2009 European Parliamentary Elections on the Web

A Mediatization Perspective

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RECONSTITUTING DEMOCRACY IN EUROPE

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Abstract

This paper evaluates the mediatizing potential of the internet on the politics of European integration and the process of enhancing the democratic legitimacy of the European Union (EU), i.e. the ways in which online media *participate or interfere* with the democratization of the EU by either advancing or constraining the development of a legitimate political order respectively. Using three 'mediatization potential' indicators (publicity, inclusion and degrees of contestation), we focus our analysis on the online debates during the 2009 EU elections (May-June 2009) in twelve member-states and at trans-European level. Our findings highlight the multiple, conflicting dynamics of mediatization present in the EU political e-sphere.

Keywords

Introduction

Research on the interrelation between European integration and the media has thus far focused on the Europeanization of national public spheres and not the mediatization of the EU political system. It has asked what impact European integration has on the news media in the national context and not what impact the enhanced media salience of the EU has on the actors, processes and outcomes of European integration (Koopmans and Statham 2010; Wessler et al. 2008).

However, given the high public salience of recent events, such as the ratification of the Lisbon Treaty, the *mediatization* of the political system of the EU has been advanced in the sense of affecting the work of its political institutions and its basic legitimacy (Meyer 2009; Trenz 2008). While the consensual style of politics that has marked European integration over the first decades has frequently not created sufficient news value to make European politics salient in the media, the progressively intensifying politicization of European integration has been subject to substantial news coverage. There is, thus, a correlation between the increasing contestation of EU issues and debates and mediatization understood here as the repercussions of media amplification and salience on the perceived legitimacy of the EU political system, which merits further research attention (Trenz et al. 2009).

We argue that the transformative effects of European integration on the national public spheres and the mediatizing effects of news coverage on EU politics need to be brought together in an encompassing model that explains how media interact with European integration. For this purpose, we define mediatization as the process of transformation of political communication through the mass media, be these newspapers, television, radio and/or their online equivalents. In the following, we first outline our analytical model of online mediatization in relation to European integration. Secondly, drawing on our comparative survey of online political communication in twelve member states and at trans-EU level, we systematically reconstruct the online public sphere in which the contentious politics of European integration and the various audiences meet and interact in debating the legitimacy of the new political setting. This allows us in a third step to draw some lines of comparison between online and offline mediatization of EU political communication and the former's possible impact on the legitimacy of the EU.

Mediatization and European integration

In line with scholars such as Hjarvard (2008) and Schulz (2004), we view mediatization not as a normative but as an analytical concept, which enables us to capture the role and impact of the media on political institutions and on political communication in general. It is the latter that we examine in more detail in this paper, focusing specifically on the case of the mediatization effects of the internet on EU election campaigning debates.

In this context, mediatization regards the question of the scope of online debates through which European policy issues are raised, citizens are informed and the legitimacy of EU actors and governmental designs are debated. Mediatization, therefore, concerns the ways in which online media *interfere* with European integration by either advancing or constraining the development of a legitimate

political order respectively (Trenz 2008). By applying the analytical concept of mediatization to European integration, we examine online debates through which the EU is evaluated. While public debates unfolding through traditional mass media are frequently found to re-affirm the nation state and the legitimacy of contextualized national politics (Hafez and Skinner 2007), it still needs to be investigated whether the so-called 'new media' alter the dynamics of political communication in a way that sustains the legitimacy of a political order beyond the nation-state.

This paper asks if the online media open an encompassing space of political contestation that is substantially and qualitatively different from the existing spaces of contentious politics in the member states. Is there any evidence that the impact of the internet on EU political communication goes beyond the effects of mediation, i.e. is there a legitimacy impact derived from the manner in which communication unfolds in online public forums? Moreover, does the online political public replicate the contextualized dynamics of national contestation or does it expose a new trans-nationalizing potential? Our comparative survey of the political e-spheres in twelve EU member-states and at trans-European level during the 2009 European Parliament (EP) elections is designed to respond to the above two interrelated questions.

Research Design

Mediatization indicators

EP election campaigns create a trans-cultural and cross-national media event (Dayan and Katz 1992) that breaks the normal routines of media broadcasting over the EU. On the one hand, electoral mobilization in EP secondary elections is found to be generally lower as compared to first-order national elections (Marsh 1998). We would, thus, expect that campaigning to remain restricted to national arenas and national party politics. On the other hand, EP elections focus the attention of a European wide audience bringing in a host of actors, including political candidates that interpret the relevance of the issues at choice. We would, therefore, expect that EP elections have the potential to attract the largest possible number of EU audiences, while activating the norms and symbols, narratives, and cultural codes that are needed to impose legitimacy to the EU political setting.

