In Search of the European Public Sphere

Between Normative Overstretch and Empirical Disenchantment

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RECONSTITUTING DEMOCRACY IN EUROPE

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Abstract

The attempt to pin down the constitutive elements of the European public sphere is typically marked by ambivalence between normative and descriptive elements. In normative terms, the European public sphere is identified through the standards which should be used to assess the legitimacy of European integration. In descriptive terms, the European public sphere is identified through the actors, institutions, and communicative processes which guide the practice of collective self-understanding of the Europeans. This article argues that the tension between normative standards and legitimating practice should be considered as constitutive for the emergence of a European public sphere. Against recent attempts to define the European public sphere in purely descriptive terms, this implies the need to re-introduce the normativity of the public sphere as part of the dynamics of an evolving communicative space in Europe. It is precisely this practice of legitimation and delegitimation that makes the European public sphere thinkable as a (still unfinished) project and that accounts for its dynamic expansion.

Keywords

Introduction

The European public sphere can be defined as the communicative infrastructure that is used for debating the legitimacy of the project of European integration. The attempt to pin down the constitutive elements of such a European public sphere is typically marked by ambiva-lence between normative and descriptive elements. In normative terms, the European public sphere is identified through the standards which should be used to assess the legitimacy of European integration. In descriptive terms, the European public sphere is identified through the actors, institutions, and communicative processes which guide the practice of collective self-understanding of the Europeans. [1]

This article argues that the tension between normative standards and legitimating practice should be considered as constitutive for the emergence of a European public sphere. Against recent attempts to define the European public sphere in purely descriptive terms, this implies the need to re-introduce the normativity of the public sphere as part of the dynamics of an evolving communicative space in Europe. I will begin this endeavour with a short conceptual history of the term *Öffentlichkeit*, which originates in German idealistic thinking and has been only reluctantly adapted to mainstream social science theorizing. Conceptual history is also helpful for appreciating the difficulties of conceptualizing the public sphere beyond the nation-state. In the second part, the article will reconstruct this alleged link between nation-ness and public-ness, and examine possible ways to overcome it. Instead of laying the blame with the methodological nationalism of social sciences, the article will scrutinize the arguments that have been put forward to defend the national research focus of public sphere analysis. The national public sphere is held up, first of all, by the particular kind of media economy that is found in Western societies. Secondly, a strong argument for the maintenance of the achievements of the national public sphere can be made by pointing out the intrinsic normativity of the public sphere.

It is only at this stage that the full potential of European public sphere research can unfold through the restoration of these normative expectations and applying them to a new institutional setting. The article will demonstrate how the search for a European public sphere inevitably ends up with a diagnosis of public sphere deficits. The European public sphere is uniting and dividing the political space that is demarcated by European integration. It is in search of the unity of its *form,* which needs to be offset against its internal diversity and against the plurality of its *practices.* As I will argue in the last part of the article, it is precisely this practice of legitimation and delegitimation that makes the European public sphere thinkable as a (still unfinished) project and that accounts for its dynamic expansion.

A short conceptual history of the public sphere

The term *public sphere* is a rather flawed paraphrasing of the German term *Öffentlichkeit*. Its use in English academic writing is still basically restricted to the

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[1] Accordingly, two 'search strategies' for the identification of a European public sphere can be distinguished. The first starts with the specification of the minimum qualitative standards of the public sphere applied to the European setting (Risse 2004; Peters et al. 2005; Eriksen 2005). The second starts with the quantification of European political communication and its effects in terms of anticipating "desired outcomes" and raising normative expectations (Eder and Kantner 2000; Trenz 2004, 2007).

reception of Jürgen Habermas' seminal work "Strukturwandel der Öffentlichkeit" first published in 1962 and only translated a quarter of a century later under the title "Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere". This rather contextualised conceptual history is clearly an obstacle when it comes to turning the notion of the public sphere into a universal analytical category within social science. Inadequacies in translation have blocked an accurate understanding of *Öffentlichkeit* and, in turn, make it difficult for all those who have not enjoyed a German speaking academic environment to appreciate its analytical value and normative impact.

