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EU Affairs in the Public Sphere

A Qualitative Deficit?

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Abstract:

The apparent absence of a European public sphere has become an important topic in studies on the EU's democratic credentials. Analyses range from assessments refuting the development of such a space, to more optimistic evaluations. Based on a qualitative analysis of two cases (the debates about the Constitutional Treaty and about EU air quality legislation) in Germany and the Netherlands, this paper also provides a cautiously optimistic account. Public debates about EU affairs are by no means unlikely, though their nature may not always be conducive for the democratic control of those affairs. Two important qualitative shortcomings will be identified: a temporal mismatch in terms of when EU affairs are covered by the media, and a content-related mismatch related to discrepancies between what goes on in Brussels and how this is represented in the media. Even though the two cases were discussed in a different way in the media, the mismatches occurred in both.

Introduction

In recent years it has been argued that one of the core problems of European Union (EU) democracy is a European public deficit (e.g. Kantner, 2003, p.213). A European public sphere, here defined as the 'space' that enables and stimulates public debate and opinion formation on important issues of public policymaking, has barely come into existence, as coverage of EU affairs in the mass media[1] is said to be rather limited and public debates on European policymaking almost absent. Yet, a public sphere is a necessary (but not sufficient) condition for democratic governance. It provides citizens with the opportunity to monitor governmental affairs, serves as a forum for discussing policy options and preferences, and offers a platform for opinion formation and holding those in office to account.

The extent of the public deficit is relatively unclear. For example, previous studies have indicated that various EU policies receive attention in national public spheres. For example, Kathleen Kantner (2006, p.155) identified no less than 184 distinctive themes in her study of EU affairs reporting by 11 European newspapers and an American daily in 2000. Yet attention for many of these themes is often rather limited. Other scholars have also suggested that we might be more positive as regards the likelihood of a European public sphere emerging, although developments are not evenly spread across Europe (e.g. Koopmans & Pfetsch, 2006; Risse, 2010, pp.157ff). Even so, several scholars have claimed that the public deficit represents a serious challenge to democracy. For example, in their assessment of the work on EU democracy by Gaindomenico Majone (1998) and Andrew Moravcsik (2002), Andreas Follesdal and Simon Hix (2005, p. 22) maintain that "the lack of party competition and other lacunae concerning a political public sphere should make us more wary of Moravcsik's and Majone's optimistic conclusion."

This paper will present empirical findings that will shed more light on this discussion.[2] Rather than focussing on *if* EU affairs are discussed in national public spheres, this paper asks *how* they are discussed. One the one hand, this paper will provide a cautiously optimistic account. On the other hand, it will identify two important shortcomings: a temporal mismatch in terms of when EU affairs are

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[1] Here 'media' will be used in the plural, in order to reflect the fact that there are different types of media which also display different ideas about their role in society, as well as offering different views towards societal issues.
[2] Data has been drawn from my PhD project (Bijsmans, 2011).

covered by the media, and a content-related mismatch related to discrepancies between what goes on in Brussels and how this is represented in the media.

The European Public Sphere

Today all sorts of issues ranging from health policy to the arts are scrutinised in debates in several different *public* 'spaces'.[3] In virtual venues, such as old and new media, people meet in time and hyper- space; in physical locations, such as coffee houses, people come together face-to-face. Such debates can legitimate public policies and the politicians and officials who devise them. In this respect a distinction has been made between weak publics, mainly concerned with opinion formation, and strong publics, focused on both opinion formation and decision-making (e.g. Fraser, 1992, p.134). The latter includes parliaments, the former generally refers to public spheres as represented by the media. The interaction between such strong and weak publics is vital for what Arthur Benz and Yannis Papadopoulos (2006, p.5) have called the 'circular relationship' between representatives and represented that forms an important prerequisite for democracy.

Many scholars agree that the rather limited occurrence of debates about EU affairs is a problem. However, there has not always been agreement about what a European public sphere actually should entail. Some have argued that a European public sphere should look like a national public sphere, with shared European mediatory structures, such as associations, political parties and media. In addition, debate between Europeans would require a shared history, identity, culture and language (e.g. Schlesinger, 1995). The supposed absence of these elements renders the development of a European public sphere unlikely. The central propositions of this perspective are summed up by Peter Graff Kielmannsegg (2003, p.58), who argues that Europeans do not share a common communication infrastructure and language, and lack shared memories and experiences which are necessary to allow for a meaningful exchange of opinions. National communities, traditions and identities persist, a continental community is missing.

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[3] As opposed to private spaces, in which people may also discuss similar issues, but (relatively) free from social pressures. What is considered 'public' or 'private' may change over time (e.g. Sanders, 2009, pp.144-5).

Other scholars have rightly questioned this perspective. Such ideal-type homogeneous national spaces have never existed. While it is common to talk about *the* public sphere, we are actually referring to a dynamic and pluralistic entity, consisting of many intersecting spaces and countless media outlets that exist at sub-national, national and supranational/global levels (e.g. Keane, 2003, pp.166-74). These different arenas do not exist in isolation, but are linked to each other. For example, media discuss similar issues, keep tabs on and cross-reference each other, politicians try to attract attention from several media outlets, and citizens use different media to keep informed (Taylor, 1995, p.186).

In addition, European do share a common history (e.g. Kaelble, 2002), and a certain set of norms and values with a corresponding European system of law (e.g. Eder & Katner, 2000, pp.323-5). The latter requires political actors to discuss policy options in a way that is understandable for their partners and for European citizens, otherwise aiming to convince others of different points of view is almost impossible. Language does not have to be a problem here, as international and foreign news are already normally translated into national languages (e.g. Van de Steeg, 2002, p.507).

Hence, it is possible to imagine national public spheres and national media representing the infrastructure for transnational debates, by providing news about political discussions in 'Brussels' and in other Member States, and by providing platforms to comment on such discussions.[4] In this respect, Thomas Risse (2002; 2010, pp.112-3, 146) has made a useful distinction between fragmentation, polarisation and heterogeneity. The latter is necessary for any public debate; different opinions are common to modern, pluralist democratic societies and fuel debates. Polarisation might be more problematic when people no longer engage with the views of their opponents, but just ignore them. Fragmentation, however, means that different spaces exist in isolation from one another. Risse therefore argues that a transnational European debate needs some kind of linkage between, and reflection on, the perspectives and views presented across the different Member States. Such linkages occur when references are made to debates in these countries, when representatives of the European institutions are given a voice in the national public spheres, or when actors from other Member States are able to present their arguments. In other

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[4] For a similar argument concerning global politics, see: Nanz & Steffek, 2004.

words, national public spheres should not just simultaneously reflect on the same issues, they should also interact with each other.

Scholars do not necessarily agree whether or not such linkages between national arenas are important for a transnational European public sphere. According to Kantner (2006; Eder & Kantner, 2000) this is not the case: what is most important is that similar themes are discussed at the same time and that similar relevance is attached to them. A common European agenda provides enough ground for European citizens to formulate opinions on EU affairs. Risse (2002; see, also, for example: Van de Steeg, 2002), however, claims that a public sphere requires people to also talk to each other. He even argues that "it is almost impossible not to find a European public sphere" if we only focus on the criteria laid down by Kantner and others (Risse, 2002, p.5).

Arguably, this is not always the case, as will also become clear here. National debates about EU affairs do not always occur simultaneously, nor is the focus of those debates always comparable. Whatever position one takes on this particular point, it is clear that any interaction between national public spheres will add an extra dimension to debates about EU affairs. In fact, in one of his most recent contributions Risse (2010) argues that European public spheres occur in different guises and that there may be different degrees of engagement of national public spheres with European policymaking.