By analyzing the EP election media event we formulate the hypothesis that online mediation of the EP campaigning opens a distinct path of mediatization of EU political communication. This, in turn, affects the dynamics of contesting the EU legitimacy in a particular way. More specifically, this regards the role played by professional journalists in both selecting and framing political news and the monopolies of central media organizations in the distribution of news to the mass audience. One possibility is that political news production in the internet is less dependent on journalists and decentralized in terms of news-making and distribution. This would open new Europeanized spaces for EP campaigning and evaluation in partial independence from the traditional offline media. Another possibility is that EU online news remains derivative of the traditional national public spheres of the member states. EU news are still mainly generated by professional journalists and amplified through central media organizations. In this case, EP campaigning would

expose low patterns of Europeanization and still be embedded within the context of mediatized national politics.

On this basis, we operationalize the mediatization concept of analysis on political communication as follows: the online public sphere is approached in terms of three functional components, namely *publicity*, *inclusion* and *degrees of contestation*. Each of these components is measured by specific quantitative and qualitative variables, used here as indicators of the mediatizing potential of the online public sphere in relation to the EU political communication. In particular, these indicators measure the extent to which the online media sphere can have a mediatizing effect on the political communication in the EU that is different from the one brought about by offline media (Table 1).

Table 1: The contours of the EU online public sphere here

Level of analysis	Operationalization	Measurement (variables)
Publicity	What are the main online platforms for circulation of EU news and opinions at national and European level? Does the internet open new political spaces below or above the nation state?	The scope of online EU debates in terms of 1) Website profiles (centralization/decentralization of media ownership) 2) Website visibility and salience of EU news within it (focalization/fragmentation of audiences)
Inclusion	How participatory and plural is the internet, in terms of political actors to get access and to distribute information and opinion?	The inclusiveness/ exclusiveness of online EU debates in terms of 1) Range of actors 2) Scope of actors 3) Manners of interaction
Degrees of contestation	How wide was the spectrum of the evaluations and justifications delivered in contesting/affirming the legitimacy of the EU during the EU elections period (18 May-10 June 2009)? Were the evaluations and opinions expressed by users substantially different from the opinions expressed by politicians and journalists?	Expressions of EU regime support/opposition in online EU debates in terms of 1) Evaluations of EU legitimacy 2) Regimes of justifications

Publicity refers to a medium's capacity to make political news and debates salient to a wider audience, in our case to the electorate. Patterns of mediatization change if EU political communication addresses the electorate as a whole (audience focalization) through centralized channels of distribution, or if political communication is decentralized and specialized with low and shifting attention of the audiences (audience fragmentation). Internet critics have thus far mostly predicted a fragmenting effect of political communication in the internet suggesting the rapid, if not imminent, demise of professional journalism and the multiplication of messages through political blogs (Gitlin 1998). Consequently, the internet would create biased echo chambers instead of focal points for political news (Sunstein 2007). It would provide an infrastructure of cultural chaos instead of centrally controlled information and ordered debates (McNair 2009).

As regards the inclusion/exclusion axis of EU political communication in the internet, the debate has mainly been whether the Internet would turn from hierarchical (top-down) forms of political communication to more responsive, horizontal patterns of exchange (Downey 2007, le Grignou and Patou 2003). Specifically, this refers to the potential of the internet to empower new groups and to facilitate transnational alliances. Mediatization patterns of political communication would thus relate to the capacities of political actors, in our case candidates and political parties, to enter into new coalitions, debate across different arenas and interact with the audience. Subsequently, we need to examine the degree of Europeanization of online political communication measured in terms of presence of foreign political actors and interactions across border. Mediatization patterns further relate to the possibility of generating user comments and the degree to which online fora become important resonance bodies, which contribute to the running of political campaigns.

Last, but not least, crucial for the mediatizing effects of the online public sphere on the EU political communication is the evaluative dimension of online debates with regard to contesting the legitimacy of the EU (degrees of contestation). One expectation is that online news-making is especially amenable to introducing negative information and circulating exaggerated and distorted opinion on the EU. This regards in particular the questions of whether online campaigning is more or less supportive of the EU and what types of justifications are typically provided to contest EU legitimacy. To answer these questions, we compared expressions of EU regime support and opposition on professional journalist websites with those found on political blogs, user forums and social networks.