Yet, these difficulties in fixing the meaning of a new term should not solely be attributed to the poor translation. Closer analysis of the semantic use of the term *Öffentlichkeit* does not bring greater clarity. *Öffentlichkeit* is not part of the traditional social science vocabulary and it cannot be found as an analytical term in the classical works of our discipline. In legal and political philosophy, the notion derived from German idealism and its ideal type of bourgeois public sphere that holds the civic spirit of the self-enlightening citizens alive. From there, the term *Öffentlichkeit* has entered political and everyday language in Germany, where it is used with different and partly contradictory connotations. As an effect of national framing, it is most common, for instance, to speak of the public sphere as a collectivity or as an actor with stable preferences and expectations, that is able to express its own opinion. The vague and indistinct use of the term has become integral part of the conceptual history of the public sphere and it continues to determine its use in scientific and everyday language.

Habermas has somehow corrected the organic vision that equates *Öffentlichkeit* with a particular community. Confronted with the critique of its own previous conception of the bourgeois public sphere, Habermas (1992; 1996a) based his legal theory on a sociologically informed notion of the political public sphere. As such, the public sphere has primary an intermediary function between political rule makers and those who are potentially affected by the exercise of political rule. It was made explicit that the former were not necessarily national governments and the latter were not necessarily national constituencies. Public sphere theorizing was thus principally applicable to new forms of governance and civil society beyond the nation-state.

In light of recent Habermasian theorizing it is useful to remind what the public sphere is not: The public sphere is neither a socio-structural entity nor an institution or an organization that could be shaped by purposeful action. In similar terms, any connotation that links the public sphere to particular forms of collective action rooted within particular groups or collectivities is misleading (Neidhardt 2006). The public sphere should rather be perceived as an open field of communicative exchange. It is made up of communication flows and discourses which allow for the diffusion of intersubjective meaning and understanding. As a realm of interdiscursivity, the public sphere is only loosely coupled to particular culture and languages. The public sphere rather opens up closed meaning systems and, through its intermediary structures, facilitates cross-cultural communication and interchange (Habermas 1992; Eder 1999; Trenz 2002; Kantner 2004).

Such an analytical understanding of the public sphere as a facilitator of communicative exchange in anonymous mass societies is useful when conceiving the conditions for the possible emergence of a European public sphere. From the latter perspective, the link between nation-ness and public-ness should not be seen as essential but as historically contingent. When Habermas, in his historical account on

the structural transformation of the public, described the transition from reasoning publics to the consuming publics of the mass media, he still had in mind a principally Westphalian-national infrastructure: a public sphere that mainly served a national constituency through national language and mass media. In the contemporary transnationalising world one might expect a second structural transformation to take place, which decouples mass-communication also from this national organizational infrastructure (Eder et al. 1998). The public sphere would thus increasingly refer to a global media economy with a new potential to address ever more dispersed audiences.

Towards a transnational public sphere?

In searching for evidence for the unfolding of a public sphere beyond the nation state, the emphasis has been laid on the role of the old and the new media as an amplifier of political knowledge and information, which is increasingly de-contextualised from local spaces.

Identifying such instances of transnational communication is relatively easy. The Internet has developed into a powerful global communication tool that opened the first truly boundless space of communication. Virtual communication anywhere is communication everywhere. The Internet gives everybody instant and affordable access to global information but also enables anybody to publish to the world. In addition, more traditional visual and textual media formats are also increasingly embedded in global communication networks. Through worldwide news-broadcasting, political events are re-contextualized within an emerging global space of meaning. Media analysts have, for instance, drawn attention to the structuring effects of so-called world events like September 11, which are linked to parallel attention cycles worldwide (Urry 2002; Stichweh 2006). The emerging global newsroom also shapes public opinion and attitudes, shared concerns and problem perceptions and thus, for the first time, makes global citizenship and global identity possible (Gurevitch and Levy 1990). As such, it becomes an integral part of the imaginary of the cosmopolitan society (Beck 2006).

Strong evidence for the impact of global communication flows can be also found in the research on world culture, which has exemplarily shown how national and local cultures are embedded in global structures of the exchange of meaning (Hannerz 1992; Robertson 1992). Similar effects have been described in terms of the diffusion of world models of legitimacy, human rights discourse and democracy (Meyer 2000; Keck and Sikkink 1998). Even the history and collective identities of particular nations are debated within the world community as was powerfully illustrated by the world-wide indignation at the formation of the first Haider-Schüssel government in Austria in spring 2000 (van de Steeg 2004; Risse 2004).

