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Mediati(z)ng EU politics: Online news coverage of the 2009 European Parliamentary elections

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Abstract

In this paper we propose that the concept of mediatization should be used not only in the narrow sense to analyze the impact of media on the operational modes of the political system, but, in more general terms, to capture the transformation of the public sphere and the changing conditions for the generation of political legitimacy. More specifically, with regard to the role of political communication on the internet, we focus on the transformative potential of online media in terms of a) publicity: the capacity of the online media to focus public attention on the political process of the EU, b) participation: the capacity of the online media to include plural voice and activate the audience, and c) public opinion formation: the capacity of the online media to enable informed opinions. We test our mediatization model on the case of online debates that took place during the 2009 EU elections (May-June 2009) in 12 member-states and at trans-European level. The findings confirm the mediatizing impact of online political communication on the generation of political legitimacy of the EU. On the one hand, online media constitute a virtually shared forum for political communication that political actors and users increasingly occupy developing homogenous patterns of evaluating European integration. On the other hand, the stronghold of offline media on the EU e-sphere and the tendency to discuss the EP elections within the frame of domestic (national) politics reaffirm the key role of national political and media cultures.

Keywords: mediatization, the EU, political communication, the internet, democracy

Mediati(zi)ng EU politics: Online news coverage of the 2009 European Parliamentary elections

Research on the interrelation between European integration and the media has thus far had a rather narrow focus on the Europeanization of national public spheres, particularly from the perspective of the print media's role in communicating about Europe (Koopmans & Statham, 2010; Wessler, Peters, Brüggemann, Kleinen-von Köningslów, & Siff, 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 mediatization understood as the repercussions of media amplification on the perceived legitimacy of the EU political system, which merits further research attention (Trenz & de Wilde, 2009). 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).

We argue that the mediatization of European integration needs to be understood not only in terms of impact of news coverage on the EU political system but more broadly, in terms of the general transformation of the national public sphere and its impact on the generation of political legitimacy. In order to understand the legitimacy impact of media communication on European integration, we need to look beyond the instrumental use of media by political actors/institutions and develop a more encompassing approach of the public sphere. In particular, we turn our attention to the little-researched transformative potential of the internet on EU political communication and the possible emergence of a European online public sphere that is different from the type of public sphere described through offline (and for the most part print) media. In the following, we first outline an analytical model of online mediatization in relation to European integration. Secondly, drawing on our comparative survey of online political communication in 12 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.

Mediatization: Towards an analytical model

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 impact of the media on political institutions and on political communication in general. In contrast to mediation, which reflects the relay function of the media (McQuail, 2005), we define mediatization as the interrelation between the operational modes of the mass media and the political system. This implies not only media impact on the political process and modes of decision-making, but also, in broader terms, impact on the infrastructure of political communication, i.e. on the contours of the public sphere. We, thus, shift the focus of the mediatization concept from the linearity of the process to the contingency of impact. This impact occurs at the interface between the political system and the media system and is measured through the manifold ways the mass media establish the legitimacy of political order and democracy (Krotz, 2007).

While previous work put much emphasis on mediatization in terms of adaptation and accommodation of the political system and the degrees political processes are penetrated by media logics (Marcinkowski, 2005; Meyer, 2009), Hjarvard (2008) proposes a double-sided understanding of media autonomy and interdependence vis-à-vis politics. The question is not only how politics adapt to the media but also how media acquires the status of an independent institution (*ibid.*, p. 113). The media logic consists for the most part of a ‘formatting logic’ that impacts on how political information is categorized and presented (*ibid.*, p. 107). Mediatization then denotes the expected or unexpected effects of this intermediary process on the generation of political legitimacy. This means that a valuable measurement for mediatization is not only the changing output (i.e. research on how media affect public opinion) or input (i.e. how political system adapts to media logics) but at the very throughput level, an understanding of the signals that are generated and transmitted within the media sphere to both directions.

With this, we broaden the traditional understanding of the public sphere as the mere mediation of political communication in its input, throughput and output dimensions (Gerhards & Neidhardt,

1991). Research on mediatization introduces a focus on the generation of political legitimacy at the throughput level, which is measured in the ways the mass media a) focus public attention on the political process of the EU (publicity); b) include plural voice (participation); and c) enable informed opinion-making (public opinion formation).