Research design and methodology

Since this paper focuses on *how* EU affairs are represented in national public spheres, a qualitative approach has been adopted. This presumes an extensive analysis of the material, which makes it impossible to study all media, all Member States and the entire affairs of the EU. This research will therefore focus on two topics, the debates on Europe's future and on EU air quality legislation, and the way in which they were both represented in newspapers in two Member States, Germany and the Netherlands. Quality newspapers in particular provide an overview of typical debates and often act as agenda-setters for other media and political actors and, as such, reach more people than just their own readers (Mautner, 2008, p.32).

This is certainly the case in Germany and the Netherlands, where they continue to play a prominent role in the public sphere (Van der Eijk, 2000, p. 329; Kaase, 2000, p.376). Germany and the Netherlands are also very similar in

terms of their political cultures, public spheres and approaches towards European integration. In terms of their media systems, the two countries have been grouped under the 'Democratic Corporatist Model', characterised by a tradition of political parallelism and consensus politics, as well as limited state power, mass circulation of the press and journalistic professionalism (Hallin & Mancini, 2004). Both have, furthermore, been identified as consensus democracies in which coalition, consensus and corporatist arrangements play a prominent role (Keman, 2008; Schmidt, 2008). In addition, these countries were among the six founding fathers of the EU and, until the turn of the century, attitudes towards the integration project were predominantly positive. Scepticism about the EU has become more prominent since the introduction of the Euro in 2002 and the unprecedented Eastern Enlargement in 2004 (Busch & Knelangen, 2004; Harmsen, 2004).

Two cases will be studied in more detail: debates on the future of Europe, and about EU air quality legislation. The time frames for both are roughly similar, covering the period from 2000 to 2005. Focussing on a recent, yet contained, time-period means the cases are highly relevant, while at the same time allowing enough distance to analyse them properly and place them in their wider context. The two cases represent different aspects of European Union affairs. The debate on the future of Europe is concerned with a 'history-making decision' which could change the EU's procedures and institutional structure (Peterson & Bomberg, 1999). In contrast, the air quality issue represents a more technical topic which does not alter the Union as such, but concerns legislation that originates from Brussels. Studies on the European public sphere tend to focus on major political issues and events, not on day-to-day policymaking and ordinary policies.[5] By taking two different case studies – researched during roughly similar time frames – one can study whether the different nature of the issues shapes their representation in the public sphere (cf. Koopmans & Pfetsch, 2006, pp.120–1).

Six newspapers have been selected for this study: the Dutch newspapers *De Telegraaf* (TEL), *NRC Handelsblad* (NRC) and *de Volkskrant* (VK), and the German newspapers *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* (FAZ), *Süddeutsche Zeitung*

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[5] Franz Seifert's (2006) study of debates about biotechnology in national public spheres is an exception. The Europub-project focussed on a wider variety of policy fields, namely agriculture, monetary policy, retirement and pensions, education, troop deployment, immigration and European integration (Koopmans & Statham, 2010). While the extend of integration differs in each of these fields, arguably, all of them are considered to be contentious issues in terms of Member States' sovereignty, and thus tend to be much more political in nature than air quality policies or biotechnology.

(SZ) and *Frankfurter Rundschau* (FR). This selection was based upon the way in which national newspapers have been characterised in terms of a political left-right continuum. This way we may find a more comprehensive spectrum of positions and opinions 'floating around' in the public sphere. The focus of this study will not be so much on the individual newspapers, though, but rather on presenting an overview of how the two cases appeared in both public spheres.

The selected newspapers are considered to be the 'texts' that reflect debates in the public sphere. They will be studied by means of a qualitative content analysis that will yield valuable information about the issues and actors that figure in the European public sphere and the ways in which EU affairs are represented in the latter. Not only does such an approach provide an insight into the information circulated about EU affairs, but it also offers an opportunity to compare that information to the actual policy process, in order to identify possible differences between the timing and content of the actual process, and the way in which the issues were covered by the media.

In both cases certain key words have been used to find relevant articles (see: Bijsmans, 2011, pp.130–1, 173–4). Moreover, articles not only had to refer to the debate on both cases, but also had to contain information regarding the policy process and an opinion, act or other type of statement relating to the process or the policy itself.[6] The online newspaper database Lexis-Nexis was used to search the Dutch newspapers. For the German newspapers different digital databases had to be used: Factiva for Süddeutsche Zeitung, GENIOS-wiso for Frankfurter Rundschau and the Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung's own CD-ROM archives.[7] All these databases employ Boolean logic and specific commands[8], allowing for the use of similar search strategies and key words in a practical and less time-consuming manner than traditional paper archives.

Since the different nature of cases affects the style of media coverage different selection techniques were applied to collect representative sets of articles. Exploratory searches for articles regarding EU air quality legislation showed that this case was clearly less prominent in the six newspapers and,

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[6] The policy process has been approached as consisting of five stages, being agenda-setting, policy-shaping, decision-making, implementation and evaluation (e.g. Versluis, Van Keulen & Stephenson, 2011).
[7] Articles for which certain information was missing or unclear were cross-checked in other databases (when available).
[8] For example, each search contained the term 'eu!' or, in case of Factiva, 'eu'/'eur*'. The exclamation mark and the asterisk command imply that the databases look for any word beginning with 'eu' or, respectively, 'eur'.

therefore, all eligible articles have been selected. In contrast, similar queries revealed that the debate on the future of Europe was discussed in thousands of articles and therefore a more focussed selection was necessary. In order to take into account the fact that newspaper coverage of current affairs displays differences between and within ordinary weeks, a technique called 'constructed week sampling' has been employed. This sampling method involves the construction of weeks: the researcher gathers all Mondays and randomly selects one and repeats this for every other day of the week (except Sundays). Statistical analysis has shown that for studies covering a period of about five years the construction of one week for each half year will provide a reliable overview of newspaper content (e.g. Lacy et al, 2001).

The collected newspaper articles have been studied using a set of qualitative indicators concerned with the information distributed in media content. In this respect, Dennis McQuail (1992, pp.205ff.) stresses the importance of 'factualness', 'accuracy' and 'completeness'. Factualness is concerned with the 'reliability of reporting' and the 'degree of informativeness', which relate, respectively, to the need to cover the facts and to the number of facts that need to be offered to understand the news. Accuracy refers to the 'quality of media reports' in terms of the prevention of errors when covering those facts. Completeness stands for the incorporation of a 'full range of information' in media reporting with regard to a particular story, as well as in terms of all essential stories. In other words, these three interrelated criteria concern the extent to which media reporting covers the facts, whether these facts are accurately depicted, and to what degree the media provide a complete picture.[9]

McQuail's criteria have been translated into workable variables by applying and adapting the three content-related dimensions introduced by Christoph Meyer (1999; cf. Bijsmans & Altides, 2007). The *issue* dimension refers to the content of the topic as represented in the public sphere, focussing on its background and importance and on the reason why the EU is involved. The *process* dimension is concerned with the phases in the policy process, including the institutions involved and the procedures followed. This dimension provides insights into the previous, current and future stages of the development of the

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[9] It should be noted that an incomplete picture of an issue will not necessarily prevent people from forming an opinion. Moreover, a rich and exhaustive body of information is not always available for every issue in national discourses.

issue, which can help determine which opportunities there are to influence the policy process. The *actor* dimension refers to the national, transnational (that is, actors from other Member States), supranational and non-EU actors figuring in public debates and their respective views and preferences (see *Box 1*).

