and public, domestic and foreign or national and international. By redrawing the boundaries of the social, the Internet displays different patterns of trust and solidarity and involves various groups in public opinion and will formation; it brings together user groups that are not necessarily identical with the national community or public.

However, critics point to the exclusionary effects of the 'digital divide': Nearly a quarter of the world's internet population is located in Europe (Miniwatts Marketing Group, 2009a) and even here internet penetration varies widely across the continent, with a noticeable gap between the 'connected' North and the not-so-connected South. Although this gap is closing fast particularly among EU member states, only 56 per cent of the EU's

population were regular internet users in 2008, including individuals from socio-economic groups classified as disadvantaged or vulnerable, such as the economically inactive, the 'less educated' and those aged 55-64 (Commission of the European Communities; Eurostat, 2008).²

Nevertheless, 80% of regular EU internet users engage in increasingly interactive activities, such as sharing and creating new content (Commission of the European Communities, 2009a-d) and find that the internet has improved their lives in terms of their capability to stay informed about current issues (87%) and deal with public authorities (48%) (ibid.).³ Those in the age group of 16-34 are the most intensive internet users, going online not only for conventional actions, such as emailing and information/news searching, but also for advanced internet actions, such as blogging, internet banking and creating their own web pages (ibid.: 49-55). 59% of users aged 16-24 use Web 3.0 real-time communication tools, such as online instant messaging, while a substantial proportion of individuals in this age population read, participate and create their own blogs (35%, 44% and 13% respectively) (ibid.: 46).

We can thus speak of a *de-facto online community*, bound together by the technology itself. At the same time, there is evidence that the online community is evolving into one of collective consciousness too: Contrary to the perception (partially, at least) favoured by scholarly debates of online social media as ego-boosters of publicity-seeking individuals (Peter, 2009), research shows that social spaces' activity is largely motivated by a desire to *increase* personal interaction, become members of a community and/or opine and debate (De Rosa et al., 2007).

There is plenty of evidence how interactive and social media are increasingly shaping citizens' life experiences, expectations and, consequently, political preferences. 'Computing is not about computers anymore. It is about living' (Negroponte, 1995). Negroponte's vision of the digital society has never been more real than today. With nearly 1.6 billion users worldwide (Miniwatts Marketing Group, 2009b), the internet has become an integral part not only of the economic but also the *social* infrastructure for the majority of its users (De Rosa et al., 2007; Hayes, 2006) with unprecedented speed. In fact, the term 'internet users' is no longer accurate: The majority of the individuals who 'go online' nowadays are 'digital citizens' (or netizens) either 'born into' the technology or by naturalisation (users born in the pre-internet era but who have been online for seven years or more, including the majority of users over 50 years of age) (De Rosa et al., 2007).

Crucially, today's Web community has migrated from using the Internet to building it (the so-called Web 2.0 era).⁴ Internet users today are not just looking for information; they are members of the 'social web', where networking, as well as file and information sharing, is the norm. Central to the social web are social networking sites, such as Facebook (Facebook, 2009) and MySpace (MySpace.com, 2009); social media sites, such as YouTube (YouTube LLC, 2009) and Snapfish (Snapfish.com, 2009); and weblogs

² According to the most recent reports, the numbers of users from these groups are rising the fastest (Eurobarometer, 2009; Punie et al., 2009). In terms of the 'broadband divide', the EU is a world leader in broadband internet availability (broadband is available to 93% of the EU25 population) and market penetration, with 50% of all EU households and 80% of businesses now having a fixed broadband connection (Commission of the European Communities, 2005c).

³ For more information on the specific actions the EU has taken within the framework of the i2010 strategy, which aims to make the Union the world's most dynamic and competitive knowledge-based economy by 2010, see also (Commission of the European Communities, 2006h; Commission of the European Communities, 2005c; Commission of the European Communities).