In particular, publicity refers to a medium's capacity to make the political process salient, as well as accessible and understandable (news-making capacity). Salience is measured by evaluating both a medium's profile (centralization/decentralization of media ownership) and its visibility in the public sphere (focalization/fragmentation of audiences). In turn, news-making capacity is evaluated by cross-referencing the quantitative (quantity of information concerning a political issue) and qualitative (how information is framed and analyzed) parameters of a medium's produced content. Participation relates to the plurality of voices that are raised in public debates, but also to community-building. Either a public sphere comes to shape because actors consciously decide to come together and debate issues of common concern (J. Habermas, 1989); or the users of a medium are passively bound together, for instance, through the consumption of the same news or by the shared knowledge and opinions among the readers of a specific newspaper. Participation is thus measured in the range of political actors that appear as providers of political information and opinions; the possibility of audience participation in debates; the framing of debates in terms of 'us' and 'the others'; and the manner of communication (linear or interactive). Lastly, public opinion formation concerns the spectrum of opinions expressed and the justifications delivered in the media. These constitute the horizon for interpreting politics and thus become decisive for perceptions of political legitimacy at the mass level (Schneider, Nullmeier, & Hurrelmann, 2007).

Research Design

Online mediatization and EU politics

In the case of the EU, the so-called 'traditional' media (press, television, radio) have repeatedly been found to re-affirm the nation state and the legitimacy of contextualized national politics (Gerhards & Schafer, 2010; Hafez & Skinner, 2007; Trenz, 2004). We, therefore, revisit the proposal that the online public sphere allows for the development of a more cosmopolitan perspective

that can in turn help promote the legitimacy of 'beyond the nation-state' democratic designs such as the EU polity (Engström, 2002).

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).

Our 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?

Online mediatization and EU elections

EP election campaigns create a trans-cultural and cross-national media event (Dayan & Katz, 1992) that breaks the normal routines of media broadcasting over the EU. By analyzing the EP 2009 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 on 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 is 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.

In order to demarcate the European elections online public sphere we first investigate where and to what extent online public debates were mobilized in relation to the EP elections in June 2009 (publicity component). In this context we identify the main online outlets for circulation of EU news and opinions. Subsequently, we map the profile of sites where opinions on the EU are presented, directly or indirectly, outside institutionally funded, supported and controlled fora. This includes an assessment of the websites' salience in the online public sphere, as well as the websites' quantitative news-making capacity (coverage of the EU elections).

After identifying and evaluating the web spaces that have the potential to focus attention of the mass electorate on EU elections, we measure participation, in terms of who contests what kind of topics in these debates. We further compare participants and contents of online debates across different media formats and countries. This concerns the presence of EU, foreign and domestic actors, of state and non-state actors, of news on domestic, foreign or European issues. We then analyze the particular group dynamics unfolding in EU polity contestations online, by examining the forms of interaction between the core communicators (bloggers, journalists) and their audiences. This includes also a qualitative assessment of whether the main traits of online communication are met (free access, free speech, adherence to the online codes of conduct).

The third step in our research is to measure public opinion formation, in terms of justifications given in contesting EU issues and the general evaluations of the EU and of European integration. Here we look at how political contestation confers legitimacy with regard to the EU political entity and political community. Is the EU supported or rejected? Is there a difference in evaluation between journalists and users? How are EU evaluations justified? What are the specific common good references through which the EU/European integration is seen as legitimate/illegitimate? (Table 1 below).

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

Methods

A mixed-methods design is applied, which combines the measurement of online platforms of communication (how? where?) with the content of public communication (what? by whom?), i.e., which bridges the divide between media systems and mediated politics analyses. This is done through the combination of a qualitative content analysis of public messages (message level of analysis) with a quantitative profiling of the selected websites in the same coding scheme (thread level of analysis). In the resulting coding model (de Wilde, Trenz, & Michailidou, 2010), evaluative statements concerning EU legitimacy were identified and categorized in a standardized manner, filtering out transnationalising trends of public opinion formation but also crucial qualitative variations at national level.

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. Our sample comprised only the most popular web spaces per country and at trans-European level.¹ In total, we included 36 professional journalism websites and 24 independent blogs of national scope, 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 included as representative of social networking communications popular with younger audiences.²

¹ Popularity is measured by visitor numbers and influence within the blogosphere, using the Top 100 websites per country listings on Alexa.com (Alexa Internet, 2009) and blog aggregator 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. All but four of the professional journalism websites and four independent blogs were in the Alexa Country Top 100 websites lists, while the majority of the independent blogs were in the top 500 websites in their country.

² Hashtags are a 'Twitter community creation', invented by users to easily group tweets and/or add extra data.

