

# Europeanised e-sphere in France and French-speaking Belgium: potential and limits

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## **1. Introduction: the French and Belgian national public spheres and political communication**

The revolutionary expectations invested in the electronic democracy and the e-administration to come at the origins of Internet have been rationalized and turned into the project of a better governance (Baptista, 2002). Today, the “information society” is no longer seen as an utopia: it is rather a policy purpose still difficult to reach, considering the ambivalent achievements of the Lisbon agenda and the intrinsic limits of European communication via the new media. Time has acknowledged the necessity to dissociate normative communication (sharing of values, the only social relation likely to bring a feeling of common belonging) and functional communication (sharing of information, referring mainly to technical diffusion and dissemination) (Wolton, 1993). Social discriminations in terms of age, education and socio-economic levels do not disappear in a potential electronic public space and may even be deepened. Internet works as a cumulative resource which allows to do better and more what one has already done before. It contributes to give more visibility to secondary issues and actors and thus enlarge the scope of the political debate in its margins, but does not turn the established social and political hierarchies upside down. In relationship with European politics, it means that a potential e-sphere will be inhabited by people already interested and committed in the European debate and that its effects in terms of socialization are likely either to reinforce existing patterns or to be non-existent.

While the Internet brings immediacy, reactivity and reciprocity, the asymmetry between the top-down (one to many) and the bottom-up (many to one) communication is unavoidable. The horizontal communication (many to many) has a transformative potential and can overcome political control but has to deal with cognitive and normative obstacles: people have to have motivation, mutual understanding and trust to interact and, still more, to act together. That is the reason why the Internet is most efficient when the virtual space underlies an existing community in the real world (Hill, Hughes, 1998; Oates, Owen, Gibson,

2006; Hoff, 2006). While the European public space is still to come in the daily life and in the traditional media, the relevant question could be to assess the contribution of the Internet to the Europeanization of national debates from the inside. As far as the quality of communication is concerned, the Internet raises concerns about the risk of populism due to the suppression of all mediations, on the one hand, and the risk of fragmentation due the constitution of specialized channels and agoras, on the other hand. The diffuse electronic interactions between power and society may blur the accountability of rulers by relativising the procedures and time of representative democracy (Dahlgreen, 2000). It leaves open the double challenge of democracy, the universality of publics (everybody speaking to everybody) and the universality of issues (speaking of everything) in the language of the public reason and under the control of the electoral suffrage.

These questions are particularly developed in the French-speaking world as the notion of public sphere in itself is frequently criticised (Dacheux, 2003; Mercier, 2002). The regulation by the public sphere may appear to contradict the French socio-historical model build by and around the state. This model is characterized by a strong transcendental public interest which can not be restricted to and formed by the agregation of private interests and a resilient political verticality difficult to accommodate online. The public sphere model is also denounced as too ethereal and rationalist to be able to subsume the substance of political relationships (Dacheux, 2005; Smith, 1999; Baisnée, 2000, François & Neveu, 1999), especially in a strong and conflictual political culture like the French one. The heuristic and empirical limits of the notion of European public sphere may be highlighted when dealing with the impossible emergence of common and efficient political rituals at the scale of the EU. Particularly, the vote is the founding ritual of democracy, not only as the expression of individual and collective will but also as the structuration of a discursive universe, a specific temporality inverting temporarily the hierarchy between rulers and ruled and the embodiment and bipolarisation (majority/opposition, left/right, etc) of politics in order to allow simplification and identification. The failure to impulse a specific symbolism in the European elections since 1979 (Foret, 2006) underlines the second-order nature of the EU. It is far from obvious that the spreading use of new technologies will be able to fill the gap.

Besides, empirical element must be taken on board. With regard to the access to and the use of the Internet, France and Belgium are middle-range countries, neither particularly in advance nor delayed in the social distribution of new technologies in comparison with other member states (*Journal du Net*, 2010). French parties are increasingly keen to use such tools.

The purpose is nevertheless to extend the diffusion of their information rather than to allow the expression of the “profane” citizens (Blanchard, 2007). While, this resilient propensity to univocity is common to all political parties in Europe (Gibson, Nixon, Ward, 2003), it is even stronger in France (Greffet, 2001). Put in other words, French parties are not the boldest pionniers in the trend seeing European political parties trying to engage citizens and to interact with them through their websites, a trend which is itself very slow and partial as shown by the European elections in 2009 (Lilleker, Michalska and alii, 2010).