All evaluative messages were classified according to their stance (positive or negative) towards three dimensions of EU integration, namely Principle (critical/supportive of the principle of integration beyond the nation state), Polity (critical/supportive of the current state of EU integration) and Project (critical/supportive of future projects /trajectories of integration). The dimensions of Polity and Project were further subdivided in three categories, namely Level (concerning power within the EU, i.e. who decides and how); Scope (the range of policy competencies currently held by EU institutions or how these ought to develop in the future); and Inclusiveness (membership of current EU states for the Polity dimension or of candidate countries for the Project dimension; and/or how relations between citizens and EU governing elites currently unfold or will develop in the future).

Website sampling

In order to create a representative map of the EU elections web sphere, we looked for EU debates in all publicly available (where no paid subscription is required) online outlets encompassing debates that took place during the last three weeks of the EP election campaign in May-June 2009, as well as the first few days following the elections.[1] In order to measure impact in terms of publicity, our sample comprised

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[1] Our EU elections 2009 virtual sphere is in fact a pre-web sphere or what Schneider and Foot (2005) classify as 'web storms'. These are instances when one big event may trigger a series of inter-actor and inter-site activity online. We deployed three methods of web sphere identification in our project (as discussed in Schneider and Foot 2005): a) Use of keywords to search for websites that referred to the EU elections; b) identification of relevant professional journalism websites and independent political blogs; c) pattern analysis of in-linking to and out-linking from a core set of URLs.

only the most popular web spaces per country and at trans-European level (Figure 1 below).[2] In total, we included 36 professional journalism websites and 24 independent blogs of national scope[3] while at European/transnational level we included one professional journalism website and two blogs. In addition, Facebook groups focused on the EU elections and two Twitter threads with EU election-related hashtags were considered to represent Web 2.0 and 3.0 communications popular with young audiences.[4]
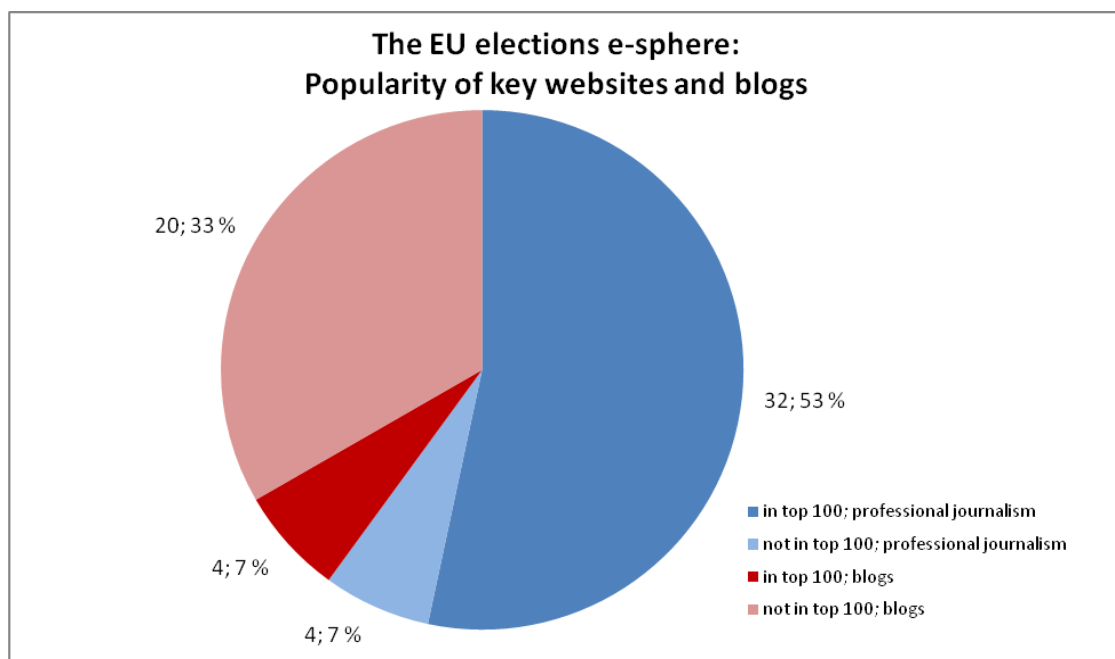

Figure 1: Popularity of sampled websites according to Alexa ratings per country

Besides the criterion of popularity, and in order to be able to measure impact in terms of inclusion, the web spaces were selected based on their potential to open an interactive space between proponents and users. In most cases, this referred to the widespread practice of online journalism to allow for user feedback and comments on articles or blog entries. If this commenting option was not available, a website needed to host at least an online debate forum in order to be selected.