Besides the criterion of popularity, and in order to be able to measure impact in terms of inclusion, 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 publicly available 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. In total, our website monitoring through RSS feeds resulted in the ‘clipping’ (selection) of 4815 articles. We have used a multi-stage, random (probability) sampling design to select 50 articles per country (25 for Belgium, as only the French-speaking websites were included in the monitoring). This resulted in 638 threads being drawn for further coding containing a total of 1126 EU-polity messages.³

The state of the EU elections e-sphere

Publicity of EP election campaigning and debates

In terms of salience, the 2009 EP elections online public sphere has emerged as a sphere which mirrors the offline media debates rather than an altogether separate, independent public debate forum. The majority of online sources selected are either online versions of well-established, high-circulation newspapers or of popular TV channels (32 of 36 websites). News-making outlets classified as ‘quality’ press are, in fact, more popular online than their printed versions, often surpassing in online visibility ‘tabloid’ newspapers, which outsell them offline. Moreover, quality and tabloid media outlets are represented in the sample on almost equal measure, even though the type of journalism offered by an online media outlet was not part of the sample selection criteria. Consequently, not only do the online versions selected for observation largely reflect the type, content and style of coverage

³ We used Krippendorff’s alpha to measure inter-coder reliability before, during and at the end of the coding week (eight coders involved). All variables had a score between 0.7 and 1, with the exception of the EU Polity evaluation dimensions, where the score was 0.62. Although this is slightly below the usually recommended minimum measurement of alpha (0.667), we have accepted it as valid and reliable score, due to the complexity of the EU polity evaluation dimensions (seven values).

given to the EP elections by mainstream offline media, but the overall news-making quality of the online public sphere emerges higher than its offline counterparts.

Another point where the online EP elections e-sphere departs from the offline public debates is that it allows for observation of the citizens' perspective on the EU's legitimacy in the form of opinions directly expressed by individuals. These range from comments on professional journalism articles, public discussion forums and citizens' journalism (blogs). The fact that the selected websites have very high saliency in the respective countries also increases the significance of the observed EP elections e-sphere, in terms both of the websites' role as multipliers and drivers of EU debates and of the impact that citizens' views expressed online may have on EU's legitimacy.

In terms of the news-making capacity of the EU elections e-sphere, coverage of the elections event averaged 305 articles per country (median) for the observed period (18 May- 10 June 2009). However, a closer look at the individual article coverage values reveals great disparities among the selected countries (Figure 1), with no clear pattern between old and new member states, northern and southern, or bigger and smaller ones.

[Insert Figure 1: Articles covering EU elections, per country here]

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 (tweelect09.eu), namely from Germany, Sweden, the UK and France.

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).⁴ The number of views and comments contributed to the live news feed 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.

⁴ See Annex for details.

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 forum. Nevertheless, the online public sphere on first glance gives voice and enables participation of an otherwise passive or altogether invisible category of actors, namely the citizens. How much of a difference this can make to the mediatization patterns of the EU political e-sphere 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% 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. 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 (Figure 2).

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% 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 appearing in the main text of a 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 their electorates which the internet facilitates was not seized up by political parties beyond their own websites (Figure 2).

[Insert Figure 2: Amount of messages per actor category, location of message and type of transmission (12 member-states and trans-European level)]

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 (Dahlberg, 2001; Tewksbury & Rittenberg, 2009). 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.

What becomes clear from the data is that, contrary to criticisms concerning the poor quality of citizens' journalism (Albrecht, 2006; van Os, Jankowski, & Vergeer, 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%) and was expressed in a polite and coherent manner (93.7%). Crucially, this standard of communication was maintained across countries, irrespective of the type of website (professional journalism or blog) 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), 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% of all EU evaluations were found in comments directly responding to the thread's main article (551 evaluations or 75.7% of all comments). As the authors of these articles hardly ever respond to commentators, 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% of all EU evaluations (177 cases) were recorded in responses to previous comments left by other users (Figure 2 above).

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. Similarly, in terms of the community-building aspect of participation, the data reveal a clear trend across all countries to discuss the EP elections within the frame of domestic politics. Of the 638 trends coded in total, 367 (57.5%) were classified under the category of Domestic Politics in terms of the main topic introduced by the central article/blog entry of each thread. Thus, the framing of the debates indicates that, with very few exceptions, online debates do not introduce or encourage a more cosmopolitan perspective on EU politics.

This observation is not surprising for blogs, as it is consistent with the narrower thematic content of the former and their overall 'niche' focus, as spaces where individuals voice their personal views on issues. Since blogs do not aim to address as diverse a readership as possible, like professional journalism websites do, it is more likely that the scope both of the blogs topics and active users (i.e. users who leave comments) will be more limited than the scope of professional journalism websites.⁵ As far as professional journalism websites are concerned, however, the limited framing of topics and narrow scope of actors in EU election debates certainly raises questions with regard to the ability of online media to broaden participation in the public dialogue and enable audiences to reach beyond the boundaries of nationally-framed political debates, insofar as the EU polity is concerned.