⁴ Core functions of the Web 1.0 era (the early days of the internet and the World Wide Web), such as email and search engines, have now reached near-saturation levels. At the same time, availability and access to the internet are steadily spreading across the globe, no longer the privilege of few economically 'advanced' nations (De Rosa et al., 2007; Miniwatts Marketing Group, 2008).

(online, publicly available, personal diaries). The popularity of Web 2.0 spaces is such that Facebook now ranks third most popular website in the world; YouTube is fourth; and Blogger (Google.com, 2009), the most widely-used blog-hosting platform, is seventh (Alexa Internet, 2009).⁵ Digital citizens 'make' information and actively participate in social networks and online forums (De Rosa et al., 2007; Sifry, 2007).

In fact, the rise of Web 2.0 functions and actions has been so rapid, that we have already started moving towards the next phase of online communications, branded Web 3.0 or 'live' internet, where all online exchanges take place in real-time, cooperative mode (see, for example, (Hayes, 2006). Perhaps one of the most easily recognisable examples of Web 3.0 is Twitter (Twitter, 2009), a platform that enables real-time 'microblogging', whereby users can produce a constant stream of brief (up to 140 words) updates on their daily activities and/or opinions on any imaginable issue, as well as follow the updates of others in real time. Counting only three years of online life, Twitter ranks 17th most popular website worldwide (Alexa Internet, 2009) and currently facilitates the production and circulation of over 18 million daily updates, better known as 'tweets' (Reed, 2009).

Although it would be naive to deny that the online public sphere is shaped to some extent by the offline public sphere and, consequently, reflects the socio-economic inequalities and political deficiencies of the 'real' world, the evidence concerning the various types of digital divides is inconclusive, to say the least (Shirazi, 2009). Even staunch critics of 'Web 2.0' politics, like Sunstein (Sunstein, 2007), argue that it is only a matter of time before such divides are largely eliminated.

More crucially, perhaps, the concept of openness in online debates, although in several aspects similar, is not to be confused with the criterion of inclusion and equality in rational deliberative democratic theories (Witschge, 2008). The online public sphere is inclusive not only in terms of 'all those affected, but also of different types of discourses and different forms of communication', extending beyond, but not excluding, 'what the majority would argue to be rational' (ibid.: 77). At the same time, the element of equality in online debates is different from offline deliberative discourse in that it applies to the right of individuals not only to participate freely, but also to 'raise issues, initiate debates, provide information and question others' (ibid.). Credibility and authority of opinion are not pre-determined by one's socio-economic or educational status, but are continuously negotiated.

In this context, some scholars approach the digital media as carriers of a new cosmopolitanism, capable of breaking up the representative order of political communication as it has been demarcated by the nation-state (Hannerz 2004). The internet is thus seen as a global meeting space where world citizens meet and exchange opinions. Moreover, public communication turns from more hierarchical (top-down) forms to more responsive, horizontal patterns of exchange (Buss & Buss, 2006; Dahlgren & Olsson, 2008; Downey, 2007; le Grignou & Patou, 2003; Papacharissi, 2002; Zimmermann & Erbe, 2002). As a result, new groups are empowered and transnational alliances facilitated.

Others point out that while traditional media work towards unitary representation of the members of the political community, the internet systematically promotes diversified representations of its multiple users (Cheong et al., 2009). Because the exposure to political news online is increasingly dependent on the consumption choices of individual users, who make use of personalised news formats to steer the filtering process and design their own news worlds (Sunstein 2001: 7), the internet is thus seen as an echo chamber in which individualised users reaffirm their pre-existing views.

⁵ Indicative of the popularity of blogs is not only their rapid rise to online and offline fame but also their number: Since their appearance in the early '00s, blogs had risen to 133,000,000 worldwide in 2008 (Technorati, 2008).

Research Question Two

In this context, we formulate our *second Research Question* as follows: What is the impact of the internet on the participation dynamics in EU political debates?

