An Emerging European Public Sphere?
Theoretical Clarifications and Empirical Indicators

by

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Introduction[1]

A lively political and academic debate has emerged about the normative viability and the empirical possibility of a European public sphere. This debate is directly linked to the controversy about the democratic or legitimacy deficit of the European Union (EU). There is general agreement that modern democracies rely upon multiple channels of intermediation between private actors in civil society and public authorities in order to insure the legitimacy and effectiveness of governance. In this context, an open, pluralist, and critical public discourse rooted in independent media is considered crucial for providing an interface between state and society in a democratic polity. If we conceive of the EU as an emerging democratic polity beyond the nation-state, the issue of a European public sphere is raised quite naturally.

Yet, there is little agreement in the literature on what constitutes a democratic public sphere (*demokratische Öffentlichkeit*), let alone a European public sphere – and how do we know one when we see one. As a result, different conceptualizations lead to diverging assessments about whether there is a transnational public sphere in Europe in an empirical sense and, if the answer is no, whether something resembling such a sphere could actually emerge in principle. Different concepts of a public sphere inevitably result in different empirical indicators how to measure it which leads to almost incompatible empirical data. Take two prominent examples: Gerhards uses time series data from 1951-1995 on the treatment of European issues in German quality newspapers to demonstrate that Europe matters very little in the German public sphere (Gerhards, 2000, 294-295). In the same volume, Eder and Kantner see an emerging European public sphere with regard to issues such as citizenship and "fortress Europe" (Eder and Kantner, 2000, 317-319).

This paper tries to make sense of the empirical and theoretical literature by asking two questions:
1. What do we know empirically about a European public sphere?
2. How can we make sense of the empirical findings in light of the theoretical debate on a European public sphere?

I concentrate on media reporting on European issues as an – albeit problematic – proxy for the (non-) existence of a European public sphere. The short answer to the first question is somewhat paradoxical: the available evidence suggests that the overall salience of European themes is still low, but that similar meaning structures and frames of reference prevail in media reporting about Europe. The short answer to the second question is that a European public sphere emerges out of the interconnectedness of and mutual exchanges between various national public spheres. An ideal typical European public sphere would then emerge
1. if and when the same (European) themes are discussed at the same time at similar levels of attention across national public spheres and media;
2. if and when similar frames of reference, meaning structures, and patterns of interpretation are used across national public spheres and media;
3. if and when a transnational community of communication emerges in which speakers and listeners recognize each other as legitimate participants in a common discourse.

It follows that a European public sphere constitutes a social construction in the strict sense of the word. It does not fall from heaven and does not pre-exist outside social and political discourses. Rather, it is being constructed through social and discursive practices creating a common horizon of reference and, at the same time, a transnational community of communication over issues that concern "us as Europeans" rather than British, French, Germans, or Dutch.

I proceed in the following steps. First, I summarize what we seem to know empirically about a European public sphere. Second, I comment critically on various ways to conceptualize such a community of communication. Third, I introduce our own notion of a transnational public sphere that has guided our research project on media reporting of the "Haider debate" in the European Union (EU; see paper by Marianne van de Steeg et al. presenting the empirical findings).

What Do We Know Empirically About a European Public Sphere?

Systematic empirical research about a European public sphere and about cross-national media reporting about European affairs is still in its infancy. In other words, the theoretical and normative debate on a European public sphere and a European communication space far outpaces our empirical knowledge about these themes. Moreover, there is little agreement in the literature on what constitutes a European public sphere (see below). As a result, different empirical studies use different criteria and, as a result, come to different conclusions as to the (non-) existence of a European public sphere.