For authors like Ulrich Beck, this is sufficient evidence to postulate the overcoming of the national public sphere. The cosmopolitan society becomes thinkable through "Welt-öffentlichkeit" as a global sphere of responsibility and reflexivity that belongs to the cosmopolitan society. This is not a matter of value-based integration but of integration through the growing awareness of risks and dangers. As Beck (2006: 35) writes: "world risk society marks an epoch in which coerced risk-cosmopolitanization mutates into a no less coerced emerging public awareness of the ongoing process of risk-cosmopolitani-zation. [...] Instead of integration through national and universal

values, the global character of dangers reflected in a world public entails a new dialectic of conflict and cooperation across borders."

The transnational scope of public communication is thus measured in the absolute amount of communication that *factually* and *potentially* transcends national borders. The world is perceived as an observatory space, in which communicative events are increasingly interconnected. This does not imply that world citizens necessarily enter into direct communicative interchange with each other, but that their local chats and discursive fora are opened for observation and participation by the other. The world public is as much a virtual public as the national public. Most of the time, it is rather inattentive and ill-informed about ongoing events, but what counts is its principal availability as an addressee of discourse. This has an increasingly contingent and unpredictable affect on those who defend discursive positions in the world community. The global public sphere is constituted by the principal availability of information from all angles of our shared world. From this perspective, there are indeed no spaces left that could not be spotlighted by Google Earth and from which information could not be instantly made available to the world community. On the other hand, the spread of world discourse is no longer comparable to the traditional notion of a discursive order, in which arguments proceed in a consequential and rational way. Signs, symbols and images are often more successful in circulating than sophisticated arguments. The world peace movement, for instance, operates most successfully through particular icons that allow for identification beyond the barriers of local languages (Benford and Hunt 1992).

Should this then be considered as sufficient evidence for abandoning the concept of the nationally bounded public sphere altogether? I will argue that there are still at least two good arguments for not abandoning the narrative of the national public sphere too quickly. The first argument is empirical and refers to the media economy of advanced modern societies. As this article will try to illustrate, there is sufficient empirical evidence to assume that, for the time being, so-called methodological nationalism of media studies, is, at least partially, grounded in the mainstream nationalism of the news media. Evidence for the persistence of media nationalism can be found in a) the historical rooting of national media cultures and institutions that facilitate b) the synchronisation of media contents and c) confine the production and consumption of news principally to national (local) publics (notwithstanding the parallel process of a progressive concentration of media ownership). The second argument will bring discussion back to the intrinsic normativity of the public sphere. I contend that critical standards of democracy are still indispensable for measuring the performance of existing public spheres as long as they represent the commonly shared normative horizon of inter-communicating actors.

Methodological nationalism or media nationalism?

A first obstacle for the conceptualization of a trans-national public sphere is what is commonly referred to as the methodological nationalism of media studies. The public sphere is first of all part of the imaginary of national democracy. The nation state appears to be a kind of natural container of the public sphere, which holds a community of co-nationals together. From this nationalistic perspective, the possibility of a transnational public sphere is categorically denied. A shared language and a shared cultural understanding, that is to say, the socialization of the individual

as a member of a particular political community, appear to be constitutive for the public sphere.

Methodological nationalism is manifested in the use of a contextualized knowledge in scientific research that claims universal validity. Our scientific vocabulary was developed within the nation state framework (Beck 2003). Nation states and nationally bounded societies are our basic unit of analysis and determine our established research routines. At a first look, public sphere research could be taken as a good example to illustrate the far reaching effects of social sciences' methodological nationalism. In measuring the public sphere one usually underlies a systemic model of public communication that distinguishes between the inputs, throughputs and outputs of communicative systems.[2] The integrative functions of such a system of mass communication depend, however, on some infrastructural requirements that are typically provided by the nation state. They rely on a) the communicative performance of *national* (or local) governments (input), b) the intermediary capacities of *national* media organizations (throughput), and c) the opinions and attitudes of *national* publics (output).

One could thus easily jump to the conclusion that established research routines have prevented us from exploring the full potential of the concept of the public sphere as an unbounded arena of communication rather than as a closed system of intermediation between established partners. A public sphere is constituted as an all-inclusive arena that is principally open to all kinds of communicative inputs and that unfolds through public discourse with the potential to reach virtually everybody.[3] The search for a transnational public sphere is therefore seen by many as a way of achieving emancipation from these non-reflected and theoretically blind research routines (Kantner 2004; van de Steeg 2002). By looking out for instances of transnational communication, we will inevitably arrive at a notion of a cosmopolitan public sphere that communicates to the world society.