This chapter deals with political communication over European integration during the 2009 EP election campaign in the e-sphere. In the comparative framework of the RECON research network, an empirical analysis of the content of the two most visited information websites and political blogs was conducted in France and French-speaking Belgium. The study focuses on several dimensions of political e-communication: the structure and dynamics of the debate online in connection with the websites; the number and the nature of the evaluative statements about the EU; the nature and origin of the actors involved in the discussion; the types of justification for the evaluations of the EU; and the form of communication i.e whether there is a style specific to online communication and to what extent it meets the “cooperative principle of communication” (Widdowson 2007: 56-65). The following section presents the hypotheses put forward. The third section presents the empirical findings and the final concludes with a discussion of the hypotheses.

## **2. Research hypotheses**

In order to summarize the Franco-Belgian differences in the processes of political communication surrounding Europe it is useful borrow the categories put forward by Vivien Schmidt. Schmidt distinguishes between two types of discourse and two types of polities, according to who speaks, to whom and how. She identifies a coordinative type of discourse, where the principal interlocutors are public policy actors communicating amongst themselves using the language of expertise. In contrast, the communicative discourse is used by public policy actors to convey discourse towards citizens at large by mobilizing the language of values (Schmidt 2006: 253--256). Schmidt also distinguishes between simple and compound polities. France falls into the former category, marked by the dominance of the executive, the restriction of the representation of interest groups and strong political polarization. This

creates a favorable environment for the communicative discourse in a theatrical exchange between the government and the citizens. Belgium, on the other hand, displays a compound system, characterized by the division of powers, a broad consultation of interest groups and politics oriented to consensus. This implies the primacy of the coordinative discourse. In this typically consociational situation, exchange with citizens does not happen directly but rather through the intermediary of “sub-discourses”, directed to particular audiences with limited publicity (Schmidt 2006: 258--262).

The EU itself constitutes a complex compound political system with an extremely elaborate coordinative discourse and a very limited communicative discourse (Schmidt 2006: 262). The legitimization of the European polity and policies relies on established patterns at the level of each member state. The danger is that national leaders and sectoral elites acting as mediators may interpretate and filter the European message according to their own interests. In countries which are compound polities, the European level simply adds to the plurality of pre-existing echelons. There is already a great number of actors and specialized coordinative discourses able to channel supranational issues. The situation is more complicated in simple polities. The European coordinative discourse runs counter to the more vertical rhetoric of national politics. Non-governmental actors are rarely associated with the justification of policy and thus do not respond so easily when solicited by Europe on these questions. They may even adopt a strategy of opposition to decisions that they deem to be against their interests or on which they haven't been sufficiently consulted.

The Belgian and French socio-political models induce some hypotheses about the framing and the content of an e-public sphere. The salience is expected to be higher in France, due to the usual publicness of the political debate and the precedent of the referendum in 2005. The popular consultation provoked a major dramatization with wide and intense exchanges and true dynamics of interactions between opposite views on European integration. However, this did not necessarily imply mutual recognition and understanding with the prevalence of the best argument at the end. There is no strong evidence of a durable cognitive and normative mobilization of the French public opinion over European issues in the wake of this collective catharsis. The conflictualization of European issues in electoral campaigns could be an opportunity for the media – and specifically – the new media to provide news coverage of EU issues matching a classical pattern of left-right framing hence facilitating opinion formation among ordinary citizens. However, since they are second-order elections, European elections differ from the normally centralizing French model of political

communication and the involvement of a vast range of actors brings about a high level of political communication fragmentation. This could suggest the potentiality of a large audience participation. In fact, the limited interest of media and citizens in European issues circumscribes any hope to enlarge significantly the scope of deliberation.

In terms of public opinion formation, recent political developments may fuel expressions of either support or dissent towards European integration. The final adoption of the Lisbon treaty may be perceived as a denial of democracy after the “no” in 2005. Conversely, the majority in office may take advantage from the success of the French presidency of the EU in the last semester of 2008.