EU online public sphere: Hypothesis 1b

Drawing on the above, the optimistic hypothesis concerning the participatory potential of the EU e-sphere unfolds as follows: The technology-enabled core characteristics of online communication (identity fluidity, lack of hierarchy, transcendence of space and time barriers) allow for an inclusive EU public sphere to develop. This means that citizens across all member states participate in the online public debates on equal terms as political actors and professional mediators (journalists). Moreover, we are able to observe if not a fully-fledged online community, at least its beginnings. The participants of the EU e-sphere visit online fora not only to publicise their views and obtain those of others, but reach out of their national spheres and come together online to debate their common EU issues with each other. This implies a different view on users, not as single participants but as representatives of the broader public. What is central is that such participatory online debates are staged for a general audience, representing particular issues, concerns, interpretations or evaluation of the EU as relevant for the wider public.

EU online public sphere: Hypothesis 2b

Contrary to the above, a pessimistic scenario would see the participatory formats of the offline national public spheres magnified and multiplied online. Political communication would remain linear, with political parties and professional mediators setting both the foundations and tone of the public debate and citizens able to react in a restricted manner. No dialogue will be recorded between citizens and political actors or journalists, while participants will not reach beyond their national and ideological public spheres to seek interaction and debate across geographical or political borders. Community-building is observed only to the extent that this is dictated by the use of the technology itself (de facto online community) or by offline community ties. In other words, what brings participants to the online fora where EU issues are debate is the simple fact that they all use the internet for gathering political information and/or are all consumers/subscribers of the same media offline.

Online public opinion formation and democratic legitimacy

Regardless of which stance one adopts towards the impact of the internet on politics (cyber-optimist or cyber-pessimist), it cannot be denied that the digital public sphere has a deep impact on how to conceive the future of democracy and of democratic politics within and beyond the nation state. The rise and establishment of the 'network' society (Castells, 2000; Castells, 2009) could not have left the domain of democratic politics unchanged. Aside from the practical and financial benefits for 'every day' politics, or e-government (Malina, 2003), such as reduction of bureaucracy, scholarly debates focus on the potential of the internet to enhance democratic legitimisation through mobilisation of the electorate and public opinion and will formation.

Insofar as voter mobilisation is concerned, the US has been leading the way, with President Obama's electoral campaign being the most recent example. Deemed an 'exemplary technology-based strategy in politics' (Butler & Harris, 2009) Obama's official campaign material alone was watched for 14.5 million hours on YouTube, worth a reported \$47 million in advertising time (Cain Miller, 2008). The internet was also used for a host of other campaigning actions, from information dissemination to fundraising

and networking (Butler & Harris, 2009), while after the election an official website was established (The Obama-Biden Transition Project, 2009) to keep in touch with voters during Obama's transition period.

Research in South-East Asian countries, such as South Korea, Japan and the Philippines, has shown that regardless of a country's level of e-development, digital media play a strong role as participatory communication channels (Park & Jankowski, 2008).⁶ More recently, Kluver et al. (2007) have shown that political leaders across the globe 'cannot afford to turn their backs on hundreds of thousands of users and potential voters who can be found online. The authors arrived at such a conclusion after conducting the first systematic (i.e. using standardised methodology for all case studies) cross-national study of national and transnational political campaigns on the internet in 15 democratic countries, including several EU members, as well as India, Sri Lanka, Australia, Indonesia and the United States.

Studies on the impact of the internet on public opinion have frequently found a correlation between internet use and support of democracy (Wolling, 2009). The Web politically empowers citizens, increases their general satisfaction with the political system, their political interest and likelihood of voting (Johnson & Kaye, 2003: 28). When compared with the general public, the online community proves also more cosmopolitan in their value orientation than the general public (Norris, 2001: 212). Enhancing the access to political news in the internet could thus be seen as an instrument to build generalised trust among the citizens and a principally positive identification with the political system.