Yet, one can essentially distinguish two approaches to measuring a European public sphere in the literature (for an excellent review see Kantner, 2002, ch. 3.3). The first approach essentially measures European public sphere by counting how often "Europe," "European institutions," or "European affairs" are mentioned in the media (e.g. Gerhards, 1993, 2000, 2002). The result is almost inevitably that European questions pale in comparison with national, regional, or local issues: "European questions receive the lowest level of media attention in comparison to all other … issue areas" (Gerhards, 2000, 294). However, Meyer reports some increase of media attention to European affairs during the 1990s (quoted from Kantner, 2002, 166). Nevertheless, a recent cross-national study comparing media reporting on national, European, and global affairs seems to indicate that "Europe" only matters in media reporting on monetary questions, agricultural issues, and, of course, on issues of European integration itself (Ruud Koopmans, project directed at Science Center Berlin, personal communication). Interestingly enough, several studies seem to indicate that there is rather little variation in terms of national media attention for European issues. The dominant themes being discussed and reported in national media seem to vary little across the EU (Kantner, 2002, 168; Sievert, 1998; Diez Medrano, 2001). The conclusion of this type of work, however, is rather straightforward: There is no European public sphere to speak of in a meaningful sense given the rather low issue salience of European themes, even though the significance of European policy questions might have increased a bit over the 1990s.

A second approach toward measuring a European public sphere concentrates on analyzing media reporting on particular European issues, such as the corruption scandal of the European Commission, BSE, the debate about the future of the EU, or about EU enlargement (e.g. Eder, 1998, 2000; Eder and Kantner, 2000; Trenz, 2000; Van de Steeg, 2000, 2002; see also Schmitz and Geserick, 1996). These studies tend to observe that European issues are being discussed and reported in the various media across Europe at the same time, at similar levels of attention in the issue cycle of media reporting, and in a similar fashion. Moreover and more important, particular European themes are framed in rather similar ways across national media leading to similar interpretive schemes and

structures of meaning. Issues might be discussed in a very controversial fashion, but at least we all agree about the frames of reference. Our own study on media reporting about the European reaction to the new Austrian government (the "Haider debate") shows very strongly, that newspapers in five different countries used very similar meaning structures (frames) in discussing the issue and that this was different from media reporting about the Haider issue in the U.S. (see paper by Van de Steeg et al. for details). In this case, we could clearly observe a "community of communication." In contrast, Trenz reports prevailing national meaning structures in a study comparing Spanish with German media reporting of the EU Commission's corruption scandal (Trenz, 2000). The Spanish press reported the scandal as a German attack on a poor Spanish Commissioner. In contrast, the German media framed the issue as another example for the fact that Southern Europeans in general and the Spanish in particular have not really understood yet that corruption constitutes a violation of core principles of liberal democracies. Thus, the frames of reference giving meaning to the corruption scandal were constructed along national lines.

This last example notwithstanding, most studies using the second approach of analyzing media reporting of particular European questions tend to be more optimistic with regard to a European public sphere, since they observe many more commonalities and similarities in an emerging community of communication.

So, who is right? There is no easy answer, since the two types of studies measure different aspects of what could constitute a European public sphere. The first measurement refers to the significance or salience of European affairs, as compared to local, regional, national, or global questions. If media pay little or no attention to the EU, the public awareness of European questions is equally low, hence the skepticism about a European public sphere. How can we talk about a European public sphere in a meaningful sense if citizens do not know what is going on, because media do not report about European affairs.

The second type of measurement refers to common meaning structures and frames of reference. If media report about Europe and the EU at all, they seem to do so using similar frames and meanings; in other words, they have a similar understanding of what it is that they talk about, irrespective of their political standpoint. We might disagree about how we judge the European "sanctions" against Austria during the Haider affair, but we discuss the issue in terms of what the EU is all about, a 'moral community of values' and a 'legal community' in which the rule of law reigns (see paper by Van de Steeg et al.). In other words, if media use similar criteria of relevance and similar frames of reference across national public spheres when discussing European issues, this constitutes a precondition for a viable European public sphere and for the emergence of a transnational community of communication.