Box 1: The Three Content Dimensions

	Questions	**Indicators**
Issue Dimension	Which issues are at stake?	A reference to certain policy measures, decisions or problems.
	What is the background/ context?	Developments and causes to which the issue is linked.
	What role should the EU play?	Arguments regarding the question whether or not the EU should be involved in a policy domain.
	What is the relevance of the policy?	Benefits for consumers, companies, et cetera.
Process Dimension	What was the state of affairs in the past?	Previous legislation, no legislation, proposals, EP deliberations, et cetera.
	What is the current state of affairs?	New legislations, Council and/or EP decisions, Commission proposals, implementation and enforcement.
	What will happen next?	Decisions, proposals, implementation, enforcement, et cetera.
	How is the policy process shaped?	QMV, unanimity, co-decision, right of initiative, et cetera – who decides.
Actor Dimension	Who acts in the public sphere?	Domestic actors, transnational actors, supranational actors and non-EU actors.
	What are their actions, responsibilities and positions?	Initiating, deciding on or refuting or supporting legislation, stimulating debate, calling for protest, et cetera.

The three dimensions cover important information for formulating an opinion, by disclosing the nature of policies, the steps in the policy process, the various preferences and responsible policymakers. They make it possible to study how

national, transnational, supranational and international actors are involved in EU policymaking, and how this process is being covered by national media. Information was provided by the newspapers, but also by the actors that were recorded in those newspapers - directly, through for example opinion pieces, and indirectly by newspapers referring to statements expressed by actors.

The Debate about the Future of Europe

Since the 1986 Single European Act (SEA) treaty changes have been introduced regularly in order to deal with internal and external challenges. Probably the most prominent attempt to change existing treaties was the Treaty Establishing a Constitution for Europe (TECE). In the past, treaty changes have on each occasion been preceded by intensive discussions and negotiations between the Member States, but debates in the public sphere were usually quite limited, even regarding the far-reaching Maastricht Treaty (e.g. Beuter, 1994; Den Hartog).[10] Despite the fact that the TECE would, to a large extent, uphold the existing treaty framework, observers were quick to note that terms such as 'constitution' were bound to raise objections and unease. With this would come increased attention for the political debates, but probably also a more complicated ratification process (e.g. Dinan, 2004, p.39; Nugent, 2006, p.125).

Though he was by no means the first to call for a more explicit *finalité* for the integration process, it was German Minister of Foreign Affairs Joschka Fischer's May 2000 Humboldt speech, which triggered responses from many other European politicians. The discussions that followed, along with dissatisfaction about the Nice Treaty, eventually resulted in a decision by the European leaders at the 2001 Laeken Summit to set up a Convention that was to debate the EU's future and to draft proposals for a new treaty that would subsequently be discussed by the Member States during an Intergovernmental Conference (IGC). This process resulted in the Treaty Establishing a Constitution for Europe (TECE).[11] The Dutch '*nee*' and the French '*non*' in the first half of 2005 proved to be the nails in the coffin of Europe's Constitutional Treaty, although most of the text was eventually revived with the Lisbon Treaty.

The debate on the future of Europe was effectively a debate *about* Brussels and the way it functions. The aim was to restructure the EU's procedural and

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[10] The debates regarding the Danish and French referendums were exceptional.
[11] Treaty Establishing a Constitution for Europe, OJ 2004, C310.

institutional arrangements and, as such, the result would be a 'history-making decision' (Peterson & Bomberg, 1999). The TECE would have had important implications for the governance of the Union, increasing the scope of Union competences and the use of the so-called 'Community method', by which all three major institutions (Commission, Council and Parliament) engage in policymaking. The first informal interventions by Fischer and others were openly discussed and the formal discussions that followed were also intended to be as open as possible in an attempt to include the European citizens. In other words, we could say that the aim was to stimulate interaction between the weak and strong publics (the latter in the guise of the Convention and later the IGC).

Figure 1: Annual and Total Number of Articles per Newspaper
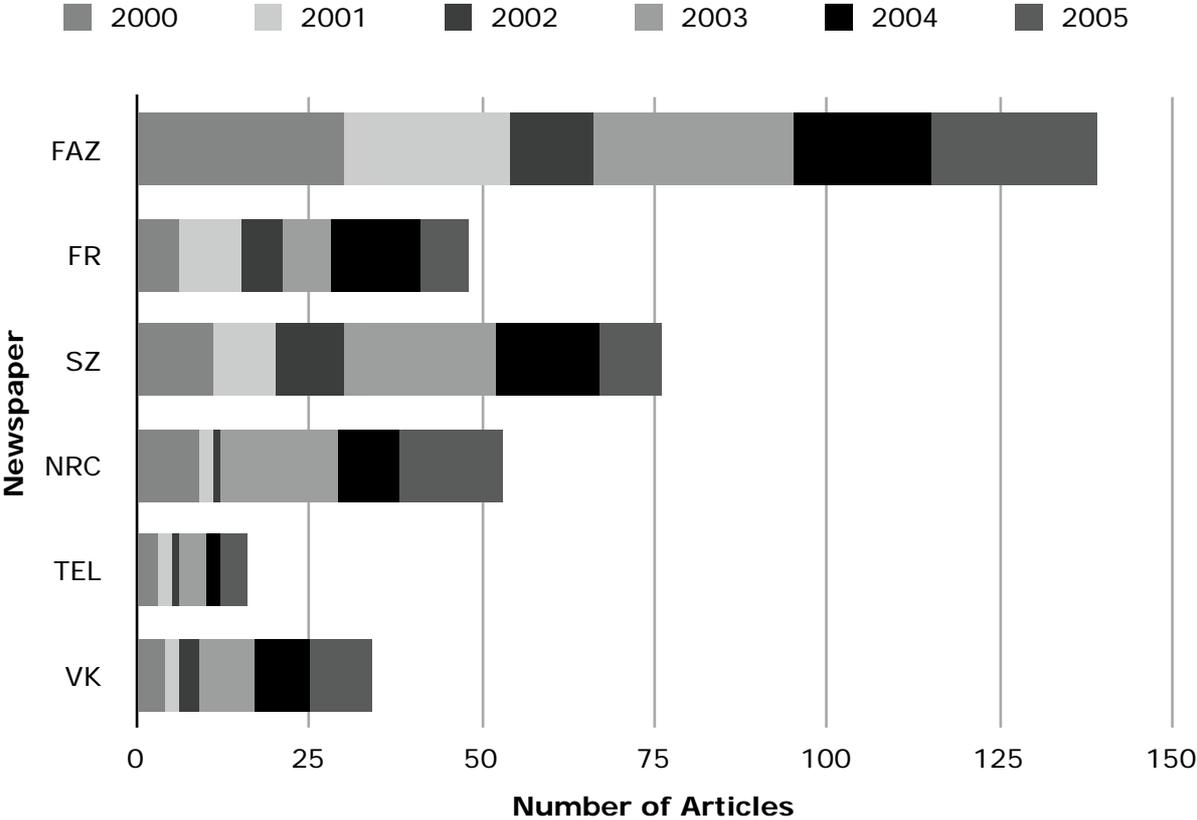

The period studied for this case was January 2000 up and including June 2005. Before presenting the findings of the qualitative analysis, it makes sense to first provide an overview of the analysed texts. Two points need to be made in this respect. First, the selection of articles suggests that the German newspapers (and FAZ in particular) paid much more attention to the debate about Europe's future, as can be seen in *Figure 1*. This is in line with the observation that,

generally, Dutch media pay (even) less attention to EU affairs than German media (e.g. De Beus & Mak, 2009). In this particular case, the fact that the idea of a European constitution was generally perceived more positively in Germany than in the Netherlands may have had an impact.