The state of the EU elections e-sphere

Public salience of EP election campaigning and debates

With regard to the audience focalization/fragmentation and media ownership centralization/decentralization axes of the EU elections e-sphere, our sample of the

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[2] Popularity is measured by standards of visitor numbers and influence within the blogosphere, using website ratings (Alexa Internet 2009) and blog aggregator popularity and influence lists, such as Wikio (Wikio.com 2009). For Facebook threads, popularity was determined by the number of members subscribed to a group, while for Twitter threads we identified the hashtags linked with the EU elections, and selected all threads ascribed to them.

[3] Independent blogs are understood here as not sponsored or run by EU or national institutions.

[4] Hashtags are a 'Twitter community creation', invented by users to easily group tweets and/or add extra data.

most salient websites of political news-making gives little evidence of a dispersion effect of online political communication. Professional journalism websites have a stronghold on the online public spheres of the EU member-states included in our sample. Consequently, the most visible online debates concerning the EU take place in professional journalism websites, the majority of which are also the online versions of popular print newspapers (26 websites) or television channels (five websites). Only a very small number of online professional journalism platforms are web-only news outlets (five). Almost all selected websites also belong to large media corporations that include several online, print and audiovisual media in their portfolios (Figure 2). Moreover, our data analysis clearly shows a high concentration of EU evaluations within professional journalism websites: Nearly 85 per cent of all EU evaluative messages were located in these. This pattern is independent of country and type of website source.[5] It is worth noting, however, that the selection of only the most popular websites and blogs per country produced a plural sample, in terms of how different types of media outlets are represented online. The result was a mix of quality and tabloid newspapers, TV channels, web-only media and independent blogs, with online popularity often breaking away from offline circulation or audience ratings.
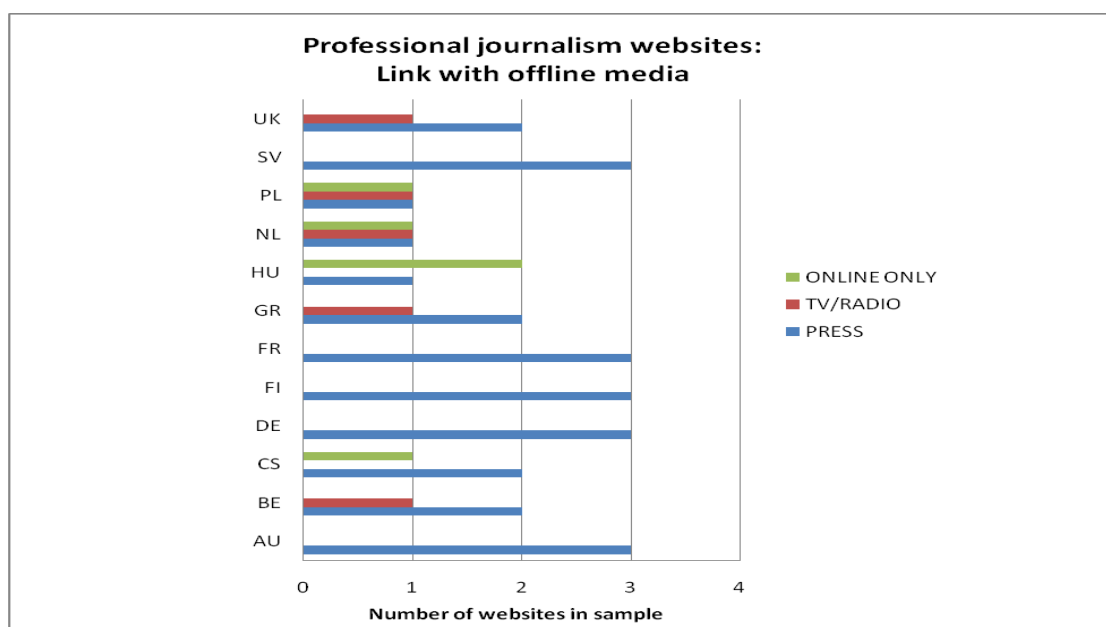

Figure 2: Professional journalism websites and their links to offline media, per country

At national level, while the majority of the selected professional journalism websites in each country enjoy high visibility on the web (32 of the 36 professional journalism websites were in the top 100 websites' list per country according to Alexa), blogs are much less prominent (only four out of 24 blogs were in the top 100 websites' list per country according to Alexa). At the same time, trans-European websites are far less visible compared to their national counterparts. The transnational professional journalism websites selected were not in the top 1000 websites in any of the selected member states, while, in several cases, they did not even appear to be in the top 10,000 according to Alexa statistics.

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[5] The Czech Republic is the only exception, as there most EU evaluations were found in blogs.

