

Let's Talk of a 'New' Europe

The Role of the Media in further creating a European
Public Sphere



Evert Schot
Utrecht University
the Netherlands

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Introduction

Europe is evolving. A century ago, it consisted of various independent nation-states, which sought cooperation only in a way that was of self-interest. A hundred years later, most of these states are part of a supranational institution – the European Union (EU). Although intrinsically debated, the EU is becoming more and more important, both in-depth, on the traditional policy areas and in-width, on more and more new subjects.

The question is whether this practical influence in policy also has an impact on the way people perceive themselves and other (fellow) Europeans. Is the way in which European topics, like European Parliamentary elections, scandals or policy topics, are debated similar to the national debate on these subjects? Or are there factors that make talk less about Europe?

As a part of the course on chances in crisis for the European society, this paper will analyze the way the media in Europe influences the way people (are able to) talk about European topics. It will argue that the contemporary information flow through media poses limitations to the way Europeans discuss these topics. First, the concept of a ‘public sphere’ will be discussed. Second, I will come to why it is important to achieve it. Thirdly, the reasons why there is no ‘public sphere’ yet will be discussed. As an intermezzo, I will give some insights on what role the crisis might play in this situation. Lastly, I will propose some directions that could enhance discussion among Europeans about topics of common interest.

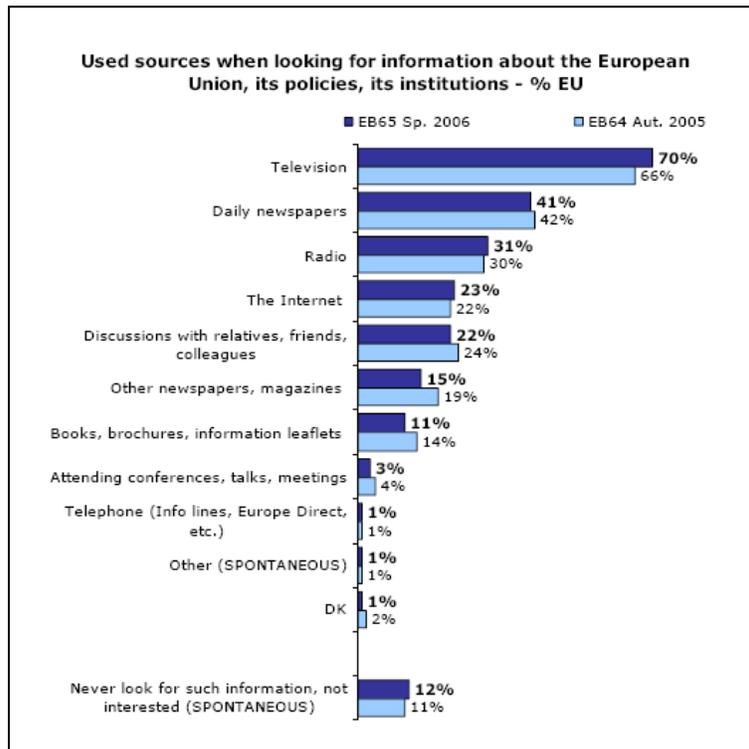
A ‘European Public Sphere’!?

The term public sphere is derived from the work of Habermas. In his eyes, it was important to achieve a discussion forum, by which citizens could “inform themselves, reason about, and eventually influence policy-making” (Habermas, 2001; in Bruggeman & Kleinen-von Koningslow, 2009:28). Although much disputed in academic debate, there are some elements that make it more tangible. As Van der Steeg (2004:2) defines a public sphere, it is “a space where citizens – in practice, an elite of citizens – discuss with each other issues in the presence of a public that has (at least theoretically) the possibility

to intervene and become a participant itself”. Three important elements can be distilled from this definition. First, there has to be a place or forum where the discussion is held. Second, there have to be discussants. Thirdly, there has to be a public that has the possibility to become discussant.

In practice, the forum for a public sphere is mainly the mass media. This is especially true if we look at the European public sphere. European issues are mostly quite abstract. Decision-making takes place in complicated institutions, with actors that are for a large part foreign, and therefore fairly unknown. Apart from this, the issues talked about are technocratic and have often no direct connection to the daily lives of most Europeans. Good examples can be seen in the ‘hot topic’ of the financial problems facing Greece and, in relation, the Eurogroup countries. As Peter Golding (2006:31) observes, “news [coverage] is awareness of that which is not experienced”.