Second, judging from *Figure 2*, the year 2002 seems to have been quite unimportant in terms of the actual coverage by the newspapers, whereas in 2003 coverage increases again.[12] This is interesting, because in 2002 the Convention that was appointed to present proposals for a new treaty hosted many important discussions and hearings during that year, largely determining the direction for the rest of the process (e.g Becker & Leiße, 2005). This seemingly moderate attention for the Convention as compared to the 2003/2004 Intergovernmental Conference (IGC) and the ensuing ratification process has also been observed by others (Boomgaarden et al, 2010, p.516; Vetters, Jentges & Trenz, 2009, pp. 417–8).

Figure 2: Annual and Total Number of Articles per Newspaper

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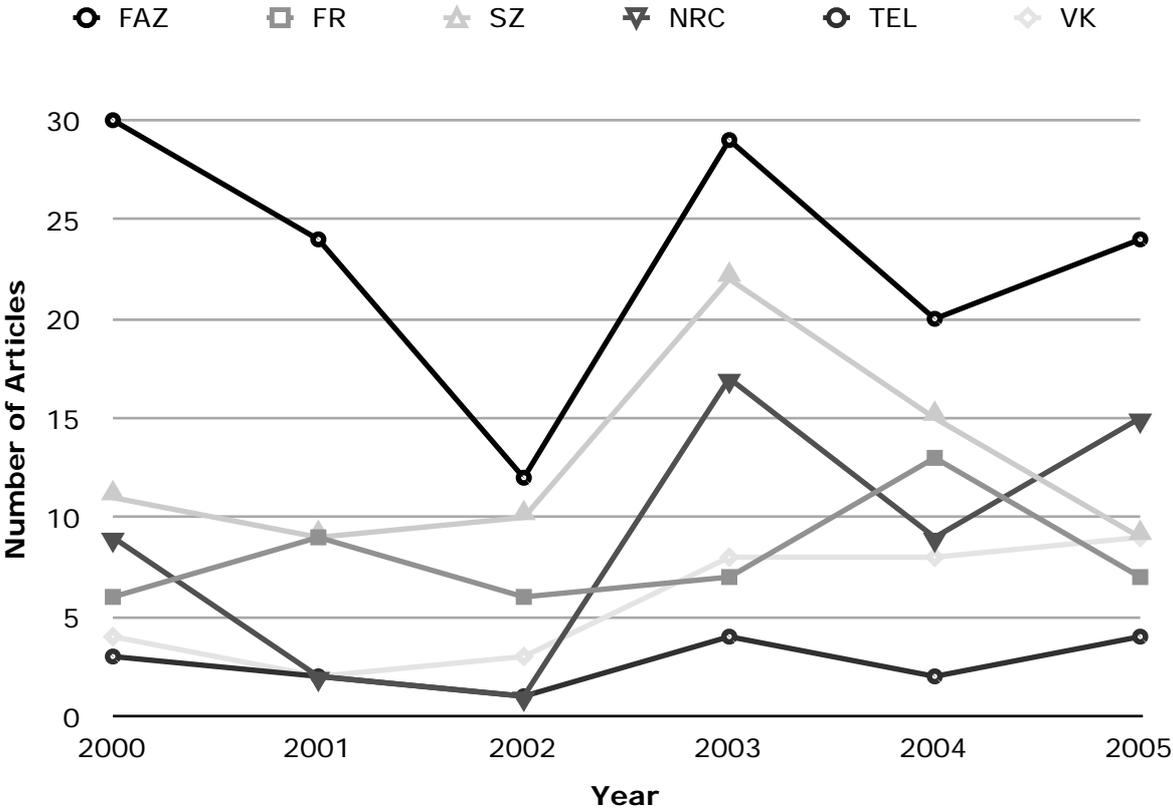
12 Remember that the number of articles for 2005 represents only half a year.

Arguably, there was attention paid to who would actually decide: The Member States in the IGC and later national parliaments and citizens (in countries planning a referendum). Even so, as just mentioned, the Convention was important and attention paid to this part of the policy-shaping phase can be argued to be indispensable. This suggests a temporal mismatch that is in line with arguments put forward by John Erik Fossum and Hans-Jörg Trenz (2007; cf. Vetter, Jentges & Trenz, 2009, p.414). They have claimed that there was no (or little) interaction between the strong and weak publics (respectively, the Convention and the national public spheres) during the drafting process of the TECE. This also means that the text that was to be approved through national ratification, by parliaments and/or by the voters, was actually publicly discussed in a different context to the one in which it was drafted. In fact, the referendums took place many months after agreement on the TECE in the IGC.

Starting with the *issue dimension*, several issues related to the debate on the future of the EU were discussed. Often these issues were discussed in articles that were first and foremost concerned with this topic, but they also regularly appeared as a secondary issue in articles about EU-related issues, such as the Danish 'no' to the Euro (28 September 2000), and sometimes even in articles about completely different topics. This shows that the debate did not take place in isolation. In fact, other developments, events and issues were also raised to question the constitutional exercise, such as the war in Iraq in case of the novelties in the field of foreign affairs cooperation suggested by the Convention and included in the TECE (e.g. SZ 05.09.03; VK 17.02.03).

Other topics that were discussed in both public spheres included proposals launched by EU leaders, the extension and reform of majority voting, the idea of a European Council President and Tony Blair's U-turn on the British referendum (20 April 2004). Sometimes these topics were discussed at the same time, but quite often the degree to which they were discussed varied greatly, as did the moment at which they were discussed.

There were even a few topics that seemed to have been distinctly 'national', in particular the the Stability and Growth Pact in the Netherlands and the division of competences in Germany. The division of competences was hardly an issue in the Dutch press (for an exception, see: NRC 22.09.00), but it has long been an important topic in the German debate, in particular for the *Länder*. It was felt that the moment had arrived to really push forward on this issue (e.g. FAZ 04.12.2001; FR 13.07.2002; SZ 13.05.03). In the Dutch debate the breach of

the Stability and Growth Pact by France and Germany and the subsequent half-hearted response by the European Commission and most other Member States were seen as highly problematic for the future credibility of the integration project (e.g. NRC 19.11.2003; TEL 25.11.2003; VK 19.11.2003). This (formally unrelated[13]) issue surfaced in the German newspapers, but was hardly linked to the overall importance and credibility of the debate about Europe's future, except in FAZ (e.g. 05.03.03).

Discussions about the role of the EU were rare and limited to specific policies, such as foreign affairs, or specific issues, such as whether or not to include a reference to Europe's supposedly Judeo-Christian heritage. But even the relevance of yet another treaty reform was mentioned infrequently - in fact, in less than half of the articles. Two themes recurred in this respect, namely the Eastern Enlargement and, to a much lesser extent, the EU's democratic profile. Yet, the need to reform was not really questioned at all.

Two general observations apply to the *process dimension*. First, previous episodes in the debates got less attention than current affairs and future events. Sometimes references to temporal dimensions were vague or even missing altogether, which may be the result of the fact that the EU's reform was discussed in different contexts (see above). For example, references to previous treaty reforms were not abundant, and mostly actually concerned the Nice Treaty. An exception to this was a FAZ article of 3 July 2000 that referred to the 1957 Rome Treaties and every major treaty reform since - but this was an article about the Nice IGC. Hence, the fact that the TECE would, to a large extent, uphold the existing treaty framework was lost, which may also explain why citizens believed that it would present a radical overhaul of the EU framework.