Can this charge of methodological nationalism of media studies be empirically sustained? In order to clarify some of these assumptions, it should be made explicit that the modern public sphere needs to be perceived as a media sphere. It is only by making use of the infrastructure of the mass media that anonymous mass audiences (the general public and the electorate) can be reached and included in politics. Within media studies on political news making, the construct of global society or European society as a new reference point for empirical research and theoretical reflection has proven to be of little analytical value (Weischenberg 2000). The drawing of national geographic and economic borders between societies remains fundamental for categorizing existing media communication within the realm of politics. Comparative media surveys, therefore, always start and end with a typology of national media systems (Hallin and Mancini 2004).

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[2] See the path-breaking article of Gerhards and Neidhardt (1991), which, to the author's knowledge, has never been translated into English.

[3] It is important to stress at this point that such a concept of the public sphere as an all-inclusive arena is not necessarily referring to the normatively thick notion of the public sphere as it was most prominently defended by Jürgen Habermas. The all-inclusiveness and openness of the public sphere is also sustained by social system theory. Niklas Luhmann conceptualised the public sphere as the undetermined environment of societal sub-systems. Its all-inclusiveness and openness is then the guarantee for the possibility of reflexivity and self-observation of society (and this is also considered as the main function of the mass media) (Luhmann 1996).

We therefore need to acknowledge that methodological nationalism of media and communication studies is, at least partially, grounded in mainstream media nationalism. This national research focus of the discipline appears to be not only justified by the media economy of contemporary Western societies but there are also well known historical reasons for this particular institutional connection between news media, national politics and national publics. Historical research, has pointed out, first of all, the co-evolution of media and national culture. Mass media have always been the school of the nation that forms the unitary national public (Anderson 1991). Even today, when confronted with the increasing fragmentation of media spheres, mass media continue to guarantee the symbolic integration of the nation as a community of communication that talks or that 'gossips' about the same topics of relevance.

There is also little or no evidence that the established institutional links between the media and the nation-state will be weakened. Trends in mass media development in Western societies are relatively clear-cut: On the one hand, we observe a steady concentration of media ownership and a flourishing media industry that opens global markets for the promotion of similar products. The concentration of media ownership is, however, not necessarily linked to the synchronization of media contents. The new character of the global media baron has only little or no influence on the shaping of local news media (Herman and McChesney 2000). The experience rather shows that profit can be best maximized by maintaining the fragmentation of political news production and providing specific news formats that address national and local publics. The success strategy of single providers on the media market consists precisely in offering contextualized products to regional consumers. Even the Internet falls apart into national niches, where consumers draw political information mainly from national and often purely local web pages (Norris 2001).

Globalization theorists further assume that intensified foreign news coverage of so-called world events would lead to shared problem perceptions and the application of similar interpretative frames. However, this optimistic assumption about the penetration of the national public spheres by the effects of transnational communication is misleading. Qualitative content analyses points to a strong nationalistic and ethnocentric bias in foreign news coverage and journalists tend to defend national interests over normative ideals of a just world order (Page and Shapiro 1992; Kevin 2003). The Swedish anthropologist Ulf Hannerz (2004) has done research on foreign news correspondents as the possible heralds of cosmopolitanism and his overall findings are negative. He concludes that, to the contrary, in our era of intense globalization and increased global connectedness, foreign news coverage in many media channels has been shrinking recently. Rather than an enabling factor, the restricted scope of media communication should be considered as one of the main constraints that cosmopolitanism faces today (ibid.: 23).

The European Union is no exception with regard to this parallel development of media concentration of ownership and the fragmentation of contents of political news-making. Within the European common market, the political news economy remains strongly nationalized, and there are no genuinely European newspapers or TV channels that could constitute a European newsroom. Whilst some existing newspapers with a transnational diffusion like the Financial Times are mainly used for the purpose of elite communication, foreign markets remain closed to mainstream national media products. Moreover, with regard to the Europeanization of national news-making, findings do not point to an increased penetration of national media by

European stories and debate. A linear relationship between growing competencies of the EU and growing public attentiveness to European integration has so far not been corroborated by empirical analysis. Only a few studies were able to observe the diachronic effects of Europeanization over time and those who did ended up mostly with negative findings (Gerhards 2000; Koopmans and Erbe 2004). Only Brüggemann et al. (2006) conceded a slight increase of EU-coverage in quality newspapers that, however, did not translate into an increase in discursive interchange between national media spheres.

Any investigation into the transnationalising dynamics of public communication must recognise therefore that nationally confined media markets are already saturated, with only small niches left that can be occupied by European political communication. National journalists will continue to serve mainly national (or local) publics. The Internet had surprisingly little impact on this general pattern of national news production through mainstream print and audiovisual media. For the average Internet user, the main providers of political news continue to be the platforms of their favourite newspaper or television channel (Koopmans and Zimmermann 2007).