In French-speaking Belgium, a region characterized by elitarian politics and consensus on European affairs, the salience is likely to be very limited. Fragmentation is implied by the political system itself, where political communication is decentralized and specialized, which is a deterrent to contentious interpretations of European issues. Opportunities for participation are scarce and there is no inclusion of the peripheries in the debate, unless they are already encompassed in the institutional system. As for public opinion formation, the underlying permanent crisis in national politics since 2007 is a further incentive to put European politics into perspective (*pas tout à fait le même sens*). Attempts to instrumentalize the supranational level in domestic politics have never been really successful due to the stable unanimous support for European integration, apart from controversies on ideological orientations of European policies. The Belgian presidency of the EU to come in 2010 does not seem to be able to mobilize or polarize public opinion and can only reinforce the permissive silence in order not to endanger the future Belgian leadership. In both cases, like in other member states, exchanges on the web are expected to remain predominantly national, to use the same repertoires and to reach the same audiences than the usual political debate on Europe, following the logic of “class politics” exemplified by Fligstein (2008).

### **3. Investigating the 2009 European election campaign on the web**

#### ***The Internet: one channel among others***

The data used for analysis focused on newspapers’ websites and political blogs. The websites and blogs included in the sampling process had to fulfil simultaneously three main criteria: being the most or among the most visited sites in their field, allowing for some form

of participation from the part of the audience and having RSS feeds available. The sites' popularity was measured according to the rankings made by [www.alexa.com](http://www.alexa.com). The three main news websites selected for France are the most famous traditional quality newspapers in France: *Le Monde*, *Le Figaro* and *Le Nouvel Observateur*. While they have are best ranked, it should be underlined that the audience of quality press in France is limited to the elites and well-educated citizens. None of this papers or their online version is Eurosceptic, since the French media is broadly speaking rather favorable to European integration. However, while the right-wing daily *Le Figaro* and the left-wing weekly *Le Nouvel Observateur* concentrated on the main actors of the campaign (UMP, PS, MoDem and *Europe-Ecologie*), *Le Monde* distinguished itself by providing more space for voices more critical of the EU. For instance, *Le Monde* published short interviews with different political actors, including representatives of marginal parties like *Lutte ouvrière* and the CPNT, and several chats with sovereignists of the far right like Philippe de Villiers and Marine Le Pen. The presence of the Eurosceptics was also quite important on TV, since there are mandatory audience rules on repartition of audience time to the various political parties. The two most popular French political blogs are *Sarkofrance* and *Plume de presse*. The former was intentionally created as a channel for criticism at the President and his party, the UMP, and none of the articles coded from this blog displayed any evaluation of the EU, although they touched on the topic of the EP elections. Obviously, the blogs are run either by committed journalists, like Olivier Bonnet, the author of *Plume de presse*, or by well-informed citizens with a special interest in politics and/or the EU. Sometimes, the role of these personalities can go far beyond the e-sphere. Jean Quatremer, the correspondent for *Libération* in Bruxelles, is a well-known personality in the world of EU politics and can be seen as an opinion leader over EU issues. His case exemplifies how the net may underlie and extend traditional media rather than create autonomous dynamics. Much more spectacularly, Etienne Chouard, a professor for economics and management in a secondary school, has become a 'star' during the 2005 referendum campaign. His interpretation of the European constitutional treaty on his blog attracted hundred of thousands of connections and even triggered a public controversy with Dominique Strauss-Kahn. At the end of the (2005 ?) campaign, Etienne Chouard was the most famous blogger in France, he was invited for TV shows and was dedicated an article in *Le Monde*. *But in the 2009 campaign ? Confirmation or disappearance of Chouard as a public voice ?* However, such examples remain rather the exception than the rule. In Belgium, the selected professional websites are those of the daily *Le Soir*, the main centre-left oriented French-speaking daily in Belgium, and of the weekly *Le Vif l'express*. Interestingly, the highest

ranked websites also include that of the TV channel RTL, which shows a kind of convergence between different kinds of media on the Internet. *Le Blog politique* and *Le Pan* are the two blogs which have the largest audience in the French-speaking realm of electronic political communication in Belgium. So far, the first examination of the debate online confirms the hypothesis that the well-established newspapers - or less often TV - have the broadest audience. In that sense, the e-sphere reproduces the order of the 'non-e' public sphere.