Empirical evidence in European research backs up these statements. In the Eurobarometer surveys (2007) it shows that TV broadcasts and newspaper coverage are the two most important sources of information about the EU and its affairs, followed by another mass media (radio). Only 22/24% of the information is gained by talking to others. If the issues were less abstract,



this number would probably be much higher. So, the forum for a European Public Sphere is mainly formed by (national) mass media.

Why should we want it?

To know how a European public sphere would look like is one thing, but taking a normative stance in favor of it is a second. There is a lot of academic debate about the possibilities and the benefits of having a common public sphere (see Downey & Koenig, 2006). In this section, I will go into the second point of the debate, and argue that it would be helpful to achieve it.

There are two main arguments that make a European wide public sphere beneficial to the EU institutions and the European public. The first derives from the democratic deficit that faces EU institutions (Downey & Koenig, 2006). The decision making process, that is becoming more important for citizens of the EU member states, is criticized for being “less transparent, less accountable and less amendable to popular participation than those of most member states” (Calhoun, 2003:244). This institutional fallacy is increased, or even constituted, by a communication deficit. If people don’t know what is going on, or if they don’t know where to go to, popular participation is (further) limited. This deficit makes that politicians loose both input for their work as well as feedback on their work by, for example, elections for the European Parliament. So, by creating a European public sphere, discussion on European topics is stimulated, thereby limiting the democratic deficit of European institutions. In fact, the European Commission (EC) itself is recognizing this line of reasoning by promoting dialogue, democracy and debate in their communication strategy for the same purpose (Lauristin, 2007).

A second argument is linked with the identity of European citizens. A European public sphere can enhance a common feeling of being ‘European’. Talking about the same subjects in a similar way creates common ground. In this sense, the public sphere “could play a similar role in the development of the EU as [it] did in the development of nation-states” (Downey & Koenig, 2006:166). Without it, it will be harder to create a common identity.

For the EU in contemporary times, both a solution to the democratic deficit as well as a more developed European identity are important. As Van der Steeg (2004) argues,

without popular participation in the decision-making process, and without a real European community, it will be impossible to find a common direction for the EU. In that case, “the EU is confined to being an administrative apparatus, detached from its citizens” (Van der Steeg, 2004:1).

Europe in the News (?)

Although, as we have seen in the previous section, discussion between different Europeans would be advantageous, this situation is far from reality at the moment. Empirical evidence shows that “the general public usually become engaged in European issues only if they involve some national interest or are initiated by scandals (Eriksen, 2005:350; see AIM, 2007). If we zoom in on the three components described in the previous section, this observation seems logical. “[A] European public sphere [...] does not fall from heaven and does not preexist 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 (Risse, 2003:5). The answer thus lies in the ways this construction is done by the media.

There has been a lot of research to the ways in which the mass media (newspapers and TV broadcasts) report on different news and opinion topics. It focuses on the ways the news about events or topics is brought. This means looking at the ways newsworthiness is determined, so on what news is actually covered and for what reasons. Also, it examines how the news is covered, i.e. by what commentators and what aspects are picked out. Because, as we have seen before, the most important sources of information about the EU are mass media, I will focus on news coverage in these media. This is also the subject of most of the European news coverage research.

Looking at what news is covered, there seems to be a common trend in the amount of European news in comparison to domestic or local news. In other words, quantitatively speaking, there is coming slightly more attention to EU news. In a study by Bruggemann et al (2006) of over 3,000 newspaper articles over 20 years, newspaper coverage of European policy and events seems to be gaining attention. Still, evidence also shows that

everyday coverage of European affairs is still “invisible” (Peter, Semetko & de Vreese, 2003:321). Only 9.14% of the political news articles deal with the EU. Also, other studies show that news about Europe is only “marginally represented” (Vliegenthart et al, 2008:420). So, the mass media are paying much less attention to European topics than they do with national topics. This means that the role of national mass media is limited in serving as a forum for a European public sphere.

This last study of Vliegenthart et al (2008) also gives some insight about the way news dealing with the EU is being covered. It shows that in the news coverage that does make it in newspapers and TV broadcasts, “EU officials [are] almost invisible during periods without key events and only moderately visible around summits and other major events” (Vliegenthart et al, 2008:420). Apart from this, most of the news coverage has a negative tone towards EU institutions (Peter, Semetko & de Vreese, 2003:322). As a case study, the 2004 European Parliamentary Elections resembles the findings of the other, more general studies. Only 20% of the actors on TV in news coverage prior to and in the aftermath of the elections can be labeled as European, the rest (80%) being national (De Vreese et al, 2006). The tone of the news coverage analyzed in this study was slightly negative. Tabloid press was more negative than were quality news programs and newspapers. This evidence shows that apart from the characteristics of the forum itself, the discussants as such also do not contribute to the creation of a European public sphere. Because they are mostly national actors, they make that the news is mainly framed in a national way, even leading to a negative tone towards the EU.