Putting the two findings together then leads to a paradoxical result: The national media do not report about Europe and the EU as often as policy-makers in Brussels would like them to do, but if they do report, they use similar perspectives irrespective of national backgrounds. The following graph summarizes this finding:

Dimensions of a European Public Sphere and Empirical Findings

Media Attention for European Affairs *Frames of Reference in Media Reporting on European Affairs*	HIGH	LOW
SIMILAR	Ideal typical European public sphere	Current empirical findings
DIFFERENT	Prevailing national perspectives on Europe	No European public sphere

A European Public Sphere? Challenging the Conventional Wisdom

What do these results tell us about the (non-) existence of a European public sphere? Conventional wisdom holds that there is no European public sphere, because there is no "community of communication" on the European level based on a common language, genuinely European media and a common European perspective (Kielmansegg, 1996; Grimm, 1995; overview in Kantner, 2002, 91-100). This suggests that we must somehow transcend our national public spheres and that a "European public sphere" is somehow located above and beyond the various national media and publics. In concrete terms, the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* and *Le Monde* could never be part of the same public sphere, by definition. This argument against the very possibility of a European public sphere is closely linked to related claims that Europe and the EU lack a collective identity and a "*demos*" and that, therefore, a truly democratic European polity is almost impossible to achieve.

These and other arguments are based on implicit claims that can be challenged one by one. First, there is no reason why we should all speak the same language and all use the same media in order to be able to communicate across national borders in a meaningful way. If people attach similar meanings to what they observe in Europe, they should be able to communicate across borders irrespective of language and in the absence of European-wide media. Very few people would argue that Switzerland lacks a national public sphere because of its three language communities. It is equally questionable to claim the absense of a public sphere when people read different newspapers. In fact, the opposite is true. A lively public sphere in a liberal democracy should actually be based on a pluralistic supply of media competing for the citizens' attention.

Second, the conventional view is based on an idealized picture of homogenous national public sphere which is then transferred to the European level. Many national public spheres are pretty fragmented, but few would argue that, therefore, people are unable to meaningfully communicate with each other (Eder and Kantner, 2000).

Third, it is unclear what is meant by the definitional requirement that a common perspective is needed to speak of a public sphere, be it European or national: "Only when there are reports about Europe and only when these reports are written from a perspective which transcends national perspectives, could a Europe of citizens emerge" (Gerhards, 1993, 99/my translation; see also Gerhards, 2002). If this means that a common public sphere – whether local, national, or European – presupposes that speakers in the public space refer to the same structure of meaning, I agree (I come back to this point later). However, if this argument means that we all have to discuss European themes with an eye on whether they promote or hinder European integration, or worse, that we

actually all agree on a common European standpoint, such a conceptualization would miss the mark. There is no reason why we should expect agreement or consensus on an issue in a common public sphere. Agreement about European policies across boundaries, ideological, and other cleavages cannot serve as an indicator for the existence or non-existence of a European public sphere. The same holds true for support levels for European integration. One could even argue that the lively debates in France, Britain, and Denmark about whether or not to join Euroland at least show that people care about Europe, in comparison to the silencing of such debates which we witnessed in Germany, Italy, or among other staunch supporters of the Euro.

In short, contestation is a crucial pre-condition for the emergence of a European public sphere rather than an indicator for its absence. The more contentious European policies and politics become and the more social mobilization occurs on European issues, the more we should observe truly European public debates. If political issues are not contested, if European politics remains the business of elites, the attention level for Europe and the EU will remain low. European issues must become salient and significant in the various public debates so that a European public sphere can emerge. Politicization of European affairs would then be crucial to raise the low salience of Europe in the national media reported in the empirical studies. Contestation and heated debates over political issue constitute crucial ingredients of a lively public sphere in a democratic polity.