### ***The dynamics of online communication: low salience, interaction and fragmentation***

Broadly speaking, the examination of several information websites reveals a strong emerging trend on the newspapers website towards the creation of dedicated pages for specific of ad hoc political issues such as the EP election, also in *Libération*, *La Tribune*, *La Croix*. Similarly, *Le Monde* had pages dedicated to the EU election. All the selected websites and blogs provided for comments facility thus allowing for forms of interaction between the journalists and the readers. *Le Monde* went even further and invited its readers to publicly unveil their voting intentions, especially if they had voted "no" in the 2005 French referendum. Comments were made on a regular basis on articles in *Le Monde* and *Plume de presse*, while *Le Nouvel Observateur* and *Sarkofrance* displayed the smallest number of interventions from the public. Most of the evaluations, i.e either positive or negative statements about EU integration, are located in the main text were made directly by political actors through interviews and chats they took part in. *Le Monde* was by far the one to publish the biggest number of articles on this theme (around 340): it had twice as many articles than *Le Nouvel Observateur* (155) and three times more compared to *Le Figaro* (100). It was also the website with the most evaluations of the EU - around 50% - compared to 25% for *Le Figaro*, 15% for *Le Nouvel Observateur* and only 10% for the two blogs. Thus, there was a significant variation between the professional news websites and the blogs, the latter focusing almost exclusively on domestic issues. Most frequently, European issues are embedded in domestic ones. In Belgium, the parties generally considered as Eurosceptic were given little attention by the press. This can be explained by the fact that the Eurosceptic parties in Belgium are mainly Flemish while only French-speaking websites were investigated here. More broadly, this is related to the wider phenomenon of the "*cordon sanitaire*", ie the fact that political parties considered as non- democratic are marginalized in the politics and the media. The readers' participation through the commenting function was also higher on topics related to national problems (e.g.: the disputes over the Bruxelles-Hal-Vilvorde constituency).

When websites like *Le Soir* organized chats between politicians and their readers, the preponderance of the leaders of national (actually even regional) parties or of regional candidates was striking. Overall, the websites displayed few articles related to the European elections and most of them appeared in the last period, of the publication of the results. *Le Blog Politique* published only 5 entries in the first week of the campaign (from which 4 were presentations of opinion polls) and nothing else until the 10<sup>th</sup> of June (the last day of the monitored period), although the results were released on the 7<sup>th</sup>. The sites with the most evaluations of the EU were *Le Soir* and the blog *Le Pan*, while almost no evaluative statements about the EU were to find on the other two websites.

When dealing with European integration, the issues debated in the threads can be clustered into a couple themes. In France, the arguments concentrated on the democratic theme: the ratification of the Lisbon Treaty was often considered as a denial of democracy in relationship with the rejection of the European Constitutional Treaty by referendum in 2005. The EU is often described as a neo-liberal little and exclusive polity which serves the upper-class and adverse to the ordinary citizens' interests. In this respect, the European Commission and its President are often targets. In Belgium, the main critical argument is that of "spender EU" and failing political personnel: MEPs are denounced as both powerless and overpaid. Furthermore, the prospect of the Turkish membership crystallizes fears regarding the future of the EU, the nature of the integration project in terms of security, economic prosperity and cultural identity.

Positive and negative evaluations of EU integration on the web during the campaign were analysed according to three dimensions: the principle of integration, the evaluation of the current state of the EU polity, and the position over the project of integration, i.e plans for future integration. Interestingly, among these three dimensions, most evaluations are located in the comments rather than in the main text posted by professional journalists or bloggers. In France, comments were made on a regular basis on articles in *Le Monde* and *Plume de presse*, while *Le Nouvel Observateur* and *Sarkofrance* displayed the smallest number of interventions from the public. Most of the evaluations located in the main text were made directly by political actors through interviews and chats they took part in.