Public opinion formation

The key finding pertaining to mediatization patterns is that negative evaluations of the EU's polity dominate (60% 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

⁵ Chi-square tests and symmetric measures did not confirm a strong and significant link between the actors' scope and type of source (crosstabulation controlled for country group; also crosstabulation of actors' scope and country, controlled by type of source).

twofold: Firstly, it contradicts the “audience fragmentation” proposal put forward by scholars (e.g. (Brundidge & Rice, 2009; Sunstein, 2007), 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.

Secondly, and in combination with the earlier 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. Moreover, the type of evaluations is independent of the type of source, meaning that in spite of the more plural range of topics and opinions hosted in the main articles of professional journalism threads, the majority of EU evaluations in these threads was Eurosceptic, coinciding with the majority of EU evaluations in the blogs, which are certainly more partisan and subjective in tone and audience orientation (Figure 3).

[Insert Figure 3: How the EU is evaluated in professional journalism websites and blogs]

In order to put the above evaluations in context, we coded the justifications provided by actors in relation to their assessment of EU legitimacy. The majority of messages (762) contained both an EU evaluation and a justification of that evaluation (68% of all messages coded), with 38% concerning democracy and necessity coming a distant second justification found in approximately 10% of all messages (Figure 4). 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 political e-sphere shows potential to foster deliberative (i.e. substantiated) discourse. At the same time, the amount of unjustified EU evaluations remains is also significant, not least because the majority of these (313) were negative assessments of the EU’s worth, particularly of the Polity (current EU set-up) dimension. This suggests that a noteworthy proportion of citizens who debate the

EU polity online is dissatisfied with the current power and decision-making set up, but offers no suggestions as to how things could be better, thus remaining 'open' to different proposals by political or other public actors.

Homogeneity is also observed in the topic of justifications: Democracy is the most frequently used topic used to justify an evaluation of the EU across the Europhile/Eurosceptic spectrum. This finding is 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 and independent of countries and country groups (Figure 5).

[Insert Figure 4: How opinions unfold in relation to the EU polity worth (Evaluations and justifications)]

Conclusion

In this paper we have argued that the concept of mediatization should not only be used in the narrow sense to analyze the impact of media on the operational modes of the political system, but, in more general terms, to capture the transformation of the public sphere and the changing conditions for the generation of political legitimacy. More specifically, with regard to the role of political communication in the internet, we have analyzed the scope and impact of the online public sphere in terms of

- a) publicity: the capacity of the online media to focus public attention on the political process of the EU;
- b) participation: the capacity of the online media to include plural voice and activate the audience(s); and
- c) public opinion formation: the capacity of the online media to foster informed opinion-making and exchange.

With this widened focus, the emerging European online public sphere can be reconstructed not merely as the infrastructure for the *mediation* of EU political communication but as the place where the basic legitimacy of the EU is negotiated. Our public sphere perspective of online *mediatization* thus encompasses different strands of media research overcoming the divide of looking either at process (mediation) or impact (mediatization). Media studies can take advantage from such a widened

public sphere perspective to grasp the complex and changing interrelationship between the ‘New Media’ and the new, transnational dimensions of European politics.

Furthermore, our analysis of the EU elections e-sphere reveals that there is a mediatizing impact of online political communication that affects the conditions for generating political legitimacy of the EU. In dealing with EU-politics, the internet has a news-making potential providing political information and making political campaigning salient to mass audiences. The internet further has a community-building potential. Users’ commenting on EP election campaigning is substantial, with thousands of citizens expressing their opinion in online forums and debates. The online media are also not distracting but focusing attention, not fragmenting users but heavily concentrating them on few, highly visible sites. As these sites are the online versions of offline media, the EU elections e-sphere closely resembles the offline public spheres in the member states, in terms of news-making quality. We can also assume that with regard to the overall public opinion formation potential of the online public sphere, insofar as the EU is concerned, online audiences are exposed to similar (if not the same) opinions as offline audiences. The key difference is that those who opt to inform themselves on EU issues online are also exposed to the views of an otherwise silent actor category, namely other citizens.

