European Public Sphere

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Public spheres are arenas in which (political) issues and positions are discussed. In democracies they are the crucial mechanism linking politics to citizens as they make elites' decisions and citizens' concerns transparent. In mass democracies, in which citizens have hardly any direct experiences with politics, it is the mass media which is the most important channel for such public spheres.

The concept of public spheres, closely related to that of democracy, has so far been bound to nation-states. Yet, with the foundation of the European Union (EU) and its ongoing integration, researchers have asked whether a European public sphere, adapted to this new supra- and intergovernmental European reality, has emerged. The search for such a European public sphere has intensified since the Maastricht treaty (1992) in which substantial power was shifted away from the nation-states to the EU. European political institutions themselves stress the necessity for such an arena of deliberation and engagement about European issues. And a community of researchers has started to discuss what we mean by such a European public sphere, how we can measure it and what factors explain its development and its effects.

The relevance of a European public sphere

A European public sphere has relevance for the future of EU integration from at least two perspectives. First, it influences the quality of democracy in the EU. A democratic Union requires an arena of public deliberation and discussion of those issues that are dealt with at a supra- or intergovernmental level. Without such an arena, institutional reforms of the EU that seek to make the Union more democratic (e.g., strengthening of the European Parliament), are doomed to fail. A prerequisite for any democratic reform to actually work is a functioning mechanism that links politics and its citizens, increasing a system's input legitimacy. Such a sphere, depending on which school of democratic theory one follows, serves democracy in several ways. It makes decisions and concerns transparent and thus allows citizens to control politics (minimum standard); it may contribute to citizens' mobilization and it may force those struggling for political solutions to justify their positions when engaging in a process of deliberation. None of the normative concepts, however, claim that a functioning (European) public sphere requires uncritical reporting about the EU. Instead from a normative perspective, the end of the pro-EU consensus may be good news. Increased contestation may not only increase the salience of the issue, but also introduce alternative viewpoints that need to be justified.

Second, the existence or nonexistence of a European public sphere influences the political process within the EU. Research has shown that in those areas where we lack direct experiences, as is the case with far-distant EU politics, the mass media's potential to influence citizens' attitudes is high (e.g., de Vreese, 2004). Media debates about European issues therefore have the potential to activate, reinforce, or change the climate of opinion. As a consequence, EU politics might change fundamentally. For a long time, the EU has been described as a compromise-seeking machine that produces political decisions without much political struggle. In this period decisions have been taken within a parliamentary and administrative arena that was unaffected by public discussions. There are, therefore, at least two consequences for the political process, if a European public sphere comes into existence. First, it may make the finding of compromises more difficult and therefore decrease the decision-making capacity of the EU. If policy-makers have to publicly communicate their positions before negotiating in Brussels, the corridor for compromises would narrow as everybody would try to avoid public defeats. In this regard, the normative desirable existence of a European public sphere for input legitimacy may well decrease output legitimacy, that is, the decision-making capacity (for the distinction see Scharpf, 1999). Second, the development of a European public sphere may also affect national party systems. These systems are strongly structured along a left-right axis. Yet, EU integration is not necessarily a left-right issue, which makes it difficult for parties to publicly position themselves. Consequently, we could observe either a splitting up of parties or a new structuring of national political spaces (Kriesi et al., 2006).

Concepts and measurements for a European public sphere

Two general concepts have been developed in terms of how to think about a European public sphere. The first concept describes a *pan-European public sphere* that stretches beyond nation states. This would be based on European media, and require a common language and a shared identity (Grimm, 1995). This concept conceives of a European public sphere as resembling (an ideal form of) a national public sphere, with a homogeneous audience and a media system that stretches to the same borders as the public sphere. This notion of a European public sphere has been criticized on various grounds. Taking the national public sphere as a prototype, it overestimates the homogeneity of these national public spheres. In multilingual countries (e.g., Switzerland or Canada) nobody would argue that a nationwide democracy cannot function because of the lack of a public sphere. It seems thus that the requirements for a pan-European public sphere are set even higher than the ones for nation-states. This concept does not reflect upon the multilevel character of the EU. There are some areas where competences have actually been shifted to the EU, some where these competences are shared, and some where the nation-state still prevails. Consequently, it seems disproportionate to claim only a pan-European public sphere could serve as a linking mechanism between elites and citizens.