**Table 1: Location of evaluation of the EU on the French websites****Principle of Integration \* Location Crosstabulation**

Count

		Location			Total
		Main Text	Comment on Main Text	Comment on Comment	
Principle of Integration	Positive	3	6	1	10
	N/A	46	51	11	108
Total		49	57	12	118

**EU Polity \* Location Crosstabulation**

Count

		Location			Total
		Main Text	Comment on Main Text	Comment on Comment	
EU Polity	Level - Positive	0	4	1	5
	Level - Negative	7	15	3	25
	Scope - Positive	0	1	0	1
	Scope - Negative	3	0	0	3
	Inclusiveness - Negative	14	10	2	26
	N/A	25	27	6	58
Total		49	57	12	118

**Project of Integration \* Location Crosstabulation**

**Principle of Integration \* Location Crosstabulation****Count**

		Location			Total
		Main Text	Comment on Main Text	Comment on Comment	
Principle of Integration	Positive	3	6	1	10
	N/A	46	51	11	108

**Count**

		Location			Total
		Main Text	Comment on Main Text	Comment on Comment	
Project of	Level - Positive	6	9	2	17
Integration	Level - Negative	23	9	2	34
	Scope - Positive	2	3	1	6
	Inclusiveness - Positive	4	6	0	10
	Inclusiveness - Negative	3	9	2	14
	N/A	11	21	5	37
Total		49	57	12	118

The most important part of the evaluations from the comments came from ordinary citizens expressing their opinion on the topic of the articles. A smaller number of these evaluations must be attributed to party actors and were indirectly transmitted in editorial contents.

The Belgian articles on the elections were mainly neutral presentations of facts and events rather than opinion articles, leaving therefore little space to the journalists to formulate evaluative statements on the EU. As in France, most evaluations either of the integration principle, of the EU polity or of integration as a project were formulated by citizens in the comments.

**Table 2: Location of evaluation of the EU on the Belgian websites**

**Principle of Integration \* Location Crosstabulation**

Count

		Location			Total
		Main Text	Comment on Main Text	Comment on Comment	
Principle of Integration	N/A	1	19	2	22
Total		1	19	2	22

**EU Polity \* Location Crosstabulation**

Count

		Location			Total
		Main Text	Comment on Main Text	Comment on Comment	
EU Polity	Level - Positive	0	2	1	3
	Level - Negative	1	9	0	10

Scope - Negative	0	0	1	1
Inclusiveness - Negative	0	2	0	2
N/A	0	6	0	6
Total	1	19	2	22

**Project of Integration \* Location Crosstabulation**

Count

		Location			Total
		Main Text	Comment on Main Text	Comment on Comment	
Project Of Integration	Level - Negative	0	1	0	1
	Inclusiveness - Positive	0	3	1	4
	Inclusiveness - Negative	1	2	0	3
	N/A	0	13	1	14
Total		1	19	2	22

So far, the evidence over the dynamics of the online debate over the EU supports our initial double hypothesis. Overall, the low values (?? Comprend pas trop) for the contents related to the EU on the most popular information websites and blogs account for the low salience of European issues in the 2009 EP election campaign, especially among citizens communicating via blogs. Besides, the debate was more vivid in France, where the political moment of the

'29<sup>th</sup> May' 2005 has left a strong imprint, than in French-speaking Belgium where it was kept particularly atone. Furthermore, these first results also point at the potential and limits of e-communication. It appears that the opportunity for interaction provided by the Internet is well-used by citizens since the majority of the evaluative statements are formulated by citizens in their comments of editorial comments rather than journalists or political actors. However, the fact that these evaluations are mainly to be found on information websites while they are quasi absent from the blogs suggest that EU integration does generate more top-down than bottom-up communication. Moreover, the dedication of special pages or sections within websites to EU issues reveals a trend towards specialization (or de-generalization) of political communication and fragmentation of audiences.

***The nature of debate: the limited added-value of the Internet***

The actors that are the most involved in the online debate are the citizens, who account for 57.6% of all the evaluations, followed by politicians with just 38.9% of the messages. The citizens' predominance can however be seen as a consequence of the privileged role conferred to them by the commenting function, enabling them to directly take part in the discussions. Besides, the simple quantitative logic and the fact that elites have less time and more prestigious and efficient ways to express themselves circumscribes this apparent centrality of the average citizen on electronic fora.