One key observation concerning the mediatizing impact of online political communication concerns the homogeneity of the EU elections e-sphere in terms of actors (citizens); opinions (negative towards the current EU polity set up); interaction (linear communication); manners of expression (polite, coherent); and manners of deliberation (justified opinions). It is also homogeneous in the sense that EU election threads are framed in a national context, the scope of actors is also national and the justification topic largely consistent (democracy). In this sense, the EU elections e-sphere is more likely to reinforce the opinions of those participants who already agree with the majoritarian view (negative evaluation of the current EU polity set-up) and possibly swing in that direction the views of those who remain undecided towards aspects of the EU polity, than foster a plural public dialogue where a majority view can be overturned after extensive scrutiny and deliberation.

By outlining the mediatizing effect of the internet on the EU political communication, our survey of e-political campaigning in the context of EP 2009 elections confirms Hjarvard’s multi-dimensional understanding of mediatization (Hjarvard, 2008, pp. 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 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	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Der Standard (pro-EU, centre-left) • Die Kronenzeitung (anti-EU, populist) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Politikblogs (independent political blog aggregator) • Rigardi (independent, journalism student initiative)
Belgium (French-speaking only)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Le Soir (politically independent) • RTL (online news platform) • Le Vif l'Express (weekly newspaper, politically independent) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Le Pan (daily updated blog, satirical) • Le Blog Politique (politically independent, anti-elitist, mainly entries from France)
Czech Republic	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Novikny (left-wing) • Aktualne (centre-right) • Lidovky (centre-right) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Blogy iDnes (blog platform, mostly centre-right blogs) • Blogy iHNed (blog platform, mostly centre-right and business blogs)
Finland	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Iltalehti (politically unaffiliated) • Iltasanomat (politically unaffiliated) • Helsingin Sanomat (politically unaffiliated, pro-EU) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 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	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Le Monde (politically independent) • Le Figaro (centre-right, affiliated to the UMP party of President Nicolas Sarkozy) • Le Nouvel Observateur (centre-left, social-democratic) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Plume de Presse (independent blog written by journalist Olivier Bonnet) • Sarkofrance (independent blog, anonymous)

Country	Professional journalism websites	Blogs
Germany	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Spiegel Online (centre-right) • Bild.de (conservative stance) • Sueddeutsche.de (liberal-left) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 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	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ethnos (centre-, supporting the socialist party PASOK) • Skai (centre-right) • Ta Nea (centre-left, supporting the socialist party PASOK) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Press-GR (anonymous writers, populist) • nonews-NEWS (anonymous writers, populist)
Hungary	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Origo (politically unaffiliated) • Index (politically unaffiliated) • Figyelőnet (liberal) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 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	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Nu.nl (politically independent) • De Telegraaf (centre-right, supported Pim Fortuyn’s LPF in the 2002 elections) • NOS (plural, politically independent) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Geen Stijl (independent blog, populist style, right-wing) • Marokko.nl (independent blog platform aimed at young people)

Country	Professional journalism websites	Blogs
Poland	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Gazeta Wyborcza (centre-right ideology). • onet.pl (centre-right ideology) • TVN24 (politically unaffiliated). 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Janusz Palikot blog (author is an active politician from PO government party, right-wing). • Janusz Korwin – Mikke blog (populist, right-wing and anti-EU, author: former dissident and monarchist).
Sweden	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Aftonbladet (centre-left, socialist ideology) • Expressen (liberal ideology) • Dagens Nyheter (politically independent) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Rick Falkvinge (PP) (the blog of the leader of the EP party Piratpartiet, liberal) • Politiskt Inkorrekt (right wing, populist, anonymous)
United Kingdom	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • BBC (politically independent) • Guardian (centre-left ideology) • The Daily Mail (conservative, populist) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Iain Dale’s Diary (author is an active member of the Conservative party) • Guido Fawkes’ blog (right-wing, libertarian)

Trans-European level	
Professional journalism	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • EU Observer (emphasis on human rights, environmentalism and the democratisation of the EU)
Blogs	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Babel Blogs (blog aggregator, politically plural, pro-EU, funded partially by the EU) • BlogActiv (blog aggregator, plural, mostly pro-EU)
Social networking websites	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “European Parliament” Facebook fan page (54,686 fans at the time of sampling) • Voter registration campaign for European Elections 2009” Facebook group (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) • Twitter #eu09 and #ep09

Tables and Figures to be inserted in the main text

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

Level of analysis	Operationalization	Measurement (qualitative and quantitative variables)
Publicity	Saliency	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Website profiles (centralization/decentralization of media ownership) • Website visibility and saliency of EU news within it (focalization/fragmentation of audiences)
	News-making capacity	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Quantity of EU elections coverage (number of threads)
Participation	Inclusion	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Range of actors • Scope of actors
	Community-building	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Framing of debates • Manners of interaction
Public opinion formation	Expressions of EU regime support/opposition in online EU debates	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Evaluations of EU legitimacy • Regimes of justifications