Democratic legitimacy is not only measured in terms of outcomes of political support and citizens' mobilisation. It is first and foremost measured in terms of the quality of political debates, through which political representatives provide good arguments and justifications for political choices and include the citizens in the process of political opinion and will formation. While the evidence pointing to the internet's role as an electorate-mobilising and political PR tool is encouraging, to say the least, its role in enhancing deliberative discourse is less evident and significantly more difficult to measure and prove. The internet's inherent characteristics of identity fluidity, real time- and space- free communication and seemingly endless flow of information certainly give it the potential to host the ideal Habermasian public sphere: Deliberative, egalitarian and democratising.

Crucially, the internet allows political actors to campaign for political programmes by addressing directly the electorate and entering into a dialogue with the voters. At the same time, it enables citizens to take on the role of political journalists, either by establishing their own political/news blog, or by contributing information, commentary and/or photographic material to professional journalism websites (Lasica, 2003). It is precisely this potential that a host of scholars have highlighted, suggesting the coming of a new era in local, national and global politics (Blumler & Coleman, 2001; Castells, 2009; Chadwick, 2006; Chadwick & Howard, 2009; Coleman & Götze, 2001; Dahlgren, 2005; Michailidou, 2008b; Poster, 1995).⁷

Nevertheless, the more sceptical cohort of 'cyber-pessimists' (Norris, 2001), has systematically deconstructed this ideal-type model of the e-sphere and has pointed to a more sobering reality of 'politics as usual' but with the added layer of electronic communications (le Grignou & Patou, 2003; Norris, 2001; Sclove, 2004; Venkatesh et al., 2004).⁸ The argument here is that political news on the internet contributes to the

⁶ See also (Ho et al., 2003; Park & Jankowski, 2008; Rafael, 2005; Sing, 2008; Soon & Kluver, 2007).

⁷ See also (Dahlberg, 2007; Hamelink, 2006; Hands, 2007; Pinter & Oblak, 2006).

⁸ Similarly, see (Albrecht, 2006; Downey, 2007; Shapiro, 1999; Sunstein, 2001; Van Alstyne & Brynjolfsson, 2005).

weakening of the political public sphere through audience fragmentation. The internet is thus seen as an echo chamber in which individualised users reaffirm their pre-existing views.

Moreover, a large proportion of studies on e-politics aim to evaluate the type or 'quality' of democracy to which the internet contributes (Albrecht, 2006; Dahlgren, 2005; Engström, 2002). Specifically with regard to the state of the political e-sphere in European countries, several studies confirm the cyber-pessimist viewpoint with regard to the limited scope of online political communication and its restricted deliberative capabilities. In his analysis of Austrian online discussions, Fuchs (2006) showed that while there was a large degree of interactive discussion, there was also a significant presence of insulting or outright destructive postings, an issue highlighted previously in Papacharissi's research (Papacharissi, 2002). Crucially, several scholars 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 (Jankowski & van Os, 2004) on online fora; cf. (Dahlberg, 2001). Examining online debates in terms of strong democracy pillars (reciprocity, rationality and tone of discussion)⁹ Strandberg (Strandberg, 2008) found that although Finnish online political discussions met the qualitative deliberative ideal of diversity of discussion topic, they did not meet the standards of deliberative content, tone of message and validation of arguments.

In terms of quantifying the deliberative ideal, Finnish debates fared better, as the standards of liveliness and intensity of debate were met (although findings varied widely), while the equality of discussants also was satisfactory (Strandberg, 2008). Similarly, Bentivegna's early study, found that the horizontal nature of citizens' online communication in discussion forums corresponds to communities 'bound together by horizontal relationships of reciprocity and cooperation', thus fulfilling the criteria of strong democracy (Bentivegna, 2002). Moreover, evidence from the UK suggests that the socio-economic inequalities typically found to affect political participation offline, are not as significant online. Rather, a user's internet experience (both the number of years one has used the internet for and the self-rated and actual internet proficiency) determines the extent to which she/he will become politically engaged online (di Gennaro & Dutton 2006).¹⁰

Research Question Three

From the above, our *third Research Question* emerges as follows: What is the impact of the internet on the formation of public opinion and the evaluation of the legitimacy of the EU? Again, two are the potential answers:

EU online public sphere: Hypothesis 1c

One possibility is that online public opinion formation in relation to the EU would deviate from the relevant offline model, both in terms of the range of views presented and in the manner these are debated. More specifically, taking into account the internet's potential for inclusive, anti-hierarchical debate, we can expect to find a wider range of opinions about the EU online, than that hosted by offline media. Subsequently, we would expect EU legitimacy views that are considered marginal in offline debates to have a presence online. One possibility is that in those countries where Eurosceptic views tend not to be

⁹ As these are identified by Barber (1984).

¹⁰ But this finding was not corroborated by studies in other member states, such as Belgium, where the typical 'elite' internet user profile (young, male, educated) was verified instead (Hooghe & Teepe, 2007).

given a lot of airtime or print space, online debates concerning the EU will be less supportive of its legitimacy than offline debates. The opposite would be expected in countries where offline debates are generally Eurosceptic: Supportive views of the EU legitimacy would be more abundant online, due to the internet's amplifying effect on public opinion (trans)formation.

Moreover, deliberation would be amplified online, to the extent that the internet enables participants to have direct interaction rather than linear communication. Citizens forming the wider audience-receptor of EU debates would be able to develop and qualify their views online, in direct response to opinions presented by political actors or journalists. This would be in direct contrast with the process of public opinion formation offline. There the audiences are exposed to more or less supportive views of the EU legitimacy, but the impact of this exposure (i.e. the degree to which citizens form their opinions because of the exposure to these views) can only be measured in general terms through opinion polls.

The manner in which opinions are justified is also expected to be positively amplified in online debates: Enhanced by the greater degree of openness (limited censorship) in online fora, expression of political opinion becomes bolder, but without merely negating the object of debate (EU legitimacy). Online dialogue concerning the EU polity is therefore expected to follow what Balkin defines as 'democratic culture' dissent:

Dissent, [...] is creative and cumulative. It appropriates elements of what it objects to and uses them in the process of critique, often through subverting or parodying them. [...] Thus, dissent exists in an interactive and interdependent relationship to the object of its criticism, appropriating elements of what it rebukes in order to make its claims. [...] In this way, dissent, and responses to dissent, are not mere repudiations of what has come before, but have a cumulative effect, building on existing materials and practices, and propelling and transforming culture forward.

(Balkin, 2004: 47-48)

EU online public sphere: Hypothesis 2c

In a cyber-pessimist scenario, online debates about the EU polity unfold in a manner similar to that of offline debates. The range of views concerning the legitimacy of the EU is not amplified to include otherwise marginalised or not-represented offline voices. Even if the range of actors is extended online, with citizens having access to and a voice in the online EU public sphere, the opinions concerning the legitimacy of the latter are restricted to those that are available/acceptable offline.

Further to this, communication between political actors, journalists and citizens remains linear, in spite of the technological possibilities for increased interaction and direct communication with multiple recipients. The implication of this is that it is no more possible to gauge public opinion formation online than it is to do so offline. Rather than having the opportunity to observe how wider audiences formulate their opinions on the EU's legitimacy by reacting to the input of political actors and/or journalists, we will only be able to identify distinct opinions, without having a clear idea of the public opinion formation mechanism behind them.

Lastly, in the cyber-pessimist version of the online EU public sphere, debate in itself will be limited, as audiences will remain fragmented not only on the basis of nationality, but also because of the multiple criteria users will deploy to build their personalised online public space. Individuals will seek out those online spaces that simply reaffirm their views about the EU's legitimacy. In the limited occasions when individuals will reach beyond the quality of debate will be reduced to an exchange of repudiating statements between opposing groups/individuals. Thus, the online EU public sphere will be static in its public

opinion formation outcomes, as it will lack the structured effort of its participants to understand the dissenting 'other' required to propel public opinion (trans)formation forward.