The normative mandate of the public sphere

As the public sphere is, in empirical terms, strongly reliant upon the infrastructure of national mass media, it is also, in normative terms, dependant on the integrative functions of a national media system. In the history of Western thought, *Öffentlichkeit* has not been introduced as a diagnostic category. Rather, it has primarily been introduced as a critical category with an interventionist ambition and with the intention of shaping the realm of discourse and communicative relationships between the citizens. In practice, this means that the constitutive and distinctive features of the public sphere have always been defined 'ex-negativo'. Public sphere theorizing has been pushed with the critical intention to detect the deficits of ongoing communication processes. The public sphere is found to be always "under construction": its performance does not yet come up with the high expectations and its outputs in terms of discursive rationality are still to be considered as provisional.

Descriptive accounts fall short as long as they fail to pay attention to this intrinsic normativity of the public sphere. Contrafactual normative assumptions about how public communication should be organized are of high relevance for reconstructing the ongoing discursive practice through which political information is made available. The identification of public sphere deficits creates a mutual obligation between communicating actors and journalists to overcome these deficits. Shared norms guide present choices of public communicators and give future orientation for public sphere building and expansion. This is best explained by the fact that the providers of quality news have internalized the normative premises of the bourgeois public sphere. The normative horizon of a shared sphere of understanding is used as the underlying script for the work of the journalists.

All attempts to introduce the public sphere as a purely descriptive category need to take into account that the concept was originally meant as a contribution to normative theory of democracy and as such, continues to shape discursive practice. Instead of discarding the intrinsic normative assumptions of the public sphere as invalid or replacing them by purely descriptive accounts, European public sphere research needs to delineate the particular kind of normative belief system, which is shared

among the Europeans. This will serve as a basis for empirically analyzing the particular ways of how normative contents inform political practice in the European Union.

A similar point has been raised in a recent contribution by Nancy Fraser (2007) who argues against globalization literature and its eagerness to find the public sphere virtually everywhere. Her point is that the public sphere cannot be simply reduced to a mere infrastructure of communication. Searching for the conditions of the public sphere (either nationally or trans-nationally) is not simply about delivering a descriptive account of ongoing communication processes but also about adding qualitative judgment. We rather speak of a public sphere when communication is organized in a particular way and linked to particular qualitative criteria. Within the normative repertoire of liberal democracies, these qualitative criteria are relatively stable. We are used to speaking of a public sphere if communication is linked, in one way or the other, to processes of public opinion and will formation.

According to Nancy Fraser (ibid.) the transformation of public communication into public opinion and will formation is based on two pre-conditions. The first refers to the generation of *normative legitimacy*. It assumes that collective choices, which are the outcome of public opinion and will formation, are seen as more valid than individual choices or secret decisions. The second condition refers to *political effectiveness*. It requires that the collective will can be also instrumentally empowered and imposed upon the private will. The problem with these two preconditions is that they are first linked to an active or, at least, attentive citizenry and second to a sovereign power, which is both the executor and the addressee of the collective will of the people. A quick conclusion is that in order to meet these two conditions we need a) nationess and b) stateness. Through its intrinsic normativity the public sphere would then be closely related to the nation state. To speak of a transnational public sphere would then sound like an oxymoron (ibid.).

Beyond the national public sphere

This quick rush through conceptual history leads to the conclusion that a transnational public sphere is, in normative terms, an oxymoron, and, from an empirical perspective, it is little more than wishful thinking. Does this mean that we have to stick to the reality of present day, more or less, integrated national public spheres? I believe not, and the simple reason for my caution in jumping to an early conclusion is that there is as much uncertainty expressed in contemporary literature about the normative integrity of the national public sphere as there are doubts about its possible emergence at the European level. Two questions should be raised with regard to the possible localization of the European public sphere along the template of the national public sphere: Firstly, the question of the adequacy of our criteria of measurement, and secondly, the question of the adequacy of the normative criteria derived from the legacy of the national public sphere as an integrated and well-functioning communicative system.

Adequacy of measurement

The diagnosis of a European public sphere deficit is usually matched against the template of the national public sphere, the premises of which are more or less taken for granted. This raises the question of the adequacy of our measurement criteria.