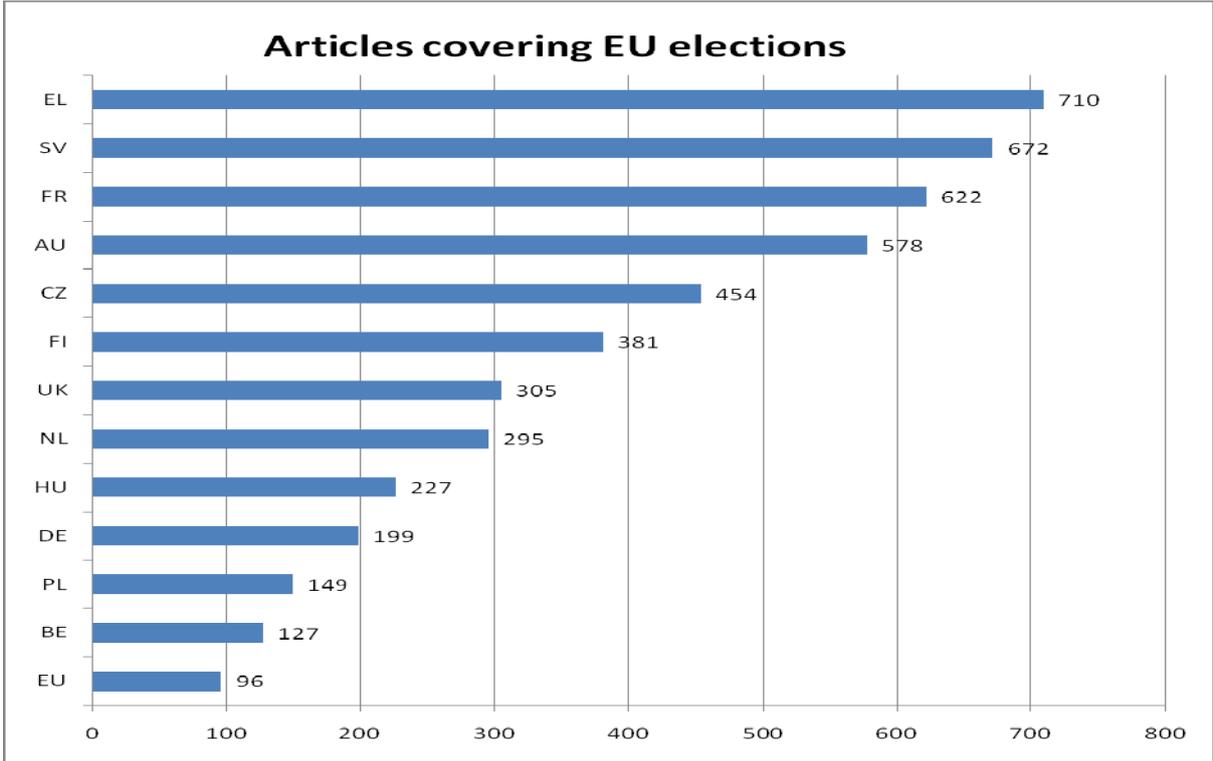


Figure 1: Articles covering EU elections per country

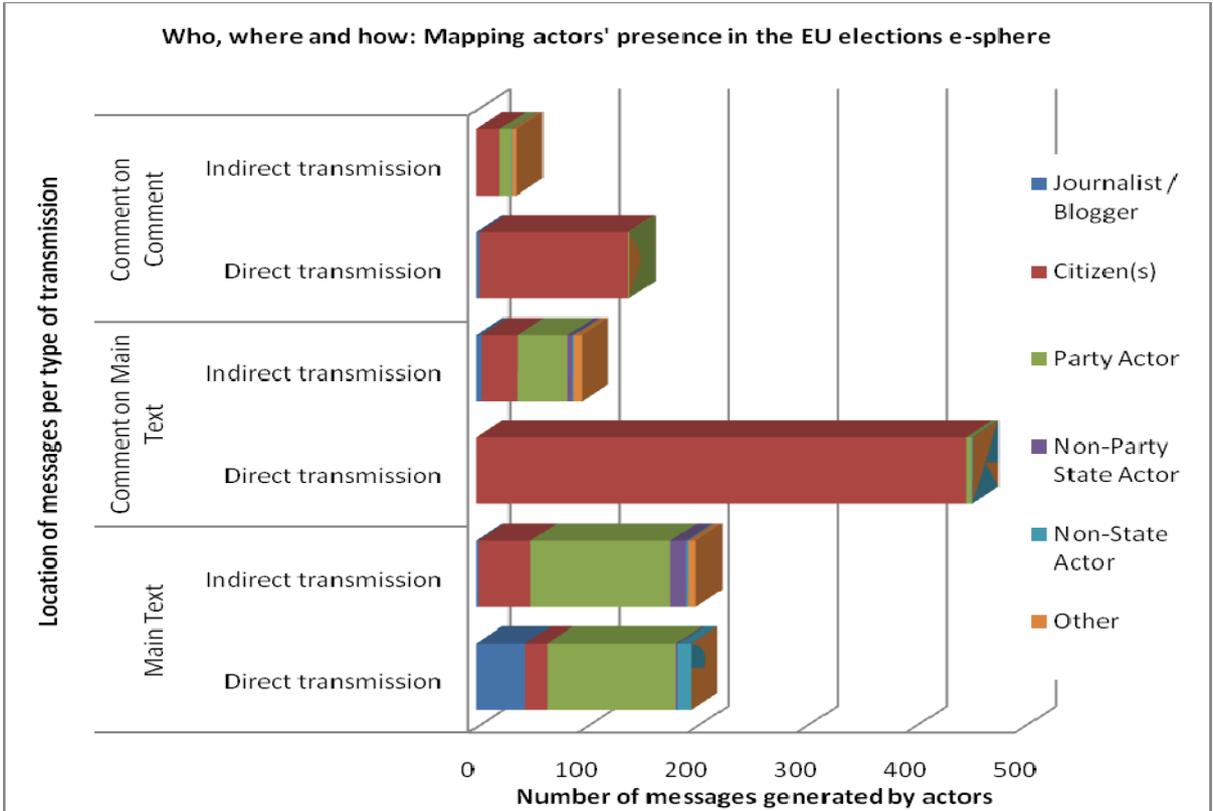


Figure 2: Amount of messages (evaluations) per actor category, location of message and type of transmission (12 member-states and trans-European level)