Despite this criticism, there are studies that search for niches of such pan-European public spheres. These studies either focus on pan-European media like *European Voice* (since April 2015 *Politico Europe*) and the heavily subsidized EuroNews, on global media like BBC World and the *Economist*, or on international media like ARTE (see, e.g., Brüggemann & Schulz-Forberg, 2009). All of these studies, however, conclude that such pan-European public spheres are directed—if at all—toward elites. Some studies also analyze the efforts by EU institutions to trigger such a pan-European communication space. In this vein, there is the "Plan D for Democracy, Dialogue and Debate" (European Commission, 2005) or the "White Paper on a European Communication Policy" (European Commission, 2006) of the EU Commission, the web TV channel EuroparlTV of the European Parliament, or activities around the "Europe Direct" program that can be taken as examples.

As the concept of a pan-European public sphere has proved neither theoretically convincing nor helpful in understanding whether and how Europe is discussed beyond an elite audience, it has been widely discarded in today's research. Instead, a second concept that sees a European public sphere developing through the *Europeanization of national public spheres* has caught most scholarly attention. The core idea of this concept is that national public spheres open up for debate on issues with an EU dimension, giving voice to actors and their positions from the EU institutions and other member countries.

Today there is still debate on what characterizes such a Europeanized public sphere. One group of researchers stresses the importance of concurrent issue publics. A debate is Europeanized "if within an anonymous mass public the same European issues are discussed at the same time under similar criteria of relevance" (Eder & Kantner, 2000, p. 327, translation by author). Studies that search for these concurrent issue and frame publics conduct content analyses asking whether media debates on specific issues are synchronous across different countries regarding the actors involved and the frames employed. The strength of this concept is its focus on the actual content of specific debates. By conducting framing analyses, one actually gets to the core of which arguments are put forward by whom and how and whether such debates become more similar over time (see, e.g., Wessler et al., 2008). Yet, the idea of concurrent issue publics has also been criticized. This concept allows for an ignorance of fellow Europeans as they do not necessarily know that the same European issues are being discussed in a similar manner in other countries. Koopmans and Erbe (2004) criticize this hidden EU dimension and question whether parallel or concurrent issue publics are sufficient to speak of Europeanization of *public* spheres. Furthermore, with a focus on concurrent issue publics conducted as single issue studies, it is hard to determine the degree of Europeanization (Pfetsch & Heft, 2015).

Another group of researchers follows the idea of Europeanization through inter-linked communicative spaces (e.g., Koopmans & Erbe, 2004; Wessler et al., 2008). One can derive three conditions that help to study such interlinked communicative spaces. The first and necessary condition (1) refers to the visibility of issues with an EU dimension and actors from EU institutions or other member states. Visibility of EU issues and actors thereby is always judged in comparison to purely national or other international issue scopes and actors. The second condition (2) focuses on the

communicative interactions. Here, Koopmans and Erbe (2004) distinguish between three forms of Europeanization. First, we can speak of supranational Europeanization if the national media reports about communicative interactions among EU institutions. National audiences then become observers of the internal disputes among EU-level actors. Second, the vertical form of Europeanization implies that national actors and EU institutions get involved with each other. Hereby, national actors can call for action at the EU level (bottom-up) or EU-level actors intervene into national politics by, for example, criticizing or supporting specific national actors (top-down). Third, we distinguish a horizontal form of Europeanization constituted by communicative linkages between member countries. A weak variant of this horizontal linkage refers to debates among actors within a specific EU state. This form resembles classical foreign news reporting. A strong variant analyzes linkages that cross national borders and connect actors from different European states. A third condition (3) asks for the inclusion or exclusion that is constructed by these communicative linkages. Europeanization thereby means that coalition-building in the public realm transcends national borders (Adam, 2007b), avoiding that all national actors stick together blaming the other Europeans. In a similar manner, Wessler et al. (2008) search for a common "we-construction" and Gerhards (1993) calls for an evaluation of actors from a nonnational perspective.

In order to study the interlinkage of communicative spaces in Europe, content analyses are conducted. Visibility as the first condition can easily be studied by simple salience analyses of issues/actors connected to their scopes. Communicative interactions require relational forms of content analyses of traditional mass media or hyperlink analyses in online communication (e.g., Koopmans & Zimmermann, 2010). Different approaches are feasible to study inclusion and exclusion in such public spheres. Combining relational content analysis with social network analysis allows identifying coalitions (Adam, 2007b) whereas frame analysis is used to study we-constructions. Studying Europeanization through interlinked communication has its strengths as well as its shortcomings. Regarding the former, this concept takes on a strict user perspective; only when the audience sees the European dimension of debates are these debates treated as Europeanized. Beyond, it follows a relational perspective: Europeanized communication flows are always studied in comparison to purely national or international communication. Finally, this method is strong in studying the time dimension of Europeanization. Yet, on a critical note, so far a normative criterion of when to speak of a Europeanized public sphere is lacking: Do all conditions need to be fulfilled? In addition, the focus on actors and their interconnectedness often leads to the neglect of the content that is actually communicated. Consequently, the search for the interlinkage of communicative spaces and for concurrent issue publics to study the Europeanization of national public spheres do not exclude each other, but can mutually be interlinked.