**Table 3: Actors involved in the online debate in France**

Actor Frequency					
		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Journalist / Blogger	1	.6	.8	.8
	Citizen(s)	68	40.2	57.6	58.5
	Party Actor	47	27.8	39.8	98.3

	Non-Party State Actor	1	.6	.8	99.2
	Non-State Actor	1	.6	.8	100.0
	Total	118	69.8	100.0	
Missing	System	51	30.2		
Total		169	100.0		

Actor \* Actor Scope Crosstabulation

Count

		Actor Scope			Total
		National	Foreign	EU	
Actor	Journalist / Blogger	1	0	0	1
	Citizen(s)	65	2	1	68
	Party Actor	28	3	16	47
	Non-Party State Actor	0	0	1	1
	Non-State Actor	1	0	0	1
Total		95	5	18	118

As far as the origin of these actors is concerned (referred as “actor scope” in the tables), it is very rare that a foreigner takes a direct stand in the French debate: 80% of the evaluations come from national actors and only 15% from European ones. Furthermore, this latter category comprises in a proportion of 50% evaluations made by Philippe de Villiers, a French politician, acting in his quality of former MEP and present candidate in the EP elections. The remaining evaluations made either by European or foreign actors are almost entirely indirectly transmitted by journalists and they usually are not connected to justification. Foreigners are

therefore poorly involved into the French debate and there is little or no space at all allocated to elaborate presentations of their position on European matters.

Belgium displays a diverging pattern. As in France, the most important part of the evaluations is expressed by citizens (72.7%) and political actors (22.7%). The national journalists are never present in the debates both because the Belgian articles on the European elections were mainly neutral presentations of facts and events rather than opinion articles, and because the analysis focused on the power relationships at the national and regional level.

**Table 3: Actors involved in the online debate in Belgium**

Actor Frequency					
		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Journalist / Blogger	1	2.1	4.5	4.5
	Citizen(s)	16	33.3	72.7	77.3
	Party Actor	5	10.4	22.7	100.0
	Total	22	45.8	100.0	
Missing	System	26	54.2		
Total		48	100.0		

**Actor \* Actor Scope Crosstabulation**

Count

		Actor Scope		Total
		National	Foreign	
Actor	Journalist / Blogger	0	1	1
	Citizen(s)	12	4	16

**Actor Frequency**

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Journalist / Blogger	1	2.1	4.5	4.5
	Citizen(s)	16	33.3	72.7	77.3
	Party Actor	5	10.4	22.7	100.0
	Total	22	45.8	100.0	
Missing	System	26	54.2		
	Party Actor	0	5	5	
Total		12	10	22	

However, in terms of actors' scope, unlike the French debate, national and foreign actors are almost equally present: 54.5% for the former and 45.5% for the latter. The evaluations made by foreigners are related to Turkey's accession to the EU and account for the influence the French debate on this topic had on the Belgian discussions of the matter. They were in fact indirectly transmitted opinions of French political actors or citizens and disseminated by Belgian readers who copied them into their comments. It is also worth mentioning that evaluations of the EU, either positive or negative, were completely absent from national politicians' discourse, a situation that highlights the low salience of this topic both among the party actors and among the media, that did not convey such EU-related value judgements. Evidence related to the actors therefore allows being more specific regarding the hypothesis about the Belgian debate. It confirms that the salience of EU issues is very low, but is also suggests that the Belgian debate is much more Europeanised than the French one, with an important proportion of claims coming from foreign actors.

As far as the substantial dimension of the debate is concerned, our analysis takes not only into consideration evaluation but also the justificatory arguments – or justification of worth.. With regard to the statements displayed on the French web, it is striking that the bulk of the justificatory arguments rest on the idea of democracy: both critical claims by political



actors in the articles and negative evaluations by bloggers or comments by ordinary citizens often mention the democratic problem in the functioning of the EU. In this respect, the so-called “29<sup>th</sup> May” is an extremely present reference. Those citizens who take part in the political debate online are keen to express their resentment over the denial of the people’s voice by the political class who forced the ratification of the Lisbon Treaty, which is seen by citizens as a barely modified version of the European Constitutional Treaty.