Second, even though four newspapers (FAZ, NRC, SZ, VK) contained more references to the decision-making process than to any of the three temporal dimensions, it was not always clear which actors and institutions were meant to take decisions and which procedures they were meant to follow. This was most prominent in the policy-shaping phase. While the Convention was only asked to lay down the foundations for a new treaty, it was regularly presented as the body that would take the major decisions. Even during the time of the IGC, responsibilities remained unclear. The Member States would decide, yes, but

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[13] Agreement to adapt the pact was negotiated in the Economics and Financial Affairs Council (ECOFIN) and agreed by the European Council in March 2005 (Nugent, 2006, pp. 364–5).

how? By (qualified) majority, informally by consensus, or perhaps formally by unanimity (e.g. SZ 13.05.03; VK 06.07.04)? Even information about the ratification process, which featured prominently in all newspapers, was not always clear. Some Member States would follow the parliamentary route, whereas others had opted for a referendum, but would these referendums be formally binding, or just consultative (but perhaps *de facto* binding)?

The examination of the *actor dimension* revealed two things. First, most actors involved in the debate were (individual) political leaders. Parliamentarians were sometimes also given a platform. Other media were mentioned quite regularly, but still only represented a fraction of the various actors - they were often just the source of a story, and not presented as having their own opinion. Civil society representatives rarely took the stage and even politicians from the *Länder* were less prominent than expected. A second observation concerning the actor dimension is that most actors came from the Member States. Rather surprisingly, transnational actors (actors from other Member States) figured more prominently in the newspapers' coverage than Dutch politicians in the Dutch public sphere and German politicians in the German public sphere. Taken together, these two observations suggest that the debate was seen as one in which the Member States were the key actors (even if this was not always explicitly acknowledged in terms of the process dimension). With some exceptions, these were the big Member States: Britain, France and Germany.

The newspapers seemed to take their role as platforms for debate seriously. In both public spheres a variety of positions and actions of a whole set of different actors came to the fore. Thus, at first sight it appears they provided an extensive overview of the participants in the debate. Some articles mentioned as many as ten or more opinions including, not just political actors, but also other media and analysts, plus references to opinion polls (e.g. FR 16.06.01; VK 31.10.02). Yet, as just noted, the focus was on a particular set of actors from a limited number of Member States.

The statement that transnational actors were more prominent than national actors also needs some qualification. For one, in contrast to transnational actors, who tended to be named not more than once or twice, national actors often occurred several times (cf. Packham & Osterhoff, 2001, pp.18–22). Moreover, the latter's opinions and actions were covered in a more detailed way, thus providing a better overview of their positions – the manifestation in both public spheres of

the French debate and, to a lesser extent, of Blair's announcement of a referendum, were the only instances of transnationalisation that come close.

Finally, just because newspapers referred to transnational actors, does not mean there was a transnational debate; in most cases, opinions or acts were just recorded, without any reaction or response from other actors. One of the few exceptions concerned the reactions to Fischer's Humboldt speech. In other words, the rather frequent references to debates, events and actors in other Member States in this case did not usually involve many exchanges of opinions between public spheres, but rather the recording of what went on elsewhere. While this may be considered a form of transnationalisation of the *coverage* of EU affairs, it does not mean that there was a transnational *debate* (cf. Sifft et al, 2007).

The Air Quality Debate

The previous section dealt with a debate *about* Brussels. This section will discuss debates about legislation that originates *from* Brussels, namely air quality policies. Environmental policy is usually quite technical and complex, as a result of which it typically only receives modest attention in the wider public domain (e.g. Bijsmans & Altides, 2007, pp.329–30), even though it may be hotly debated in the issue-specific and elite-supranational public spheres where policymakers and other interested parties interact. Its implications and effects may not always be evident.

EU clean air policy consists of different approaches, but here the focus is on debates with regard to air quality standards: initiatives concerned with ambient air quality, which has been defined as 'outdoor air in the troposphere' in various directives (e.g. Directive 96/62/EC, Art. 2), and which is primarily concerned with setting so-called 'limit values' for the presence of pollutants in 'outdoor air'. Efforts in other fields are aimed at safeguarding those limit values or has been developed within the domain of other policies; even debates regarding, for example, car technology (e.g. the Auto-Oil programmes) have largely advanced in parallel to the development of the ambient air quality directives.

The time frame for this case is January 2000 to December 2005. This time frame covers a period that spans several stages of the policy process: not only policy implementation, but also policy evaluation and agenda-setting (including a new thematic strategy and a revised framework directive). Moreover, the

timeframe of the air quality case largely coincides with the debate on the future of Europe, thus enabling the comparability of both cases. The years during which the important ambient air quality framework directive (Directive 96/62/EC) and the first daughter directive (Directive 99/30/EC) on substances such as particulate matter (PM) and nitrogen oxides and dioxide (respectively NOx and NO2) were drafted and approved have not been analysed; an exploratory search for articles about EU air quality legislation in these earlier years yielded few of relevance, if any at all. This already indicates that there was (at least) no public debate at the time the policy was drafted. The articles had to refer to the EU's air quality policy and contain information regarding the policy process, as well as an opinion, act or statement related to it.

Figure 3 provides an overview of the number of articles studied for this particular case. Although this set included more articles than in the first case study, it should be noted that no further sampling method was used – in other words, all available articles from the research period that met the aforementioned criteria were included.

Figure 3: Annual and Total Number of Articles per Newspaper
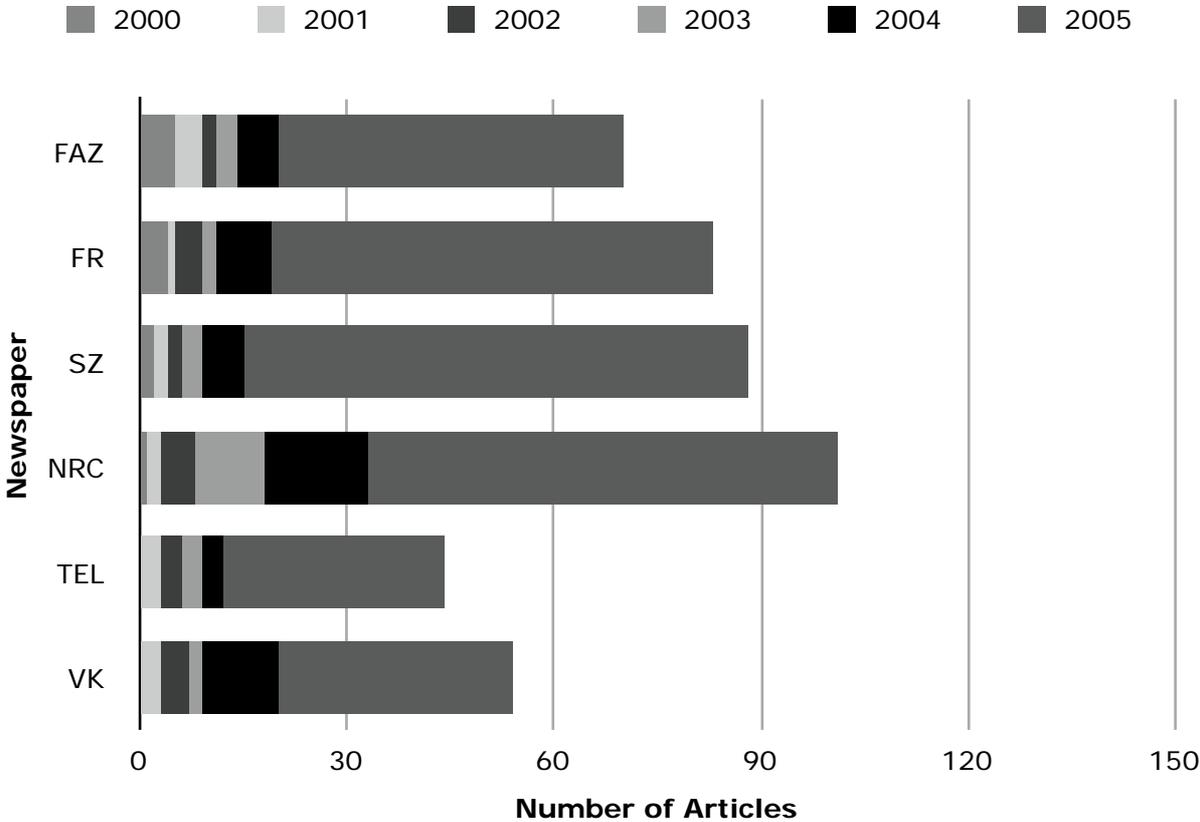
Not only did NRC cover the clean air debate more extensively than the other two Dutch newspapers but, based on this selection, it also paid more attention to the issue than the three German newspapers. FAZ is not overrepresented here. It may not be the most 'sensitive' when it comes to environmental issues, but in that respect it may be comparable with NRC. Besides more critical commentaries (e.g. FAZ 19.04.05), it too contained quite emphatic calls for policy action (e.g. FAZ 30.03.05). Yet, this suggests the widely shared image of the FAZ as one of the key newspapers for EU affairs coverage does not necessarily apply to every topic or policy (cf. Balčytienė et al, 2007, pp.157–8).