The third point out of the definition of a public sphere deals with the public. In the case of mass media, the public consists of many different people, because of the range mass media like TV and newspapers have by definition. There is one aspect that is important for this subject, and that is the fact that all mass media are still nation-wide, with only a few exceptions. Although there are some ‘European mass-media’, like Euronews, the range of these media is only very low, mainly reaching an elite of citizens who already have strong (professional) ties with EU institutions. Therefore, “judged by their readers and viewers, they are simply irrelevant” (Golding, 2006:15).

These three things taken together make it difficult for mass media to rise above the national public sphere. Because of their national basis, national news has the upper hand in what news is selected for TV news broadcasts and newspaper articles. Also, it makes that the European news that does make it is framed in a national way by national actors. Thirdly, because of the national basis, the audience is also predominantly national. Of course, out of a practical point of view, lingual and cultural differences between countries amplify all of this.

This national focus creates differences in news coverage across different European countries. Because of the national focus, analysis and audience, all these things differ in each country. In other words, there is no overlapping forum, with common discussants and an audience that has common views in the public debate.

Why not more Europe?

As we have seen just now, because mass media are mostly nationally based, they deal less, and in a less common way, with European news (events). The question still unanswered is why this is the case: what makes that national mass media keep having this national focus? Why wouldn't they start moving in the direction of a common European news flow?

Of course, the final answer to these questions has to deal with the history, culture and shared values of the different countries. Europe still is no fully united nation-state, and all the 27 member states still have, for a large part, their own habits, interests and, as we have seen, public spheres. The figures are well known: apart from Luxemburg (20%), there is no country where more than 6% feel as being European instead of citizen of their own country (EC, 2001).

These points are reflected in the results of a study by the AIM Project (AIM, 2006). It has qualitatively researched the reasons why editors and journalist of the TV news, political talk shows and (quality) newspapers still keep a national focus in their work. A first reason that was given was that the journalists had no expertise on EU topics, and that

they therefore felt less comfortable reporting on Europe. Secondly, journalists gave as reason for the underrepresentation that, in their eyes, their public had no interest in European affairs. The topics are seen to be too complex, or of little importance to ordinary citizens. Thirdly, editors mentioned as a reason that nothing really happened in Brussels, and that they (of course) would deal with real news, if it would be there. A last reason, linked with the ones above, is that the EU, and especially the European Commission, wasn't doing enough to actively provide the information journalists needed to write or compose their journalistic work.

Intermezzo: the Financial Crisis

Now, having focused on the (European) public sphere as a concept, its advantages for Europe and the EU and to the reasons why it is not yet existent, we will turn to the role of the crisis. Having in mind the subject of the course of this paper, which has as a thematic subtitle 'Chances in Crisis', are there any elements of the current financial crisis, that could affect the situation described above?

The crisis itself did affect many European countries, and consequently also many European citizens. Although it started in the United States in 2008, many important events that are related to the crisis now are taking place in Europe and the EU. Think for example about the collapse of the Icelandic Landsbankinn, which led to financial unrest in EU countries like the Netherlands and the United Kingdom. Governments had to back up people who had stored their savings with an international daughter firm of Landsbankinn called Icesave. Also, the unrest on the financial markets and the currency markets is a direct effect of the crises in the southern European countries, like Greece and Spain. All these events are not only affecting the country in which they are taking place, but, through the connectedness of the international and EU economical system, also affect people abroad. This is especially the case in the EU, where many countries have a common or linked monetary and financial system.

All this financial and economical turmoil created a lot of work for European decision makers. A lot had to be decided, and many of these decisions were highly politically

contested. They gave rise to intense public debates in the different European countries about practical matters of giving state aid to money savers or fellow member states having problems. These debates also evoked a 'metadebate' about questions as the balance between solidarity and self-interest or the defining of the relation between the EU member states.