**Table 5: Nature of the arguments on the French web****Justification of Worth in the main text - France**

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Democracy	15	30.6	30.6	30.6
	Culture	3	6.1	6.1	36.7
	Necessity	4	8.2	8.2	44.9
	Economic Prosperity	1	2.0	2.0	46.9
	Safety	7	14.3	14.3	61.2
	Other	1	2.0	2.0	63.3
	N/A	18	36.7	36.7	100.0
	Total	49	100.0	100.0	

**Justification of Worth in the comments - France**

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Democracy	24	34.8	34.8	34.8
	Culture	2	2.9	2.9	37.7
	Necessity	8	11.6	11.6	49.3
	Economic Prosperity	1	1.4	1.4	50.7
	Safety	3	4.3	4.3	55.1
	N/A	31	44.9	44.9	100.0

## Justification of Worth in the main text - France

	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Democracy	15	30.6	30.6	30.6
Culture	3	6.1	6.1	36.7
Necessity	4	8.2	8.2	44.9
Economic Prosperity	1	2.0	2.0	46.9
Safety	7	14.3	14.3	61.2
Other	1	2.0	2.0	63.3
N/A	18	36.7	36.7	100.0
Total	69	100.0	100.0	

The same claims emanate from peripheral parties, such as *Lutte ouvrière* or the *Front National* (FN), which accounts for the invocation of democracy in the main texts posted on the websites. The small sovereignist and republican party *Debout la République* led by Nicolas Dupont-Aignan, the pan-European Eurosceptic movement *Libertas*, the traditionalist CPNT, the FN, the Trotskyist *Nouveau Parti anti-capitaliste* and the neo-Communist *Front de gauche* have all organized actions to “commemorate” the “no” vote to the Constitutional Treaty on the 29<sup>th</sup> May. On the contrary, the referendum was conspicuously absent in the discourse of the mainstream parties who largely supported the adoption of the new treaty.

In Belgium, the neutrality of both the political class and the media towards the EU is reflected by the quasi absence of evaluation/justification in the main text. Justifications of worth are therefore to be found in the comments posted by readers. They mainly refer to necessity and democracy.

**Table 6 : Nature of the arguments on the Belgian web**

		Justification of Worth in the comments			
		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Democracy	3	14.3	14.3	14.3
	Culture	2	9.5	9.5	23.8
	Necessity	7	33.3	33.3	57.1
	Economic Prosperity	3	14.3	14.3	71.4
	Safety	1	4.8	4.8	76.2
	N/A	5	23.8	23.8	100.0
	Total	21	100.0	100.0	

Necessity is invoked both by those who criticize the level of MEPs' wages and imply that money should be spent differently in order to have better results as well as by those who argue that these wages are justified since they can keep MEPs' away from possible bribery by lobbyists or simply because their work needs to be properly rewarded. A democratic perspective is adopted when criticizing the balance of power within the EU institutional design, namely the monopoly of the legislative initiative by the unelected Commission and the "*decorative*" function of the EP. This viewpoint also underlies critiques of the "*progress*" of the European integration in the defiance of the people's will and the denunciation of the elitist character of the EU ("*a minority of profitors*"). At the same frequency as democracy (3 cases), economic prosperity is also invoked. In this sense, citizens complain about the use of the euro or in general about the expensive life or the unemployment that the EU provokes and point out to the discrepancies that exist between the elites of the system who benefit from it and the ordinary citizens who have to cope with the present economic difficulties.

Besides evaluation of the EU and justification, the last dimension explored in this analysis is the form or style of political communication on the web. The purpose is to

determine whether the e-sphere meets the requirements for deliberation or whether it generates a new form of communication deviating from the standards established in the traditional media. The set of standard rules widely acknowledged in the realm of electronic communication (including e-mails, chats, for a, etc) is called the “Netiquette”. Four criteria (or maxims) have been identified here in order to assess the specificity of the online style of communication. Firstly, the maxim of quantity, which refers to the quantity of information provided in the messages, both in terms of length and substantive arguments. Especially poor or rich messages are considered as breaching the usual of standard maxim of quantity. Secondly, the maxim of relation is used to see whether evaluations of the EU provided by political actors or citizens are directly connected to the subject of the article or of the discussion at stake. The maxim of manner allows to control whether messages are formulated in an acceptable language or whether they are insulting or outraging (which is called “flaming” in the jargon dedicated to Internet practices) or displaying aggressive attitudes (writing in capital letters is for instance identified as “shouting”).