This leads to a final point challenging the conventional wisdom. Claims about the absence of a European public sphere as well as related arguments about the non-existence of a European collective identity are often based on essentialist notions of public spheres and collective identities. Public spheres are not a given, are not out there waiting to be discovered by some analysts. Rather, they are social constructions in the true sense of the word. Public spheres emerge in the process in which people debate controversial issues in the public. The more we debate issues, the more we engage each other in our public discourses, the more we actually create political communities. Take the worldwide debates, heated arguments, and social mobilization over the Iraq war. In a way, this debate has created a global public sphere and a global community of communication. Does this mean that there is a global public sphere out there across issues and themes? Of course not! My point is that public spheres and communities of communication emerge through social and discursive practices, in the process of arguing about controversial questions (see also Risse, 2000; Habermas, 1981). Europe is no exception. It would, therefore, be wrong to assume that European integration and institution-building automatically leads to the emergence of a transnational European public sphere. Rather, such transnational sphere transcending national perspectives is being created through social practice and contestation.

However, while social mobilization about and contestation of European policies and politics is a necessary pre-condition for an emerging European public sphere, it is certainly not sufficient. One could easily imagine social mobilization and public debates surrounding European policies within the member states that discuss these questions solely from the various national perspective. Is joining the Euro in the British, Danish, or German national interest, or not? If the debate is solely framed in these national terms, people would still debate the same question, but the frames of reference would be totally different. The study of the Commission's corruption scandal mentioned above showed, for example, that Spanish and German media reported it using very different and nationally encoded frames of reference (Trenz, 2000). While the two public spheres still observed each other, the same question meant two very different things in the two national communities. Mutual awareness of each other's perspective is certainly significant for a common public sphere, but it is not sufficient in my view. The problem is that it is hard to communicate with each other in a meaningful way, if we disagree not only over the issue in question, but also what actually the problem is.

Gerhards is, therefore, very sceptical about the emergence of a European public sphere: "The territorial boundaries of the public sphere are, therefore, mostly identical with the territorial boundaries of democracies, because the elected representatives of the respective people orient their communicative, public behavior to the 'demos' who elected them and on whom they depend" (Gerhards, 2000, 292/my translation). In the absence of transnational interest groups, parties, and social movements, we are unlikely to see an emerging European public sphere in which the issues are discussed from a European rather than the various national perspectives. The result is clear: We need to fix the democratic deficit of the EU first, before we can fix the deficit in European public sphereness. Others, however, see the emergence of a Europan public sphere as a pre-condition of being able to tackle the European democratic deficit. Is this then a "chicken and egg" type of problem?

Toward an Empirically Meaningful Concept of a European Public Sphere?

At this point, we are back at square one: What constitutes a public sphere? Let me start with a conceptualization which Eder and Kantner have suggested building on Habermas's work on public spheres (Habermas, 1996, 190; also Habermas, 1990). Accordingly, a meaningful concept of public spheres requires that media communicate "the same issues at the same time using the same criteria of relevance" (Eder and Kantner, 2000, 315). What does this mean concerning our question of a European public sphere?

First, the Eder/Kantner definition starts from the assumption that a transnational European public sphere can be built on the basis of the various national publics and media. As long as media report about the same issues at the same time, we do not need European-wide media based on a common language. Keep in mind, once again, that a public sphere is a social construction constituting a community of communication. Communicating about the same issues at the same time is a definitional requirement for a public sphere which is not really controversial in the literature. The graph above picked this criterion as "media attention for European affairs." It is also easy to measure, since one can simply count the number of articles on a particular theme in the various media and then examine whether the peaks and lows in the issue cycles of media reporting follow similar patterns across countries. Several studies including our own on the Haider debate (see paper by Van de Steeg et al.) showed that this first indicator of a transnational European public sphere is usually fulfilled.

The more interesting theoretical problems start with the third part of the definition, "same criteria of relevance". On the one hand, there are those who argue that a European public sphere requires that speakers in the sphere adopt a European rather than a national or otherwise partisan perspective (see above). There can still be controversies, but the debate would center on whether or not a particular policy is in the European rather than any other interest. On the other hand, there are those who claim that "same criteria of relevance" simply means that we are taking notice of each other in a common public sphere, that we mutually observe each other. The example above of the German and Spanish media reporting of the Commission's corruption scandal would still qualify as one public sphere, since the two national media still observe each other (see Trenz, 2000 on this point).