On the one hand, the abovementioned elements of the crisis make that there is an increase in the news flow coming from the European stage. Not only horizontally, with more and more important news from other European countries, but also vertically, with events in one nation having direct importance to the next (see Bruggemann & Kleinen, 2009). In other words, European issues, like the efforts made by EU Finance ministers to 'save' the Euro and to come up with a plan to prevent things happening now in the future, are becoming national issues. This means an increased issue salience of EU affairs, making the argument posed by some editors in the AIM study (2006), that there was no (real) news coming from 'Brussels' less valid.

On the other hand, however, the points made about the national focus in news coverage in (national) mass media still count in the news regarding the (effects of) the financial crisis. Because of the fact that European issues have direct importance to the European nations, there is also a strong 'we vs them' framing in the news coverage (see, for comparison, Downey & Koenig, 2006). This is part of the debate about the balance between solidarity and self-interest: if, for instance, we as Dutch help out Greece by granting a state loan, we ourselves will have to pay for it, as the argumentation goes. Because of the national basis of mass media, this can result in a national framing of the news in term of self-interest, instead of solidarity.

A second point that could reduce the positive effects of the crisis on creating a European public sphere in the mass media is about the type of issues that come forward in the news. Most of the issues deal with difficult monetary or financial problems, as well as with high politics. These subjects are still far away from people's everyday lives. This can amplify the nation-oriented approach of the media, resulting in a question of: what's in it for us?

So, what can be done?

In the previous section, we could see that, although the crisis had some promising features, the mass media as such still pose difficulties in being a forum for a true European public sphere. Are there possibilities to overcome these inherent problems of the (national) mass media, and look for other forums, discussants and audiences? In essence, two directions can be pursued.

The first direction is about *changing the source*. In other words, changing the focus of the national mass media, and giving them a more transnational focus. This means not changing the media landscape, but trying to influence the way it is being used. One possibility in this direction is for the European Commission to take an active role in convincing journalists and editors of the newsworthiness of European topics. This could deal with several of the arguments given in the AIM project study (2006) about a lack of knowledge about EU affairs and the request of journalist to get more information about what's going on in Brussels and elsewhere regarding Europe. Of course, there are setbacks to this strategy. It will take a lot of effort to get the message through, because the media are still based nationally, which means the logic presented above still counts. This direction could thus be seen as not tackling the source of the problem, but making the best of the situation.

A second direction could be more promising for the future. It can be labeled *changing sources*, and does look more at the source of the problem. It is about focusing less on (national) mass media as a forum, but trying to use other media to act as one for the European public sphere. Some efforts have been made with regard to transnational European media, like Euronews and some European newspapers, but, as we have seen above, their range remains low. A more promising way could be the use of new social media, like Twitter, blogging or social network sites. Here, a direct connection can be made between people from different countries in Europe, without having the layer of journalists in between, as is the case with mass media. Here also, the EC can play an active role directly as well as indirectly. It can use the internet to get the information out, thereby both limiting the communication deficit and creating transparency as well as

getting people to use this information in a discussion with each other in a similar vein. In fact, this means changing the forum from the mass media (TV, newspapers etc.) to the internet. Also, it means changing the way discussants and audience are defined: it's not mainly a small elite that is discussing the topics, but the two groups will get, even more so, intertwined. Of course, this is part of what makes a public sphere, as we have seen in the definition of Van der Steeg (2004): an audience must have the possibility to become a discussant itself. With promoting this direction, this possibility is much enlarged.

Conclusion

This paper tried to find out in what way different European people were able to discuss European topics with each other. Also, it looked at what role the media, as a forum for the public sphere, is playing.

As we have seen, a European public sphere would be beneficial for decreasing the democratic deficit of the EU institutions as well as in bringing Europeans together. These two point together make that it will be easier to come to a common or shared direction with regard to the EU and Europe as such when this public sphere exists.

This as it might be, evidence shows that the current situation is far removed from this ideal situation. The mass media, as the main forum for a public sphere, are almost all nationally based. This makes that they have a strong national focus in selecting, presenting and interpreting the European news. Journalists and editors feel that there is no interest in European topics, and that they themselves are incapable, or do not have enough resources, to get the message through to their national audience.

Crisis also does not present a solution, although some elements look promising. There is an increase in salient news from Europe, which increases newsworthiness. But, still, because of the national basis of mass media, it is being brought in a national vein, presented in a 'we vs. them' fashion.

Two directions are in essence possible to change the current situation. The first is about changing the source, for example by actively promoting EU news as important and newsworthy. A second, which is more directly aimed at the source of the problem, is by changing sources, and trying to get less dependent on the mass media as a forum for the public sphere, but using other media instead. For the future, internet, and especially the new social media, can look promising in this light.

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