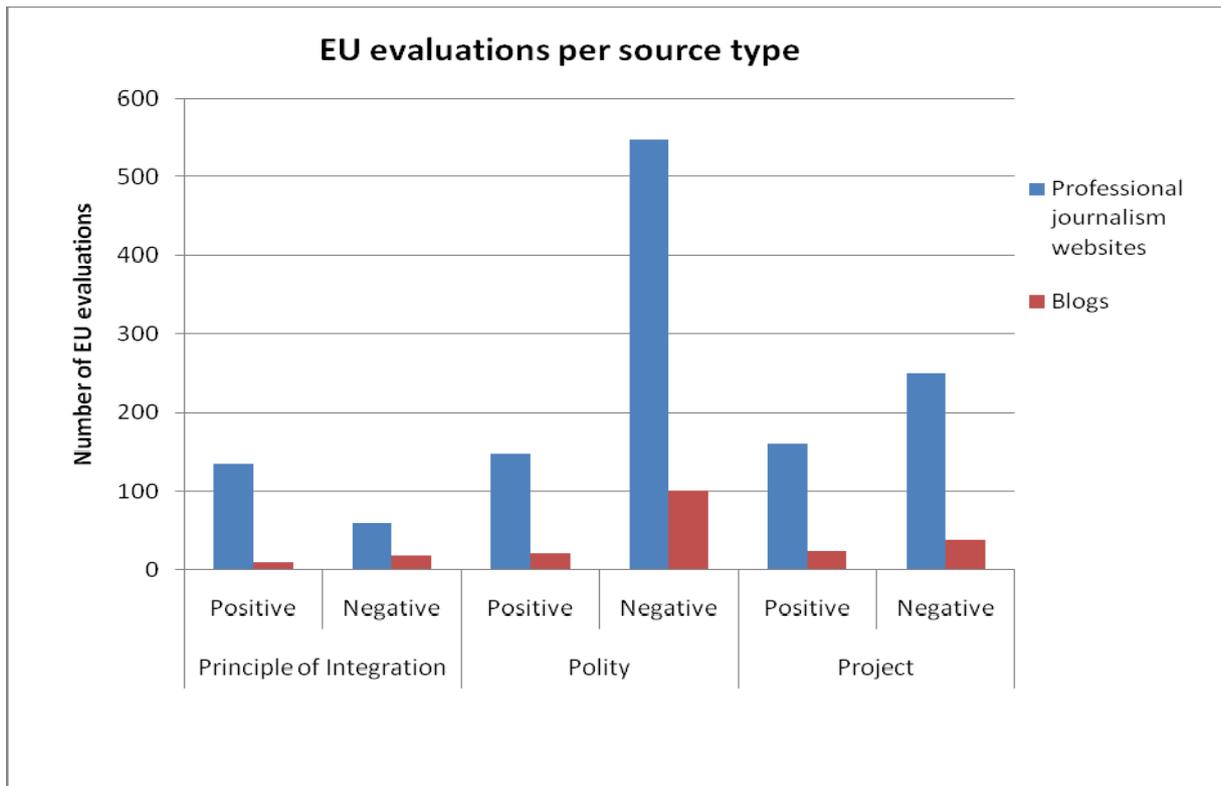


Figure 3: How the EU is evaluated in professional journalism websites and blogs