Friedhelm Neidhardt (2006) has raised this point in a recent overview article, arguing that the national public sphere is very much a dummy alternative when it comes to determining the scope and the performance of transnational communication. The diagnosis with regard to the integrity and well-functioning of the national public sphere is discouraging. Existing spaces of communication are increasingly diversified. Media specialists from all Western countries send alarming messages about the lowering of news quality in traditional formats like newspapers and public broadcasting (McNair 2000; Meyer 2001). The disenchantment with the performance of the existing national public spheres is based on a variety of diffuse empirical observations:

- The fragmentation of existing media spheres is explained through ongoing processes of individualisation and a retreat of the citizens from the public into the private. Classical sociological explanations refer to the functional differentiation of society: those who participate in the economic market and those who participate in the system of cultural reproduction do not necessarily share the same language. Different codes are used by the different sub-systems of society to construct social reality. Translations become necessary and incommunicabilities between different sectors of our social life increase (Luhmann 1996).

- The crisis of the unitary public sphere is further displayed in a new class segmentation of the political news landscape (Bourdieu 1996). Do the readers of the *Sun* and of the *Guardian* really populate the same public sphere? One possible hypothesis is that the boulevardisation of newspaper and television formats reflects a particular pattern of media use of uneducated social classes and thus enhances information inequality (Schiller 1996). The few remaining quality news formats (mainly reduced to three or four nationally wide diffused newspapers and television programmes) occupy ever smaller niches, which are mainly used by the political elites to communicate among each other.

- The breakdown of the national public sphere is, thirdly, manifested in a new territorial differentiation of the news spaces. Within the nation states, particular regions or ethnic communities create their own, relatively closed and self-referential news worlds specialized in the reproduction of regional gossip but no longer covering international or even national news (Hafez 2007: 98ff.).

- Last but not least, the acceleration of political news production contributes to the fragmentation of media markets. Attention cycles, through which political debates unfold, become shorter and the rhythm through which new events are introduced and old topics are replaced by new ones gets faster (Baumgartner and Jones 1993).

The fiction of a unitary national public sphere could in the past still be upheld with some plausibility. Its symbolic expression can be found in the idea of the whole nation gathering around the television for the eight o'clock news. But how can we imagine a unitary national public if media users instead of choosing between two or three television channels get dispersed in the cyberspace? New media formats create distractions but only rarely attention. Public opinion formation, however, requires attentive publics. It is grounded in a world of shared news, in which the same topics are discussed at the same time with the same criteria of relevance (Habermas 1996b: 190).

The diagnosis of the dispersion of the unitary national public sphere as the locus of public opinion and will formation is, of course, related to the imminent concern with its diminishing capacities to support national democracy. This raises the question of the normative adequacy of the national public sphere as a template for the European public sphere, and intrinsically, as a template for the building of European democracy.

Normative adequacy

Colin Crouch (2004) has recently proposed the term post-democracy to designate a qualitative change in the development of Western democratic societies. His argument is based on a generalised descriptive account that collects rather dispersed empirical indicators: (1) the decline of public authority, private governance, corporate domination and the commercialisation of citizenship, (2) individualised and fragmented societies and the disappearance of collective actors or stable coalition (e.g. class) that could substantiate the 'rule of the people', (3) the replacement of party politics by lobbyism and the rise of new parties as firms and advertisement machines, (4) the degradation of mass political communication exemplified by the growing personalisation of politics, media advertisement and images, which replace rational debates and discourse, the lowering of news quality and the media staging of politics as show business.

The European public sphere deficit needs to be addressed as a specific case of this general malaise of democracy. Its recognition is based on normative premises, which – though widely shared among the Europeans – loose institutional anchorage. The democratic functioning of the public sphere in Europe can rely on a consensual value system, but not on the infrastructural requirements for its own realization. How can the adequacy of the normative standards of public sphere theorizing be defended against the new structural transformation of the media spheres in Western societies? Normative political theory has come up with two answers: The first is to insist on the normative standards of the national public sphere against the deficiencies of the existent systems of mass communication. The second is to re-adjust the normative standards of the public sphere to the new fragmented media reality.