Empirical evidence about the existence of and triggering factors for a European public sphere

A pan-European public sphere is small and elite-focused

Although transnational media have increased their audience shares (Brüggemann & Schulz-Forberg, 2009), they still serve an elite audience hardly reaching out to a broader public. Language barriers, nationally focused media usage, and EU politicians who have to align their communication strategies to national audiences in order to be reelected make it unlikely that such a pan-European public sphere will develop in the near future (Gerhards, 1993). Yet, these transnational media (e.g., *Financial Times*, *Economist*, or *European Voice*) are often regarded as opinion leaders, which have the ability to influence national media outlets by means of intermedia agenda-setting—a claim that requires a sound empirical analysis in the future.

National public spheres have become more Europeanized

The visibility of EU actors and issues has increased in the course of time, a result that also applies to European Parliament election coverage (for 1999 to 2009 see, e.g., Boomgaarden, Vliegenthart, de Vreese, & Schuck, 2010). Yet, these increases pertain primarily to vertical Europeanization, that is, communicative linkages in which EU-level actors are involved, whereas no clear-cut trend could be detected regarding horizontal forms of Europeanization (for 1982 to 2003 see Wessler et al., 2008; for 1990 to 2002 see Koopmans, Erbe, & Meyer, 2010). Regarding inclusion and exclusion, Wessler et al. (2008) see a slight increase of we-references to Europe, which however remain on a very modest level. An analysis by Adam (2007b) shows that depending on the issue discussed, coalitions in public debates often remain nationally confined. Yet with few empirical results and many questions open, inclusion and exclusion needs to be high on a future research agenda. Finally, results regarding concurrent issue and frame publics seem to depend on the degree of fine-tuning within the analysis. The more general the categories that are analyzed, the more we can observe such concurrent issue publics, whereas a closer view on such debates also underlines national differences.

Europeanized debates are strongly dominated by powerful actors

Research has vividly demonstrated that debates in which EU issues are discussed advantage specific actors: those who have driven EU integration for a long time, the elites (see, e.g., Koopmans, 2007). Core executive actors can raise their voices in the media whereas parliamentary and party actors are less represented. The most marginalized actors are those to whom theorists of the public sphere attribute most importance, namely civil society actors. This bias toward the powerful goes hand in hand with a selective focus of EU coverage. Instead of reporting and commenting on the early stages of policy-making (where civil society potentially plays a role), media focus on the output side of politics (Wessler et al., 2008). It is further accelerated by the fact that if actors from

other countries are given a voice, they are those actors from the powerful EU countries whereas actors from smaller countries are not granted access (Wessler et al., 2008).

Europeanization of national public spheres depends on conditions that work independently of national settings

Such conditions have the potential to trigger similarities between countries. First of all, mass media reporting and commentary seems to follow the *institutional design* of the EU (Koopmans et al., 2010). Public spheres focus on those political levels where power is executed. As the EU gained power in the course of time, public spheres Europeanized. They did so, in those issue areas where competences have actually been shifted to the EU level. Second, the degree and form of Europeanization differs according to the *media* analyzed (Pfetsch & Heft, 2015). So far most studies focus on the quality press, the most Europeanized media outlets. Regional and tabloid newspapers are regarded as less open for EU issues and actors. However, tabloid media are the frontrunners for Euroskeptic news. In the audiovisual sector, public service broadcasters have turned out to be more open regarding EU issues and actors compared to commercial stations. An analysis of the degree of Europeanization of online communication has dampened hopes that online communication might leave behind national borders. Instead the Internet — at least when approached via search engines — seems to mirror the "hierarchies of visibility" in the offline world (Koopmans & Zimmermann, 2010). Third, key events like summits, EU referenda as well as European Parliament elections have been identified as triggering factors for the Europeanization of national public spheres in all countries (e.g., Boomgaarden et al., 2010)