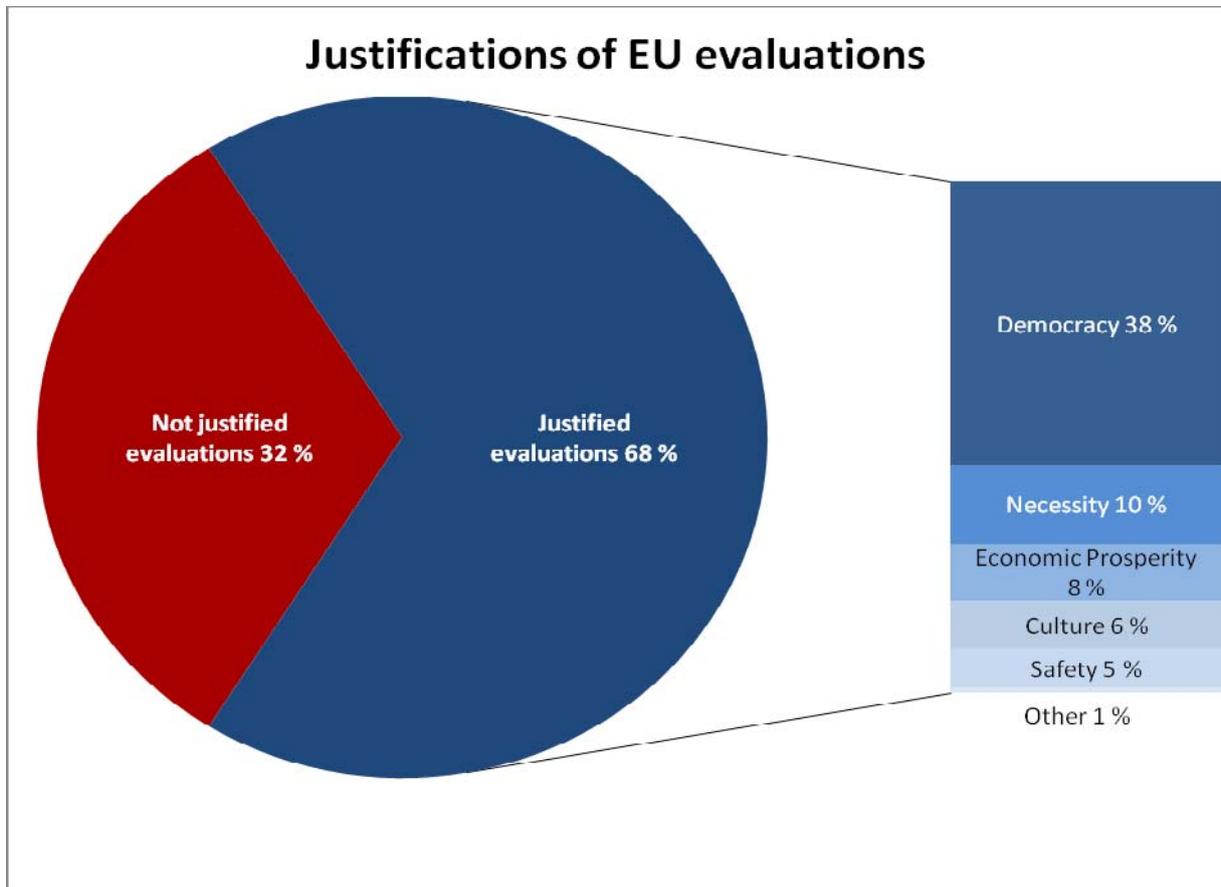


Figure 4: How opinions unfold in relation to the EU polity worth (Evaluations and justifications)