With regard to social networking media, their role in the mediatization process of the EU political communication is even more marginal. On Twitter, the hashtags #eu09 and #ep09 were identified as the two threads most relevant to the EP elections in June 2009. Of these, #ep09 made the top ten 'trending topics' on Twitter only on June 7. Moreover, statistics available for #eu09 show that while the debate that unfolded was certainly cross-national, contributors from four countries dominated the discussions (tweetelect09.eu), namely from Germany, Sweden, the UK and France (over 80 per cent of contributions were made by users who identify themselves as coming from one of these four countries, with UK users making most contributions of all).

Similarly, on Facebook only two groups and one 'fan page' concerning the European elections displayed a membership significant enough to be included in the sample (i.e. over 1000 members/fans).[6] The number of views and comments contributed to the live news feed and debate topics on these three Facebook pages was very small, thus rendering the debates generated in these forums marginal, compared to the discussions hosted by national professional journalism websites.

What emerges from the above observations is that the online public sphere within which the EU is debated is a mirror of the offline media debates rather than an altogether separate, independent public debate forum. Where the EU political e-sphere could potentially deviate from the mediatization pattern found in offline public spheres is in that it offers a public voice to citizens, whose evaluations and perceptions of the EU are largely absent from offline media debates. This hypothesis is assessed in the following paragraphs.

Participation in EP election campaigning and debates

From our sample, citizens emerge as the unquestionable protagonists of the evaluative debates concerning the project of European integration in its principle, present and future forms. Of the 1126 evaluative messages coded, nearly 63 per cent were generated by citizens (707 messages). Moreover, the EU's legitimacy is almost exclusively discussed in the commenting areas/discussion forums of the websites examined and not in the main texts/articles of the selected threads. Specifically, 71 per cent of all EU evaluations were found in the comments left by individuals in relation to articles or as part of an open online discussion on an EU topic. This reaffirms the participatory quality of the online public sphere and suggests that the online mediatization of EU politics has the potential to advance rather than constrain the democratization of the EU polity.

Party actors are (distant) second most visible group of contributors in the EU evaluative discourse, but their evaluations are merely attributed to them by third parties (either journalists/bloggers or citizens). Of the 308 messages identified as having originated from party actors, 124 were directly transmitted (40 per cent of all party-actor generated messages). Crucially, only six of these messages were unsolicited, spontaneous contributions of party actors to the online debates, i.e. messages located in the commenting area/discussion forum. All other direct evaluative messages generated by party actors were located in the main text of a thread/article. Statements, evaluative or otherwise, appearing in the main text of a

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[6] See Annex for details.

thread are the result of the journalist/blogger either directly requesting the party actor's opinion or directly quoting actors' previous statements on the topic. This means that the opportunity for direct communication which the Internet facilitates was not seized up by political parties for a more direct access to their mass electorates beyond the parties' own websites.

Consequently, the data points to a strong mediatizing effect of the online political communication in terms of the participation dynamics: While online political communication is more inclusive in principle, the weak presence of political actors, in combination with the interactive opportunities offered online, has given ground to the voice of citizens, who are otherwise mostly excluded from the offline political communication processes.

The fact that the overwhelming majority of evaluative messages about the EU are generated by citizens is, therefore, a strong indicator that the online debate forums have the potential to come closer to the inclusive, participatory model envisaged by theorists of the public sphere (Habermas 2006; Stanyer 2009; Albrecht 2006; van Os et al. 2007). However, this fact alone is not sufficient, in order to verify the democratizing potential of e-debates and their qualitative difference from their offline counterparts. For this reason, we look at the level of community-building among participants of the online public sphere, i.e. how participants interact with each other.

The first thing that becomes clear from the data is that, contrary to criticisms concerning the poor quality of citizens' journalism (c.f. Albrecht 2006; Stanyer 2009; van Os et al. 2007) the EU elections e-sphere emerges rational and polite. Of the 1126 evaluative messages coded, the vast majority was relevant to the thread topic introduced in the main text/article (90.7 per cent) and was expressed in an acceptable (i.e. polite and coherent) manner (93.7 per cent). Crucially, this standard of communication was maintained across countries and despite most websites either following an *a posteriori* monitoring process (messages may be reported by other users for breaking rules of communication and removed by moderators after they have been posted) or not having a monitoring system in place at all.