In the following section, we examine these hypotheses in the context of elections in Europe, both at national and European level. We identify the trends verified by existing research but also the shortcomings of previous projects. Subsequently, we propose ways to overcome these shortcomings, through our operationalisation model.

The internet and elections in Europe Current research and the public sphere approach

After an admittedly slow start, political parties, institutions and individual political actors in Europe now incorporate nearly all aspects of online communications in their public strategies, from (the now humble) emailing to YouTube broadcasts, political blogs, e-government services and Facebook pages (Braghiroli, 2009; Coleman, 2005; Michailidou, 2008a; Michailidou, 2008b; Papathanassopoulos et al. 2007). For example, a study of MEPs' online communication strategies by Braghiroli showed that there is a consistent trend of MEPs to use their personal candidate websites in order to maximise their electoral efforts but also to get in touch with their constituency, once they have been elected (Braghiroli 2009).

Specifically in relation to EP elections, in the first comprehensive study of its kind, (Lusoli, 2005b) found that two traditional mediators, namely political parties and candidates, constituted the backbone of the electoral websphere in a manner similar to the offline aspect of electoral campaigning. Moreover, electoral rules and practices were also found to have an impact, while levels of information provided online were found to be directly proportionate to the size of a member state and the level of political activism already existing in a country (the larger the country and the higher the level of political activism, the more information about the EU elections was found online). These findings were interpreted as a clear sign of 'normalisation' of the electoral websphere, in that it reflects the assets and disparities of offline campaigns, rather than push campaigning towards 'equalisation' (of actors, means, processes and access), a prerequisite for democratisation. Similarly, the 'elite' profile of internet users (young, male, educated, from urban/semi-urban areas) was confirmed, while the internet was found to have an impact on voters' mobilisation, but only insofar as already mobilised voters are concerned (Carlson & Strandberg, 2005; Danyia & Galacz, 2005; Jankowski et al. 2005; Lusoli, 2005a; Van Os, 2005b).

On the other hand, results were inconclusive with regard to the 'quality' of the online debates, in terms of deliberative standards. While professionalisation of political communication was evident in most political parties and candidates' websites and opportunities were provided for voters to interact with political actors and/or other voters online, on average campaign interactivity and involvement remained superficial or occasional on most producers' websites in most countries (Lusoli 2005b: 157-158). Nevertheless, in some countries (Ireland, Finland, Hungary) evidence clearly pointed to the internet's potential to structure and clarify the debate on EU elections (Carlson and Strandberg 2005; Jankowski et al. 2005; Lusoli 2005a) and in other member states (Hungary, France) the equally significant potential of the internet to offer more direct, less interpretive reporting of issues was verified (Danyia and Galacz 2005; van Os 2005). A more recent study of MEPs online communication strategies by Braghiroli showed that there is a consistent trend of MEPs to use their personal candidate websites in order to maximise their electoral efforts but also to get in touch with their constituency, once they have been elected (Braghiroli 2009).

One point on which all empirical studies consistently agree is the role of the internet as the main source of political information, political exchanges and mobilisation for young people. In the EU27, although the internet is the preferred source of information about political matters for 27% of the population, in the age group of 15-24-year-olds the percentage rises to 48, while for the 25-39 age group it stands at 38% (Eurobarometer, 2009). Similarly, during national election campaigns in Europe and the US, the internet is the preferred information and communication medium for the 17-24 and 25-44 age groups (Chevallier, 2009; di Gennaro & Dutton, 2006; Esser & de Vreese, 2007; Karlsen, 2009; Lusoli, 2005a; Rainie & Horrigan, 2007; Smith, 2009), while younger political candidates are also more likely to have their own website (Braghiroli, 2009). For the 'shapers' of tomorrow's political culture, as young voters are often called, (Dahlgren & Olsson, 2008; Kann et al., 2007), the internet constitutes a suitable environment, culturally relevant to them, which encourages them to engage in politics not only as passive consumers of online information but as participants of public debates and activists as well (Tønnevd, 2009).