Kantner herself has elaborated on this point by taking a middle position between the two: "By same 'criteria of relevance,' I do not mean a 'European' perspective based on a European identity, but common interpretations of the problem concerning an issue which include controversial opinions on the particular question" (Kantner, 2002, 60/my translation). This clarification picks up the argument made above that contestation and controversies are necessary ingredients for a common public sphere. 'Similar criteria of relevance' do not mean that we agree on an issue. But we have to agree

on what the problem actually is; we need to 'know' what we are talking about. We can disagree on whether the attack on Iraq is consistent with international law or not. But 'same criteria of relevance' requires that we do agree that compliance with international law is significant in debating questions of war and peace. If we do not agree about international law as a frame of reference to discuss the war against Iraq, we cannot meaningfully communicate about the issue. 'Same criteria of relevance' in a European public sphere then requires that issues are framed in similar ways across national public spheres and that we can observe similar meaning structures and interpretive reference points irrespective of national background or political standpoint of the respective media. In our own research, we conducted a frame analysis of the various newspaper articles and reports of the Haider debate in order to establish similarities in interpretations and structures of meanings (see paper by Van de Steeg et al.).

In my view, 'same criteria of relevance' goes beyond mutual observation of public spheres (see the example of Spain vs. Germany above). But Kantner rejects the notion that a common identity is needed in order to adopt similar perspectives and interpretative frames on an issue. To summarize: From this perspective, we can speak of a European public sphere, if and when people speak about the same issues at the same time using the same criteria of relevance and are mutually aware of each other's viewpoints.

European Public Sphere, Community of Communication, and European Identity

From an empirical-analytical standpoint, such a conceptualization of a European public sphere might actually suffice. However, if we link the subject matter to questions of European democracy and legitimate and accountable governance (which is the normative perspective under which the question of a European public sphere is normally discussed), I doubt that we can leave it here. So, on the one hand, how can we avoid to simply extend our traditional notions of national democracy unto the European level and, as a consequence, fall back to a conventional notion of public spheres according to which it is impossible beyond the nation-state? And how can we avoid, on the other hand, to conceptualize a European public sphere in such a way that it loses its connection to *democratic and accountable* governance beyond the nation-state? I suggest that one can overcome this dilemma by combining the logic of arguing in Habermas's theory of communicative action (Habermas, 1981, 1992, 1995) with a social constructivist understanding of collective identities (see e.g. Eisenstadt and Giesen, 1995).

If we posit the existence of a common public sphere as a necessary ingredient of a democratic polity – be it on the national, be it on the European level, it is inevitable to talk about a community of communication. 'Community of communication' means that speakers talk to each other and to their audiences rather than simply voicing utterances. It requires reason-giving and arguing rather than simply mobilizing one's particular constituency for a common cause. Engaging in a debate requires listening to each other's arguments and trying to persuade each other. It certainly implies contestation and it may or may not lead to a reasoned consensus. But a 'community of communication' in a public sphere implies, at a minimum, that speakers in a public sphere recognize each other as legitimate participants in a debate. We might disagree fundamentally, but we take each other's statements seriously in a democratic polity. Nationalist reactions deny this legitimacy. Polarizations along national lines by definition create boundaries using nationalist "self-other" distinctions, as in the case of the corruption scandal: *The* Germans are after *our* (Spanish) Commissioner. *The* Spanish don't know what the rule of law means. In these and other statements, the two public spheres still observe each other and they also use some common reference points. But they surely do not treat each other as legitimate speakers in one's own public sphere. To give another example: One can

agree or disagree with the so-called "European sanctions" against the Austrian government during the Haider debate. But to treat them as illegitimate interferences in one's national affairs would constrain the community of communication to one's nation-state and to discursively establish a boundary against 'foreigners' in one's national public sphere. As Van de Steeg et al. show in detail, our frame analysis led to the surprising conclusion that we could actually observe a transnational community of communication in this particular case. Not even the Austrian press treated the other EU member states and their interventions as 'foreign' and 'illegitimate.'