The diagnosis of post-democracy can first be turned into the political task of repairing the malfunctions of the public sphere and enhancing the news quality of the media. Proposals into this direction are mainly defensive. They do not aim at conquering new transnational spaces of mass communication but rather at safeguarding the national public sphere as a space of public opinion and will formation. The "dumbing down" of news quality in mainstream national media has, however, shattered faith in the self-regulatory capacities of the public sphere. Take, for instance, a recent article by Jürgen Habermas, published in one of Germany's leading quality newspapers.[4] His critique of the streamlined newspaper business very much resembles the diagnosis of the structural transformation of the public sphere, which he gave around half of a century earlier. The normative conclusions and political recommendations, however, read strikingly different today. In their present form, the quality and the informative value of news can no longer be guaranteed by the self-regulatory dynamics of an autonomous public sphere. These values can only be guaranteed by state intervention. The state has, therefore, the duty to assure the population's basic

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[4] Jürgen Habermas : "Keine Demokratie kann sich das leisten", *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, 16 May 2007.

supply of political information. For that purpose, selected quality newspapers should be granted public legal status. They should profit from public financial support to be able to provide the basic public commodity of information.[5]

State assistance in fulfilling the democratic functions of the mass media could also be turned into a guarantee for a fair and ample treatment of European politics in the media. Once such state guarantees of news quality are established, the European public sphere would be a question of political design. One could easily imagine an agreement on national quotas for the space for European news. One page of exclusively European news in a newspaper could be rewarded with a fixed amount of public subsidies. Ultimately, EU-correspondents would be paid by public finance to write for a virtual, and still largely non-attentive, European public.

Secondly, the diagnosis of post-democracy can be used to re-address the normativity of the public sphere and to adjust its standards to a changing media reality. Applied to European integration, the concern is that the template of the national public sphere with its telos of unity, consensus and integration would lead to a normative overstretch in negotiating the diversity aspects that traditionally make up the European space. The over-emphasis of the unity of the public sphere might also reflect an implicit eurocentrism, forgetting about the diversity of publics in other parts of the world (Nieminen 2007). To construct Europe as a unified political entity with the correspondence of a unified people is then not only to be considered as a utopian, but also a dangerous idea, because it does not pay respect to the diversity of European cultures and traditions.

In dealing with this uncertainty about the applicability of the public sphere and democracy in a transnational institutional setting, political theory was concerned, above all, with the clarification of the polity type that is constituted by the European Union (the so called 'nature of the beast' question (Risse 1996; Eriksen and Fossum 2007). Testing out the viability of different polity options is a helpful exercise to come up with different reformulations of the normative standards, on which a public sphere and democracy can be based in the European Union. The question of how to adjust public sphere theorizing to the social and political reality of the 'unity in diversity' of Europe is ultimately a political question that guides the social and communicative practice of an unfolding European public sphere. The new normative challenge of reconciling but not abandoning diversity in a plural and multicultural social setting is, at the same time, a question of political practice. It is also noteworthy that the European Union has internalized the idea of 'unity in diversity' as a mode of collective self-description of its expanding activities in all social fields. The political mandate to conserve and to protect diversity becomes a kind of new normative standard of Communitarian policies. 'United in diversity' has even been proposed as the official slogan of the EU and as such it should be enshrined in the Constitutional Treaty as part of the symbols of the EU.

The remaining part of this article will give a different twist to this normative line of argumentation. Instead of assessing the ideal functioning and the normative adequacy of the public sphere in relation to the institutional-constitutional designing of a European political order, I will interpret the contrafactual normativity of the public sphere as the stimulus that is necessary for entering into discursive practice.

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[5] Ironically, it is precisely the EU's single market ideology that would not allow single states to apply such a subsidizing practice.

The confrontation between unity and diversity is then seen as constitutive to the public sphere to the extent that it is reformulated as a 'normative problem" that has to be dealt with collectively.

Uniting and Dividing
The European public sphere as an unfinished project

Theorizing the public sphere is about conceiving the unity of its form against the plurality of its practices. The topic of 'unity in diversity' discovered by the European Union is, therefore, very much the same riddle that is also underlying the constitution of the national public sphere. The public sphere is the space for organizing societal diversity, by envisaging its possible, but still incomplete unity. As such, the 'unity in diversity' dynamics of public communication are essential for the staging of democracy as the expression of popular sovereignty that recollects the plural voices of the citizens. Becoming engaged in public communication is a way to accept the common normative horizon of a discursive community, which is held together by the belief in the possibility of agreement, consensus and understanding. The collective will of the people is what Ernesto Laclau (2005) has called an empty signifier of democracy. As such, it has the crucial function of simulating the unity of ongoing discursive practice. Although the consensus remains still unachieved and the understanding is still incomplete, we can at least talk about it. The public sphere is then displayed through this unfinished project of collective will formation, which relates the multiple discursive positions within a unifying signifying practice.