Figure 4 clearly indicates that at the outset Europe's air quality policy was barely an issue in either country, despite some early warnings that limit values potentially posed serious problems (e.g. FAZ 23.06.00; FR 19.07.01; NRC 04.11.02; SZ 06.02.01; TEL 24.07.01; VK 26.10.02). Analysis shows that many actors were surprised about the impact of the EU's legislation, which again suggests a temporal mismatch: the debate only kicked off when it was recognised that the limit values were starting to create problems - long after they had been drafted.

Figure 4: Annual and Total Number of Articles per Newspaper
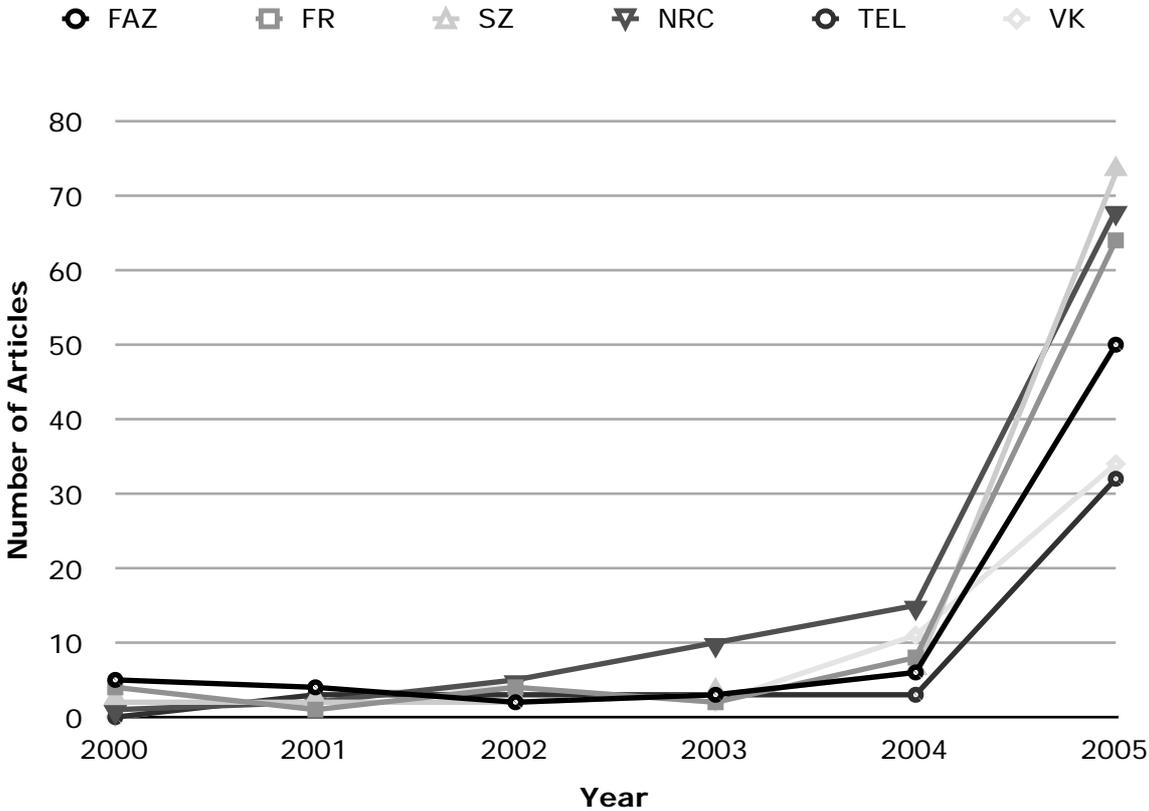
The Dutch debate only really got underway when the Council of State's Administrative Jurisdiction Division cancelled a number of construction plans in 2004 and 2005, and it subsequently became clear there were problems with the limit values set out in the EU directives. There was no such occurrence in Germany, though at the end of 2004 cities were becoming more apprehensive, considering the prospects of (partial) traffic-free zones and court cases that may be a consequence of not being able to meet the limit values.

When taking a closer look at the three dimensions, starting with the *issue dimension*, it becomes clear that while the period covered here includes a number of important moments in the development of EU air quality policy (e.g. Catalayud, 2003, pp.375–7), the focus in Germany and the Netherlands was mostly on the first daughter directive and, in particular, on PM and NO2. Hence, this case also displays a content-related mismatch, regarding the virtual absence of references to the other directives and the corresponding policy processes, but also regarding the depiction of the policy-process for Directive 1999/30/EC.

The debate was very much occupied with the transposition, implementation and enforcement of EU policy. The PM limit values were increasingly viewed as difficult or even impossible to meet, and actors questioned the measures to be taken and who should be taking them, but also the appropriateness of the limit values (were they too strict?). All newspapers reported on (potential) Commission sanctions or infringement procedures regarding the transposition and implementation of several pieces of air quality legislation.

Due to the fact that both debates were predominantly national affairs, only two events were discussed in all six newspapers, namely the Commission's internal environmental costs-benefits debate that foreshadowed the announcement of the new clean air strategy (July 2005), and the Commission's presentation of the proposals for revised air quality legislation (September 2005). There was some attention to PM-related challenges in other countries, but just by means of illustration, not as a way to exchange views and opinions. For example, the problems in Italian cities to meet the EU limit values were noted in both public spheres. In both debates certain national issues were discussed simultaneously, such as German plans to introduce coloured stickers in the German newspapers, and the revision of Dutch air quality legislation in the Dutch newspapers. Other topics were discussed at different times or were reported more prominently in some newspapers than in others – as was also the case in the debate about Europe's future.