Further analyzing the manner of interaction among participants of the EU elections e-sphere, we can observe that while the possibility for dialogue is available in the majority of websites examined (61 out of 65 websites)[7], communication is largely linear. This means that when participants of the online community express evaluative comments about the EU this is done in the form of a response to a thread's main text and, consequently, to its author (journalist or blogger). Specifically, 48.9 per cent of all EU evaluations were found in comments directly responding to the thread's main article (551 evaluations or 75.7 per cent of all comments). As the authors of these articles hardly ever respond to commentators (only 8 such instances were recorded in our sample and all occurred in UK websites, namely the BBC and the Guardian), this type of commenting constitutes one-way communication and not debate. However, the possibility of online debating is not totally lost on participants: 15.7 per cent of all

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[7] The four websites which did not provide any possibility for interaction apart from email were: The Greek blog NoNews, the Hungarian news platform Index and blog Figyelönet and the Dutch newspaper De Telegraaf.

EU evaluations (177 cases) were recorded in responses to previous comments left by other users.

Besides this, and no less importantly, the findings are categorical insofar as the actors' scope is concerned: Nearly all online discussions about the EP elections were national in character. Trans-nationalization of EU debates can be observed only within the trans-European websites and social networking groups. Moreover, professional journalism websites in member-states may appear more plural, in terms of actors' scope, than blogs, but this is more likely to be due to the narrower thematic content of blogs, which are bound to attract a more niche/specialized audience than professional journalism websites.[8] Subsequently, there is no evidence to support a possible opening of national online media to a more trans-national audience.

Exactly how participants of the EP elections' e-sphere evaluate the EU is discussed in the next section, where we examine the degrees of EU contestation, namely the arguments and justifications used to assess the EU's legitimacy.

Degrees of contestation

The key finding pertaining to mediatization patterns is that negative evaluations of the EU's polity dominate (60 per cent of all cases contained a negative evaluation of this dimension; 648 cases), across countries and at trans-EU level, and irrespective of the source/platform hosting the EU debate, as well as irrespective of the actor's position (i.e. acting in his/her capacity as journalist, citizens, political or NGO actor) and scope (national, transnational, foreign/non-EU). The importance of this finding is twofold: Firstly, it contradicts the 'audience fragmentation' proposal put forward by scholars (e.g. Sunstein 2007, Brundidge and Rice 2009), according to which the plurality of media and information sources online leads to fragmentation, and ultimately isolation of audiences, as users seek out only like-minded websites for their information and interaction with other users. In the case of the observed EU election debates, we would have expected to find more positive evaluations of the EU in explicitly pro-EU websites, such as Cafe Babel or the EU Observer. This, however, has not been confirmed by the data. Secondly, and in combination with the previous finding concerning the homogeneity of actors participating in EU election e-debates (mostly citizens), the homogeneity of views expressed in assessment of the EU's legitimacy points to the emergence of a community online, which comes together above all in order to debate the current state of EU affairs. While the main articles/threads varied in theme and tone concerning the EU and despite a plurality of views appearing both in the main articles and in the comments, the majority of the EU evaluations was negative towards a specific aspect of the EU (its current state of polity) and originated from citizens. Neither the content (Eurosceptic) nor the carriers (citizens) of these online EU evaluations are usually hosted to such an extent by offline mainstream media.

Within the Polity dimension, critical statements are mostly concerned with the level of integration, i.e. the division of power between the EU and the member states (nearly

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[8] Chi-square tests and symmetric measures did not confirm a strong and significant link between the actors' scope and type of source (cross-tabulation controlled for country group; also cross-tabulation of actors' scope and country, controlled by type of source).

30 per cent of all Polity evaluations, 322 cases). Moreover, the Principle and Project dimensions of the EU's integration leave participants of the EP elections e-sphere relatively indifferent. Particularly insofar as the former dimension is concerned, just 21 per cent of all messages question European integration in principle (e.g. by stating that European integration is an infringement to national democracy or a contribution to economic prosperity). With regard to the latter dimension, it is again mostly the level of integration that is assessed negatively, such as the allocation of new controlling powers to the European Parliament by the Lisbon Treaty (145 out of 421 evaluative messages), followed closely by negative evaluations in the Inclusiveness category (e.g. critique of future enlargement; 127 cases).

In order to put the above evaluations in context, we coded the justifications provided by actors in relation to their assessment of the EU's worth. The majority of messages contained both an EU evaluation and a justification of that evaluation (67 per cent of all messages coded), with just over 37 per cent concerning democracy and necessity coming a distant second justification found in approximately 10 per cent of all messages.[9] The fact that the majority of the evaluations were justified further strengthens our earlier observations concerning the quality of the EU elections e-sphere. As well as being rational and polite, the EU online political public sphere shows potential to foster deliberative (i.e. substantiated) discourse.