Europeanization of national public spheres depends on country conditions

These conditions help us understand why debates differ between member countries although these countries are subject to the same decisions at the EU level. Research has shown that a *country's involvement* (i.e., being member or nonmember; and for the latter accepting core EU decisions or not) in the process of EU integration impacts its debates (e.g., Koopmans et al., 2010; Pfetsch, Adam, & Eschner, 2008). Even in their commentaries (Pfetsch et al., 2008), the mass media differ in their openness toward Europe and their framing according to a country's involvement. A second conditional factor on the national level refers to those who shape media's input: *national political actors*. These actors are important as they give far-distant Europe a face and show the relevance for the national level, thereby making Europe newsworthy. Research has shown that national elites' degree of political contestation over Europe is related to the salience of European issues and actors on the media agenda in a nonlinear way (Schuck et al., 2011). Contestation has to move beyond a certain point to actually boost media attention. Such party contestation occurs if the pro-EU consensus of mainstream political parties (for a long time existent in most continental European countries) is challenged by Euroskeptic parties. Elite conflict seems to be one crucial variable to understand the degree of Europeanization of national public spheres. Yet, whether elite conflict (or sometimes even consensus) is publicly communicated by a party also depends on its

relation to public opinion (Adam, 2007a). Public opinion thereby may even serve to make elites speak up in consensus situations if the consensus position is supported by the citizens. Equally, the existence of EU-critical public opinion makes the voicing of EU skepticism attractive. Finally, EU-critical public opinion itself without an elite advocate is not sufficient to boost the issue on the media agenda. A conflict between elites and citizens in a country is unlikely to trigger Europeanized media coverage as elites' silencing strategies are reflected on the media agenda (Adam, 2007a).

Summing up, research clearly shows that the degree of Europeanization of national public spheres has increased, with elites profiting most. However, this increase is not a linear one, but strongly conditional upon factors within the nation-state and beyond (e.g., type of media, EU institutional design, and events).

Challenges for future research on a European public sphere

In order to better understand how national public spheres change in the course of EU integration, three empirical and one normative challenge must be met. Regarding the latter, it is still unclear which criteria need to be fulfilled in order to speak of a fully fledged, democratically functioning, Europeanized public sphere. Criteria such as visibility of issues and actors, communicative interactions and coalition formation that transcend borders, as well as concurrent issue publics are derived from democratic theory. Yet, what does it mean for the quality of democracy if only some of these criteria are fulfilled (e.g., we observe a focus on EU institutions but less so on other member countries)? Is more better? That is, is a public sphere better equipped to serve a European democracy if it has a higher share of transnational actors compared to national ones? Doubts can be cast as it has been shown that a disproportionate visibility of European actors goes hand in hand with less attention for the issue as such (Adam, 2007a, 2007b).

On a descriptive level we need to know more about recent times, especially how the financial and debt crisis is affecting national public spheres. Situations of crisis make the general public care about issues and thus open up completely new possibilities for public politicization. Processes of inclusion and exclusion within the Union or of rising hostility need to be analyzed. During this crisis, conflicts of redistribution within and between countries unfold a very specific dynamic. They allow intermingling of the two basic dimensions of mobilization (Kriesi et al., 2006), economic and identity issues. For the future of the Union, it will be important not only which political measures are taken but also whether the public debates leave behind a divided continent in which national actors have blamed the others and have walled themselves off on the basis of economic nationalism. To understand these processes, research on the Europeanization of public spheres has to move beyond analyzing the visibility of EU issues and actors. Instead we need to focus more on how Europe is debated and who is putting forward the message. In order to achieve this goal more transparency regarding the instruments used to study Europeanization is necessary so that studies can be replicated and results compared.

Research on the Europeanization of public spheres also requires an explanatory turn in order to understand the conditional nature of these processes. The intermedia agenda-setting process and the role of transnational media within this process merit

attention. Further research needs to study the interplay between mass media and national politics: Which political entrepreneurs put the issue and new (possibly Euroskeptic) positions on their agendas? How do mass media and political parties within the same system react? This interplay at the national level is key to understanding the domestic adaption of Europe.

Finally, research needs to focus more on the conditions under which such Europeanized debates affect citizens' attitudes and yield consequences for the political process. With the rise of Euroskeptic voices, research is needed that analyzes which type of messages have the capacity to influence public opinion the most as well which type of messengers can do so. Do positive EU messages have the same capacity to affect opinions as EU-skeptical messages (for the strength of negative messages see Maier, Adam, & Maier, 2012)? How do changes in public spheres and public opinion affect politicians?

Acknowledgments

SEE ALSO: Comparative Research; Content Analysis; Democracy; Public Sphere; Transnational Political Communication

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