As with the future of Europe, the debate surrounding the EU's air quality legislation was the subject of articles not specifically dedicated to this issue. In a secondary context, the PM directive and its policy process were mentioned as an example of how EU affairs should *not* be conducted. It was compared with the policy processes for other EU policies, such as a directive on water quality (NRC 07.04.05) and the environmental noise directive (FAZ 20.04.05). There were also references to air quality policy within the context of democratic decision-making and parliamentary control in EU affairs (e.g. SZ 15.04.05; VK 06.12.05).

Besides the debate over the problems both countries were encountering with the limit values, the newspapers also focussed on the nature of those values and the possible effects of PM, as well as on the possible sources of PM pollution. Yet, while the nature of the limit values – were they too strict, too costly? – was subject to debate, it seems to have been generally accepted that air quality policy should be set on the European, not national, level. Occasionally 'the EU' was explicitly credited for its efforts to combat a major health risk (e.g. FR 20.07.05). The majority of articles referred to the relevance of the policy – either what would happen if the limit values were exceeded (Commission cases, other court cases, Commission demands for action plans) or what the effect of the limit values themselves might be (health versus economy).

As regards the *process dimension*, the focus was mostly on the present state of affairs, the existence of the PM limit values or – in the years up to 2005 – the imminent coming into force of the limit values. References to past and future events were more limited, tending to focus on events on the national level, rather than what had happened or was going to happen on the EU level. Such information was only present in predominantly background-related articles on, for example, the limit values and how they came about. The transposition of the first daughter directive did not receive particular attention (for an exception, see: FAZ 13.12.01). It did become an issue in 2005, however, when several commentators and actors noted that the agreement on, and transposition of, the first daughter directive had taken place way before the 2005 limit values actually came into force. In other words, references to past events were not completely absent, be it that they came late.

When it was noted increasingly that the limit values had been decided years before, criticism was directed at the public authorities whom, allegedly, had not prepared thoroughly enough to cope with the coming into force of the limit values. Hence, the debates referred to notions of responsibility and

accountability, though they displayed limited awareness of the process by which the values came about. The Commission was regularly identified as the main decision-maker. In reality, the 1996 framework directive and the first daughter directive were the result of the cooperation procedure, whereas the other directives were based on co-decision. In other words, in all cases the Council and the Parliament had been involved, but were rarely referred to in the debate. The responsibilities of the individual Member States were mentioned more frequently (e.g. FAZ 29.03.05; FR 04.04.05; NRC 10.12.04; SZ 22.09.05; TEL 01.12.05; VK 22.09.05). Nevertheless, their role as decision-makers was less prominent than their role as implementers of existing legislation.

In both the Netherlands and Germany the debate over the implementation and enforcement of the existing limit values seemed to foreshadow the new 2005 Commission proposals, though the exact impact is difficult to determine.[14] But despite the fact that there were few or incomplete references to responsibility at the European level, there were many accounts of responsibility at the national level, from cities to district government (in Germany) to courts – in other words, reflecting the particular phase of the policy process (policy implementation).

The main similarity between the *actor dimensions* of both cases is that the newspapers offered room to different opinions within the various articles. In addition, again quite a few actors were only mentioned once, though overall the diversity of actors was much greater in this case than in the previous one. Yet, there were also two differences. First, transnational actors were not quoted extensively, but only figured in a few articles that reported on or referred to the PM-related problems other Member States were experiencing. The relatively few articles that did refer to other Member States generally reflected on the national debates in those countries – there was no exchange of opinion across borders.

In contrast, national actors were represented most widely. Regional and local politicians, authorities and interest groups also figured prominently in both public spheres. In both countries local debates, measures and examples played a role in the debate. The responsible national politicians, the German Minister for the Environment Jürgen Trittin (Greens) and the Dutch State Secretary for the

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[14] According to a Commission official, the debates in the public spheres did not have a direct effect on the new proposals because media reporting in the Member States was not followed on a daily basis. More important were early Dutch efforts to influence proposals that were then forthcoming. As the Netherlands was generally seen as a country with a good track record on environment and with significant technical and policy knowledge in the field, its concerns were taken seriously (Interview, 31 August 2010).

Environment Pieter Van Geel (Christian Democrats), played a prominent role in the debate. However, it should be noted that they mostly figured as national politicians, not as members of a European institution – the Council of Ministers.[15]

In general the responsible institutions and actors at the European level did not figure very prominently in the debate. The Commission appeared most often in the debate. Besides being (partly mistakenly) identified as the source of policy or the decision-maker, it was also addressed by other participants in the debate, or defended the existing air quality legislation (e.g. SZ 21.05.05). Despite its 'green' image, the EP figured little in the debates, which can probably be explained by the focus on implementation – those MEPs that did figure in the debate, tended to do so in the context of the new Commission proposals and the Commission's internal environmental costs-benefits debate. Besides institutions and their members or representatives, other supranational actors also appeared. These were mostly European level interest organisations. Here, the nationality of European-level actors played a role in their prominence in the public debate, with most (quoted) actors being either Dutch or German. This has been implied by other studies too, for example, regarding the day-to-day business of German reporters in Brussels (Leppik et al, 2007, pp.59–60, 69–70).

A second difference with the previous case concerns the fact that the air quality debate not only attracted politicians and political parties, but also various interest organisations, research centres and citizens' organisations. Environmental movements and citizen action groups figured prominently in all six newspapers and made use of the limit values to demand various measures from local, regional and/or national administrations (e.g. FAZ 25.10.05), and went to court to secure legal support for these demands (e.g. VK 02.04.05). Business associations, associations representing the building sector (in the Netherlands) and local and regional administrations were most clearly opposed to the existing situation. Representatives from the car industry (individual companies as well as umbrella organisations) took part in both debates, but mostly in Germany (e.g. SZ 30.03.05; cf. VK 04.11.05). In some cases, letters from representatives of these organisations or from readers referred to previous articles, letters or editorials.

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[15] On one occasion Van Geel was recorded as the acting chair of the Council of Ministers (NRC 15.10.04),

Discussion

The empirical research presented here shows that EU affairs *are* subject to discussion in national public spheres. Attention to the debate about the future of Europe was to be expected and it actually seems to have increased as the referendums drew nearer (see, for example, also: Vetters, Jentges & Trenz, 2009). More surprisingly, even such a technical policy field as air quality can become controversial, once the impact of policies is made clear.

Other studies have noted that EU affairs may actually already be becoming more prominent in several national public spheres (e.g. Kantner, 2006, p.155; Seifert, 2006). The two case studies, in fact, show that EU affairs are also regularly discussed in the context of other, sometimes unrelated topics, and can play a role in national discussions, even without being explicitly identified as originating at the European level. In accordance with the selection criteria, articles that referred to EU legislation or issues, without identifying them as such, were excluded from the set of articles that has been analysed. This may be seen as a negative consequence of the way in which articles were selected, but content analysis requires some way of deciding on how to find and pick articles for analysis. The existence of articles that discuss EU affairs without explicitly marking them as such is nevertheless worth mentioning and might offer inspiration for different types of studies which could focus on this interesting phenomenon.

Both these latter articles and those which discuss EU affairs in different settings suggest that the EU and its policies filter through into national public spheres more often than we normally assume (cf. Kantner, 2006, pp.151–2; Trenz, 2004, p.296). This may not yet constitute a public sphere (let alone trigger transnational debates), but it does indicate that the problem may not be the *absence of references* to what is happening in Brussels but rather *the way in which this is accounted for* in public spheres: only in passing and sometimes even without identifying the policy as being of European origin. Or, in other words, 'Europe' *is* being discussed in national public spheres, both explicitly *and* implicitly, even though the EU is not always depicted accurately and in full light, if at all.