Moreover, democracy is at the heart of EU evaluations across the Eurosceptic/ Europhile spectrum, meaning that it is the most frequently given justification for both positive and negative evaluations of the EU in all of its three dimensions, with 422 evaluations (55 per cent) out of a total of 762 that contained a justification. It also remains unaffected by the type of actor formulating the evaluation and the type of source where messages are found. Similarly, democracy is by far the most frequently occurring category of justification across countries and country groups.

Conclusion

In this paper we have operationalized the concept of mediatization in order to measure the impact of the internet on EU political communication. Using the component concepts of publicity, inclusion and degrees of contestation as mediatization indicators, we have identified the actors, spaces and modes of EU contestation within the EU e-sphere, as this emerged during the EU parliamentary election period of May-June 2009. Rather than an altogether radically different public political forum, the EU political e-sphere emerges through our data analysis as strongly interrelated with the offline national media spheres.

Specifically, online debates on the EU polity and EU politics feature in mainstream, highly popular online media platforms. This is a key indicator of the mediatizing potential of the internet on the EU's political communication, as it means that EU evaluative debates are gaining salience and are not monopolized by partisan online media (websites of governments and/or political parties). Moreover, existing online audiences debating the EU are not fragmented: Online debates on the EU legitimacy

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[9] These figures remained largely unchanged even after data was weighted to factor in the large of proportion of evaluations from UK websites.

allow for a plurality of opinions to be heard, regardless of the political ideology /affiliation of the hosting website in terms of ownership and distribution. This is also irrespective of the fact that the online public sphere largely reproduces the offline public sphere in its geographic and socio-cultural scope as the national public sphere. Crucially, the EU elections e-sphere gives voice to, and indeed is dominated by, individuals acting in their capacity as citizens. This is a category of actors who are otherwise excluded from offline media and their views are usually measured through opinion and election polls.

In representing EU election campaigns, the Internet is found to be more than 'a secondary medium in secondary order elections' (Jankowski et al. 2005). As a central mediator and amplifier of political campaigning it is also becoming a focal point of mediates political debates. In particular, the Internet is found to have a community-building impact in the sense that it brings together individuals who want to debate the EU polity, irrespective of whether they agree with each other or not. User commenting is now an integral part of the political space in which the legitimacy of the EU is debated. Nevertheless, it is the national community, which remains the reference point of online political debates and European issues are mainly taken up as a negative reference point to confirm the national community. Participatory journalism is in this sense more Eurosceptic than offline journalism, since user comments focus primarily on negative opinion-making about the EU.

Insofar as the degrees of contestation are concerned, the EU and European integration are primarily evaluated in terms of the polity dimension. Evaluations of EU legitimacy are further justified primarily in terms of democracy standards. The present constitutional and institutional design is strongly associated by participants of online debates with a democratic deficit and democratization of decision making structures and procedures is demanded. This finding points to the unsettled character of the EU, which, in times of electoral campaigning, gives rise to Eurosceptic voices challenging the EU polity. In turn, EU polity contestation takes place across all online media confronting the EU with demands for regime change in terms of democracy, and particularly decentralization, subsidiarity and against enlargement.

By outlining the mediatizing effect of the internet on the EU political communication in relation to how the latter unfolds in offline media spheres of the member-states, our survey of e-political campaigning in the context of EP 2009 elections confirms Hjarvard's proposition that mediatization is multi-dimensional (Hjarvard 2008: 130-131). Specifically, mediatization simultaneously facilitates centrifugal, centripetal, homogenizing and differentiating processes (ibid.). On the one hand, the stronghold of offline media on the EU e-sphere and the dynamic presence of citizens in online debates on the EU elections point to a strong tendency of homogenization in terms of actors. On the other hand, the plurality of the websites hosting EU debates, in terms of media types (professional journalism website or blog), media ownership (independent website or part of media conglomerate) and political affiliations, suggests a tendency for differentiation. At the same time, the predominantly national context within which the online EU debates unfold suggests a centripetal function of the online mediatization process, as far as the online EU public sphere is concerned. Last, but not least, the centrifugal tendency in Hjarvard's model is confirmed in the community-building trend that emerges from the data analysis, with participants

coming together primarily with the aim to debate the EU polity without (seemingly at least) seeking like-minded websites to express their views.

Although further research is required, in order to determine the impact of the online political communication on the EU's political system, our analysis is a first step towards mapping the mediatization of EU e-political communication and highlighting its complexity. Online media undoubtedly constitute a virtually shared forum for political communication that political actors and voters increasingly use as an arena for their interaction, while their strong links with offline national media reaffirms the key role that national political and media cultures continue to play in the mediatization process.