As far as the respect of these rules of conduct within the online sphere is concerned, there are only slight differences between discourse by the professional journalists, on the one hand, and that of the citizens, on the other hand. In France, the main difference is related to the maxim of relation (with EU issues) which is systematically respected by the actors who express themselves in the main text and only in a proportion of 75% by the actors who intervene in the comments. Secondly, the maxim of quantity is breached in almost 64% of the evaluations located in the comments and only in 55% of the messages in the main text. In this latter case, however, it is mainly connected to indirect evaluations, in which journalists or political actors convey the opinion of another actor rather than the presentation of their own stance on the issue. Lastly, there is no use of insulting or vulgar language, neither by journalists nor by readers, which would breach the rules of “Netiquette”. The online communication remains therefore quite conventional and doesn’t constitute a breaking point from the traditional offline discourse. On the Belgian websites and blogs, the maxims of quantity and relation are respected in proportion of 50-60% and they are mainly not respected in the case of indirect evaluations. There is also no use of insults or vulgar language, neither in the main text nor in the comments, or of any other forms of breaching of the netiquette. From this point of view, the online communication does not differ radically from the traditional media.

#### 4. Discussion and conclusions

The internet has unarguably become an arena for political communication which can no longer be ignored. Broadly speaking, the specific role of the online communication in the 2009 EP election campaign seems to have been limited in France as well as in French-speaking Belgium. The e-sphere reflects the gap between the mainstream parties, on the one hand, and the peripheral parties, on the other. This holds for both the quantitative (number of articles) and qualitative (Europhile vs Eurosceptic) aspect of communication. As a consequence, the expression of critical opinions about the EU remains confined to circumscribed spaces of the political sphere. The empirical investigation of online communication over the EU during the campaign for the last election of European Parliament brings valuable insights with regard to the potential and limits of a Europeanised e-sphere. The evidence gathered confirms our expectation that EU issues have raised little interest among both professional journalists and users of the electronic media at large. Indeed, the fact that popular blogs such as *Sarkofrance* or *Le Blog politique* display so little communicative activity about the EU reflects the lack of interest for Europe in general and the weak presence of a structured Eurosceptic discourse among citizens in general. Nevertheless, the debate was more lively in France than in French-speaking Belgium. Following V. Schmidt, communicative discourse about the EU which is grounded on values is much more developed in France than in Belgium. According to its centralistic tradition, discourse tends to be more confrontative and opinions about the EU polarized. In this respect, the contents of the discussions are clearly focused on the “2005 moment” which has left a strong imprint on citizens’ minds: four years later, the ratification of the Lisbon Treaty is considered as an evidence that democracy is denied in the realm of EU politics. In the compound Belgian polity, however, EU integration is not a subject of public controversy. Few citizens raise criticism, while journalists and members of the French-speaking political establishment remain very neutral.

Our second main hypothesis was that the Internet and the e-sphere are providing only limited new opportunities with regard to political communication and citizen participation. Firstly, the most popular websites are those of the best-established media institutions in the respective national media landscape. *Le Monde* and *Le Soir* definitely stand out as the main information provider about EU issues and the most sophisticated platform towards blogs, forums and chats. In this regard, the Internet shows little innovation or alternative channels for communication. The existence of dedicated pages and specific blogs run by individuals

with a special interest in the EU seems to fuel a trend of specialization hence fragmentation of political communication related to politics in general and to European issues in particular (Michailidou & Trenz, 2009). Secondly, the fact that most evaluative statements are to be found in citizens' comments rather than in editorial contents suggests that the interactive dimension of the Internet must not be neglected since it is well-used by readers. While further research would be needed on the bloggers' and readers' sociological background, it is very likely that the electronic version of established media institutions are reaching similar audiences. The fact that communication on the blogs and in the comments remains very conventional gives a hint that the internet is primarily used by well-informed and educated citizens. This is even more blatant with regard to the production of content since the bloggers are mainly committed journalists, well-informed citizens, professors, etc. Furthermore, issues as well as actors voiced are mainly national. This holds especially for France, while Belgium displays a much more Europeanised coverage of the campaign with references to foreign personalities and issues. In the heated political and intellectual debate about the potential of the Internet to enhance the deliberative and egalitarian nature of contemporary politics, the data and the analysis of the 2009 EP election campaign provides a rather mixed picture. It gives little evidence for a specific role of the internet in a greater citizens' mobilization on EU issues. Eventually, communication in the e-sphere seems to reflect rather than to transform the classical dynamics for citizens' political participation. Whether this is bound to be so or whether this is a sign for an unripe e-sphere in Europe remains an open question.

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