In Europe, the internet's mobilising effects are also evident in relation to other socio-demographic groups typically considered inactive/less active in conventional or offline forms of politics, such as in the case of the UK (Gibson et al., 2005). Likewise, Chevalier found that Swiss citizens who describe themselves as irregular voters or abstainers were also those who used iVoting the most (Chevallier 2009). More importantly, these were citizens who do not lack the resources or knowledge to participate in offline electoral processes, but simply understand political participation as a 'self-centred process' (ibid.: 37) and the internet facilitates their attitude to politics. Karlsen (Karlsen, 2009) also points to the internet's potential to mobilise, albeit from a different angle: a high proportion (59%) of Norwegian voters who had sought information from political party websites before the national elections (in 2005) did not decide what to vote before the campaign, while 50% did not even identify with the political party, whose website they visited to get information about the elections.

EU elections online

A new research perspective

The complexity of the online political sphere cannot be sufficiently explained either with uni-dimensional analytical approaches focusing on online party politics and electoral campaigns only; or deliberative democracy approaches, which do not take into account the particularities of online public debating. In order to address the shortcomings of existing research on both fronts (impact of EU integration on national public spheres and mediating constraints on EU legitimacy), we propose that analysis of online debates concerning the legitimacy of the EU polity focuses on identifying the actors, spaces and modes of EU contestation during periods of anticipated increase in salience of EU news coverage, such as the EP elections. By identifying the components of publicity, participation and public opinion formation as core dimensions of the online public sphere, we aim to capture the several dimensions of the e-mediation of political communication in the EU and bring them together under an encompassing research perspective.

Specifically, we test whether the online media offer a new and alternative environment for mediating the debate on the EU's legitimacy, precisely by linking political contestation (public opinion formation) and citizens' participation with public salience and news making (publicity components). The potential of the online media to assume this central legitimating function of the EU depends not only on the quality of debates and/or on the informative value of its inputs, but also on the scope of political communication.

We therefore opt for a plural research design that analyses the possible emergence of an EU online public sphere firstly in terms of EU debates in professional journalist websites (possibility of the emergence of an EU online sphere from above); secondly, in terms of alternative media and independent blogging and, related to this, the formation of online

communities through user commenting and social networking (possibility of the emergence of an EU online sphere from below).

In order to comprehend fully the public contestation of the EU legitimacy on the internet, we do not analyse the providers of the inputs of political information, i.e. the websites of political parties or the official sites of the EU. Instead, we investigate the public mediators, which turn communicative inputs into public messages and news that reach the general audience. This concerns the little-researched role of professional and citizens' journalism in the amplification of political debates. We ask what the main platforms for intermediation of the online debates are and describe the emerging network environments that link users as members of a general political audience (and not a particular user community that supports, for instance, a political party).

At the same time, given the increasing political influence of the blogosphere, we move beyond professional journalism and news outlets and include political bloggers in our research. Independent political blogs have rapidly gained popularity and indeed political influence in some countries (Ferguson & Griffiths, 2006; Ferguson & Griffiths, 2008). The expectation, therefore, is that blogging could allow Europeans to discuss their common affairs independently of main media organisations. Could political blogging in Europe be(come) so influential that it would also have an impact on the legitimacy discourse over the EU? The answer, again, depends on scope: not only the scope of participation but also the extent to which blogging addresses European issues and debates and reaches a mass audience. The legitimacy impact of blogging not only depends on the way arguments can be addressed directly to responsible actors but also the ways these arguments are attended by a broader public that can be potentially convinced by them.

In operationalising our research design, we compare expressions of EU regime support and opposition (Trenz & de Wilde, 2009) on professional journalist websites with those found on political blogs, user forums and social networks. Subsequently, we examine the degree of Europeanisation of online political communication measured in terms of presence of foreign political actors and interactions across borders. Online debate amplification patterns further relate to the possibility of generating user comments and the degree to which online fora become important resonance bodies, which contribute to the running of political campaigns.

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