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Annex

Websites and their political stance/affiliation selected per country

Country	Professional journalism websites	Blogs
Austria	• Der Standard (pro-EU, centre-left, non-party affiliated) • Die Kronenzeitung (anti-EU, populist, non-party affiliated)	• Politikblogs (independent political blog aggregator) • Rigardi (independent, journalism student initiative)
Belgium (French-speaking only)	• Le Soir (politically independent, plural) • RTL (online news platform) • Le Vif l'Express (weekly newspaper, politically independent)	• Le Pan (daily updated blog, satirical) • Le Blog Politique (politically independent, anti-elitist, mainly entries from France)
Czech Republic	• Novikny (left-wing) • Aktualne (centre-right ideology, political party neutral) • Lidovky (centre-right ideology)	• Blogy iDnes (blog platform, mostly centre-right blogs) • Blogy iHNed (blog platform, mostly centre-right and business blogs)
Finland	• Iltalehti (politically unaffiliated) • Iltasanomat (politically unaffiliated) • Helsingin Sanomat (politically unaffiliated, pro-EU)	• Kasvi (author: Green Alliance MP and EU Parliament candidate) • Soininvaara (author: Osmo Soininvaara, former: MP, member of Government, and chairperson of the Green Alliance).
France	• Le Monde (politically independent) • Le Figaro (centre-right ideology, affiliated to the UMP party of President Nicolas Sarcozy) • Le Nouvel Observateur (centre-left, social-democratic ideology)	• Plume de Presse (independent blog written by journalist Olivier Bonnet) • Sarkofrance (independent blog, written anonymously)
Germany	• Spiegel Online (centre-right ideology, no political affiliation) • Bild.de (conservative stance) • Sueddeutsche.de (liberal-left ideology)	• Bildblog (author: Stefan Niggemeier, offers an opposition to the Springer group media content) • Political Incorrect (author: Stefan Herre, pro-American, pro-Israel, 'against the islamization' of Europe)
Greece	• Ethnos (centre-left ideology, supporting the socialist party PASOK) • Skai (centre-right ideology, non-party affiliated) • Ta Nea (centre-left ideology, supporting the socialist party PASOK)	• Press-GR (anonymous writers, populist) • nonews-NEWS (anonymous writers, populist)
Hungary	• Origo (politically unaffiliated) • Index (politically unaffiliated) • Figyelőnet (liberal ideology)	• W – For a Better Magyarland (author: young columnist Árpád Tóta W., mix of liberal and conservative views) • Reakció – polgári underground (young conservative group of bloggers)
Netherlands	• Nu.nl (politically independent) • De Telegraaf (centre-right ideology, supported Pim Fortuyn's LPF in the 2002 elections) • NOS (plural, politically independent)	• Geen Stijl (independent blog, populist style, right-wing ideology) • Marokko.nl (independent blog platform aimed at young people)

Country	Professional journalism websites	Blogs
Poland	• Gazeta Wyborcza (centre-right ideology). • onet.pl (centre-right ideology) • TVN24 (politically unaffiliated).	• Janusz Palikot blog (author is an active politician from PO government party, right-wing ideology). • Janusz Korwin – Mikke blog (populist, right-wing and anti-EU, author: former dissident and monarchist).
Sweden	• Aftonbladet (centre-left, socialist ideology, non-party affiliated) • Expressen (liberal ideology, non-party affiliated) • Dagens Nyheter (politically independent)	• Rick Falkvinge (PP) (the blog of the leader of the EP party Piratpartiet, liberal) • Politiskt Inkorrekt (right wing, populist, written anonymously)
United Kingdom	• BBC (politically independent, plural) • Guardian (centre-left ideology) • The Daily Mail (conservative, populist)	• Iain Dale's Diary (author is an active member of the Conservative party) • Guido Fawkes' blog (right-wing, libertarian)

Trans-European level

Professional journalism	• EU Observer (emphasis on human rights, environmentalism and the democratisation of the EU)
Blogs	• Babel Blogs (blog aggregator, politically plural, pro-EU, funded partially by the EU) • BlogActiv (blog aggregator, plural, mostly pro-EU)
Social networking websites	• 'European Parliament' Facebook fan page (unknown owner, 54,686 fans at the time of sampling) • Voter registration campaign for European Elections 2009' Facebook group (unknown owner, 5,953 members at the time of sampling) • 'I will vote in the 2009 European Parliament elections' Facebook group, (2,719 members at the time of sampling)[10] • Twitter #eu09 and #ep09

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[10] Facebook groups are primarily formed on the basis of shared interests of networks or in relation to a cause. Fan pages are created to support a specific person, a cause or an institution.

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