An understanding of the unfinished nature of the public sphere is essential for conceiving the possibilities of a transnational opening of our communicative spaces. As noted by Armando Salvatore (2007: 48), publicity can be perceived as a critical movement, which potentially reaches beneath but also beyond the Westphalian sphere. There is thus a 'fruitful ambivalence' in the original dynamic concept of the public sphere , which in its historic unfolding in the nation state framework, was viewed as 'perpetually unfulfilled, unable to fully satisfy the criteria of rationality and universality that it entailed' (ibid.). It is this unfinished and unsatisfied nature of the project of the public sphere, which becomes the seed of its potential transnationalisation.

Conceptualising the public sphere as an unfinished project of collective will formation is also helpful to qualify the status of normative political theory of European integration within the debate on the democratic reconstitution of Europe. Normative political theorists are neither the chief organizers of the debate on a European democratic project nor its neutral external observers. Academics and intellectuals are simply one of the many (and probably not even the most central) players in the public sphere. As such, they cannot be expected to provide solutions for the possible reconciliation of unity and diversity, but only stimula for the continuation of this signifying practice. The unfinished search of a consistent normativity of democracy is manifested in modelling attempts, which seek to maximize the different standards of democracy (e.g. participation and deliberation) and apply them to particular institutional-constitutional setting (Lord 2004). The models that are discussed in relation to a constituted EU polity (such as an intergovernmental Europe, a federal Europe or a cosmopolitan Europe) are different ways of reconfiguring the 'unity and diversity' of the European space (Eriksen and Fossum 2007). As such, their main function consists in de-paradoxisation: they negotiate particular trade-offs between

the principles of democracy and, in doing so, allow for the continuation of democratic practice.

This article's proposal for a practical turn in the theory of democracy is thus based on a constructivist understanding of the public sphere. A theory of practice needs to spell out how the strive for the impossible reconciliation between unity and diversity is turned into discursive practice that structures the political field of European integration (Trenz 2008). The analysis of the structuring effects of discursive practice could, for instance, start with a mapping of the observatory positions that constitute the political field. The political struggle, dealing with the unity and diversity of the public sphere follows well established ideological cleavages. In political programmes or party manifestos, unity and diversity are typically played off against each other. Communitarians put a strong emphasis on commonality and unity of the public sphere. Liberals propose a public sphere that is based on pluralism and difference. Multiculturalists propagate a diversity of units, which is represented in the co-existence of fragmented public spheres. Proponents of deliberative democracy aim at the reconciliation of unity and diversity through a higher discursive rationality. These political logics fall short in seeing that unity and diversity are not the foundational moment of the public sphere but rather products of discursive practice. Yet, it is exactly this political logic of perceiving unity and diversity as alternatives or as opposite poles that becomes the enabling condition for entering into discursive practice. The public sphere does indeed do both: As suggested by the theme of the Helsinki conference for which this contribution was originally delivered: it is 'uniting and dividing' at the same time and through the same discursive practice.[6]

Conclusion

This article has found an intrinsic tension between the contrafactual normativity of the public sphere and the facticity of ongoing communicative practice. Instead of resolving this tension, it has been proposed that public sphere research should turn towards the ongoing practice of legitimation and delegitimation that constitutes a shared sphere of communication and mutual observation. The still open constitutional process of the European Union gives an illustration of these interrelated dynamics of polity building and public sphere building. The unfinished nature of the European public sphere correlates with the unfinished nature of the EU polity and its strive towards the mythical *finalité* of the integration project.

At the end, the European public sphere deficit is found to be less exceptional than expected. Disenchantments with the quality of political communication are part of the history of the public sphere. This contrafactual normativity of the public sphere as an unfinished project of collective will formation must be kept in mind when searching for the possibilities of a European public sphere. The diagnosis of such a 'deficit' is not only given by the European research community, it also guides the self-reflexive practice of European institutions in searching for the conditions to improve the dialogue with the citizens (Commission 2006). For a sociological account, it is then possible to observe how the European public sphere materializes through the recognition of its own deficits (Trenz and Eder 2004).

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[6] "European public sphere(s). Uniting and Dividing". Research seminar held at the University of Helsinki, 19–21 August 2007.

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RECON is an Integrated Project financed by the European Commission's Sixth Framework Programme for Research, Priority 7 – Citizens and Governance in a Knowledge-based Society. Project No.: CIT4-CT-2006-028698.

Coordinator: ARENA – Centre for European Studies, University of Oslo.

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