Thus, accepting other fellow Europeans as legitimate speakers in a common public sphere implies that the "we" in whose name actors speak and to whom they relate, extends beyond national boundaries. Thus, a certain degree of collective identification with Europe is necessary to treat fellow Europeans from other countries as legitimate voices in one's own national public sphere. We can call it "identity light," since it does not imply a deep sense of loyalty toward each other, but some minimum sense of belonging to the same community. In sum, a meaningful concept of a public sphere – whether local, national, European, or global – implies the emergence of a community of communication which presupposes some degree of collective identification with each other's fate. The issue at stake being discussed in public concerns 'us' as members of a community. We cannot remain neutral observers, but we have to take a stance in a community of communication. In the Haider case, this was the difference between the reports in the U.S. media (as neutral observers) and the reporting in Europe whereby media actively framed and participated in a debate of common concern (see paper by Van de Steeg et al.).

Yet, it is important to qualify these statements so as to avoid misunderstandings. As argued above, communities of communication are social constructs that emerge during discursive practices. The same holds true for collective identities. I do not refer here to some primordial understanding of a European identity, but to an identification with fellow Europeans *in the course* of the debate itself. Thus, a European public sphere as a transnational community of communication creates a collective European identity in the process of arguing and debating the common European fate.

But how do we know a 'community of communication' presupposing some degree of collective identification when we see one? There seem to be two ways of measuring it. First, we can find out who the "we" is in whose name speakers communicate or to whom they refer in their utterances. We can also find out who the "they" is against whom the community is constructed or who is treated as outside the community. To what degree is a European "we" constructed and how does this relate to the national "we"? Second, it is possible to measure the degree to which national media not only use the same reference points, but *European* reference point and to measure the extent to which issues are framed as common European ones, as questions of common fate. Once again, there is no need to agree on anything here. "Common European perspective" only requires that policy questions are framed as issues of common transnational concern in the European public space. In our analysis of the "Haider debates," we found that the debate was framed in terms of two understandings of Europe across all media and countries: "Europe as a moral community" holding up the values of human rights and democracy, on the one hand, and "Europe as a legal community" in which the rule of law prevails, on the other (see paper by Van de Steeg et al.). In this sense then, we found a "community of communication" during the Haider debates.

Conclusions: An Emerging European Public Sphere

This paper argued that we can meaningfully speak of a European public sphere that extends beyond the national public spheres

1. if and when the same (European) themes are controversially debated at the same time at similar levels of attention across national public spheres and media;
2. if and when similar frames of reference, meaning structures, and patterns of interpretation are used across national public spheres and media;
3. if and when a transnational community of communication emerges in which speakers and listeners recognize each other as legitimate participants in a common discourse that frames the particular issues as common European problems.

While a European public sphere implies a community of communication and some degree of collective identification of the speakers with each other, these are all social constructs that emerge through discursive practices.

If we use these criteria to interpret the empirical state of the art on a European public sphere, the conclusion seems to be clear: People do not talk about Europe that often, but if and when they do, they establish a community of communication across borders. There is not yet a stable and high issue salience of European affairs in the national public spheres. But it is remarkable that similar reference points and meaning structures emerge, as soon as people debate European issues, irrespective of one's particular viewpoint in the issue at question. There is very little evidence that media reporting about Europe and the EU varies dramatically from one national public sphere to the other, as far as the frames of interpretation are concerned. In sum, we can empirically observe an emerging European public sphere.

The policy conclusions are equally clear: Many political and business leaders in Europe believe that controversial debates on Europe, the EU, and European policies will endanger the European integration process and slow it down considerably. Therefore, one should not touch the European elite consensus which still prevails in many, particularly Continental European countries. This belief is dangerous in democratic terms and plain wrong in empirical terms. Contestation and politicization is constitutive for a democratic polity including the European polity. And it serves a European purpose, since it is bound to increase the issue salience and significance of European affairs in the national polities. The data on frames of reference suggest that raising the salience of the EU in the national polities will not drive the Europeans apart, but pull them together in a European public sphere.

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