This brings us to the question of what type of information is disseminated in national public spheres. Earlier it was argued that it is important that the media cover facts, depict these facts accurately and provide a picture that is as

complete as possible. Yet, both cases displayed a mismatch in timing between debates in strong publics and those in weak publics. Moreover, there also was a mismatch in content between the actual debates and processes in those strong publics and their representation in the media. One of the most pressing problems with regard to debates about the EU is that they tend to take place after the key decisions have already been taken, often without acknowledging previous steps in the policy process. Another problem concerns the fact that the representation of the European policy process in national public spheres often misrepresents the way things actually work in Brussels. Since media are in the business of providing *news* (a marketable commodity) these observations may not come as a huge surprise. Yet, some issues are difficult to understand without providing an insight into which events, decisions and procedures had led up to the current situation.

This applies to both the general features of decision-making and the allocation of competences and responsibilities. For example, the preparatory work of the Convention received relatively little attention and the Commission was regularly identified as the main decision-maker in air quality policy. Both cases and both public spheres showed similarities in this respect, which seems to confirm findings by other studies that media news values and selection criteria are comparable across Europe and that coverage of EU affairs shows many similarities (see, also, for example: De Beus & Mak, 2009, p.134). Therefore, Trenz (2008, p.299) correctly asks the question whether this may help to foster interaction between national public spheres.

These mismatches are problematic in terms of democratic EU governance. Yet, the observation that EU affairs can become subject to public debate both implicitly and explicitly in the case of both high-profile and seemingly more technocratic topics, is important. As such, more policies might be discussed in the public spheres if EU policymakers and stakeholders were more open about issues, options and preferences throughout the policymaking process. Whether recent attempts to streamline EU action in the field of communication policy can play a role in this respect is difficult to predict (e.g. European Commission, 2006). For example, the debate about the future of Europe showed that a top-down approach to stimulating transnational debates was not successful.

What is remarkable is the fact that transnational and even supranational actors were quite prominent, especially in the debate about the EU's future. While this was much less the case with regard to the air quality debate, some

degree of interaction between different public spheres is apparently not uncommon. Silke Adam (2008) even reports that interaction in the French and German debates about the TECE involved European actors in 80% of all instances. This is not fully in line with what is usually suggested, namely that national positions and actors dominate debates (cf. Koopmans, 2007, p.205).

The fact that events and discussions in other Member States do not go unnoticed does not mean that we can automatically discern transnational debates. In fact, compared to the debate on Europe's future, the debate on the EU's air quality legislation was mostly a national affair, which implies that the stage of the policy process as well as the nature of the topic at hand has an impact on debates about European affairs, both in terms of the intensity of the debate and the communicative exchanges between public spheres (cf. Trenz, 2004, pp.303–7).

The representation and discussion of EU affairs in the public sphere may differ depending on the issue in question, but also on national differences, ranging from characteristics of the political systems to the way in which European legislation has been transposed in national legislation. The resulting differences such as these do not, however, exclude similarities between the debates in different public spheres. As mentioned previously, even the mismatches were present in both cases and in the debates in both Germany and the Netherlands. This suggests that there actually is some degree of comparability between debates in national public spheres.

The coexistence of differences and similarities was most clearly seen in the second case study on EU air quality legislation, in which different means of transposition played a role in terms of the legislation's domestic consequences, but in which responsibility was a key issue in both public spheres, as was the balancing of public health versus economic development. In addition, an element of surprise among actors could be discerned in the debates in the Dutch and the German newspapers. In other words, despite their predominantly national focus, the debates developed along parallel lines in terms of timing, themes and – with the exception of the role of regional authorities – even actors (organised interests, citizens' organisations, local governments and so on).

Seifert (2006) also found that while there was little interaction between national debates about biotechnology, those debates developed along the same lines, engaging similar types of actors to discuss comparable themes. While the issue was not prominent in all national public spheres, Seifert describes how it

was controversial in countries such as Austria and Britain. He even argues that these debates had an impact on the European policy-process, because national politicians tended to transfer domestic worries about, and arguments against, biotechnology to the European level. To some extent this seems to have been the case with regard to the Dutch debate. These 'synchronised national publics' may also be able to contribute to democratising EU governance. They may certainly form a stepping stone for transnational debates.

Transnational debates may also be possible because of two aforementioned points. First, the fact that there were several references to events, discussions and actors in other Member States, in particular in the debate on the future of Europe, would suggest that there is potential for transnational debates, not just coverage of events elsewhere. It shows that issues are not always placed within a domestic context, even though national perspectives and peculiarities may play a role. Second, implicit references to EU policies and articles in which EU affairs were only a secondary issue were found in both public spheres, and have also been identified by Trenz (2004) and Kantner (2006). These references show another type of similarity between the ways in which EU affairs become part of national public spheres. For Kantner (ibid, pp.157–8) this is one of the reasons for claiming that the political horizon in EU Member States is (at least partly) shifting towards the European level.

In sum, there are reasons to believe that national public spheres can form a transnational arena for debate. Yet, this assessment should not be equated with arguing that national arenas will always offer opportunities for transnationalisation (cf. Pfetsch, 2008, p.36). The European public sphere is certainly not completely fragmented, as references to debates and events in other Member States are not uncommon. Nevertheless, those linkages between national spaces may be brief or very superficial, as was sometimes the case in the debate on Europe's future, where some Member States and transnational actors were only referred to once. In other words, it will be difficult to continuously maintain transnational debates. This also raises questions concerning the extent to which debates in and patters of interaction between national public spheres need to be similar; questions that have so far remained unanswered in the existing literature and that can also not be answered here (see, also: Risse, 2010, p.155). It is certainly imaginable that debates might regularly remain confined to domestic settings – in fact, Stephanie Sifft et al

(2007) argue that while the 'monitoring' of EU affairs has increased since the 1980s, the interaction between national public spheres has not.

Conclusion

Scholars such as Eder (2000), who have argued that debates about EU affairs do take place and do cross borders, are right to argue that we should focus on what the European public sphere might look like, not on whether or not such debates take place. Discussions about EU affairs vary according to the topic at hand, and even according to policymaking phase. Discussions can also develop along similar lines in different Member States, but differences between countries can have an effect on these discussions. Hence, we should envisage the European public sphere as a multifaceted, ever-changing construct (cf. Bijsmans, 2011). In terms of democracy, this multifaceted space may pose problems when people are excluded from debates, but at the same time it also takes into account the fact that the EU consists of different Member States with different priorities.

The conclusion that EU affairs are discussed in national public spheres, be it explicit or implicit, should at least make us cautious of jumping to quick conclusions about the existence of a public deficit, at least in terms of the amount of coverage. Even parallel, synchronised debates may offer opportunities to influence EU decision-making. What seems more problematic is the quality of coverage: reports about EU affairs tend to be published too late and the information provided by our national media tends to display discrepancies with regard to factual processes and responsibilities at the European level.

Of course, there are still other discussions in Brussels that either go unnoticed or are monitored too late. In some cases this may be problematic, in others it may not. Some kind of politicisation of EU affairs and a different approach to communication may be essential. While some have argued that this process is already underway (e.g. De Beus & Mak, 2009; Risse, 2010, pp.172-3), it may not always be easily achievable. Besides, we should bear in mind that better communication and more publicity do not mean that citizens will actually engage with EU affairs, or that they become more positive towards it. But then again, that is the essence of democracy.

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