

# **Evolving Europe: Voices of the Future**

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## **The Role of the Euroblogosphere in a context of a European Public Sphere.**

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**Abstract:** This article aims to illuminate the perception of Spanish and English language bloggers and to understand them and their activities from the analytical perspective of an online European Public Sphere (EPS). The research, using a methodology of semi structured online interviews, answers how these bloggers, based on the interviews, do they perceive to be the key attributes of the EPS, including its major strengths and problems. The findings give evidence of what is it the role of the Euroblogosphere in the online EPS, and its contribution of more democratic debate. Following is presented present part of the research done by myself about the Euroblogosphere. This paper focuses in the space and role of Euroblogosphere in the EPS and its contribution to the democratisation of the debate by the opinion and experiences of the own bloggers. The main conclusion is that the Euroblogosphere is growing in size, participating in the democratization of the debate, but its influence is still limited.

**Key words:** Euroblogosphere, European Public Sphere, interviews, democratization, e-participation

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# 1. Introduction

The lack of a European public space where the citizens can share their thoughts and expressions about the decisions taken in European level correlates with the democratic deficit that the European Institutions have. Many commentators agree that democratic deficit is linked to the existence and function of EPS and the deliberative democracy it creates (Papanagnou, 2013).

The argument of this article is that the Euroblogosphere seems one path that holds out much potential in this regard, given that it comprises many independent bloggers writing their personal opinions on EU matters, usually in more than one language (Ruiz Soler, 2012). At the same time the Euroblogosphere could be the central bridge between national and European discussions (Fossum & Schlesinger, 2007). It might foster democratization of European discussions, as it is easier to reach international audience without having to pass through and be filtered by national mass media that invariably angle EU issues through the lens of national political cultures.

With this research I pretend to address the gap of academic research in the topic of the Euroblogosphere, and at the same time to complement the existing literature about the European Public Sphere with a viewpoint not taken into consideration deeply by the scholars: online communication –more concretely the Euroblogosphere- as a way of public participation, political communication and deliberation. There is a lack of understanding of the ways in which various groups and individuals engage in civil society and political processes in the development of supranational developments such as the fostering of a more integrated Europe (Wessels, 2009).

According to a pan- European online newspaper, “the euroblogosphere represents a large number of European citizens who criticise the democratic deficit in European institutions, or more simply those who want to share criticisms, suggestions or gossip in an online community” (Sforza 2012). However, further empirical and theoretical exploration of the contribution of the Internet and its different elements, where the Euroblogosphere might play an important role for the constitution of a European public sphere, and where individual citizens can democratically participate in political conversations, is necessary.

What exactly is the EPS, and why I address it when researching Euroblogosphere? According to Erik Oddvar Eriksen, the Public Sphere is “the social room that is created when individuals deliberate common concerns. It depicts a relationship between the speakers and the audience that is created by social actors experiencing the by-products of cooperation, which in turn prompts the inclusion of affected parties” (Eriksen 2007: 23). This definition can be also applied to blogospheres in general, but more concretely to the European Blogosphere where people from all member states and outside Europe meet in virtual spaces to exchange their thoughts and reflexions. It is vital thus to understand very well the processes of the EPS if we want to understand what is the place of the Euroblogosphere, and what contribution it makes. However, the idea of a European Public Sphere has aroused issues of concern. Several scholars in the field of Communications and European Studies have been researching and writing about the European Public Sphere, being the uncertainty of its existence the most common conclusion (Kaitatzi-Whitlock 2007).

## 2. Literature Review

The Euroblogosphere, due to its characteristics, is considered to be part of the European Public Sphere. (Ruiz Soler, 2012). However there is not much literature about the specific topic of EU blogosphere and the role it has on society. Academically, two papers have been written about the Euroblogosphere<sup>1</sup> until 2009. That year an aggregator of blogs about EU topics was created by independent citizens: [bloggingportal.eu](http://bloggingportal.eu), that contains already more than 1000 blogs comprised of different languages.

Feldhof concludes in his research that first, Euroblogosphere fails fostering political participation of the masses; and second, the European blogosphere has a limitation in the control of policy-makers. Ondarza, on the other hand, and in her own words concludes that the Euroblogosphere is a partial public sphere where European institutions are responsible to provide a basis for the growth of it. The Euroblogosphere can be understood as a virtual partial public sphere of people who are especially interested in European politics and societal issues (Ondarza, 2007).

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<sup>1</sup> Myra von Ondarza, "The Euroblogosphere - Advent of a social movement or source for expert information?" (Master Thesis, Hamburg, 2007).

André Feldhof, "Atomization overcome? The role of the European blogosphere in fostering more European democracy." (Bachelor Thesis, Maastricht, 2009).

Recently, a new academic article was written by Georgios (Papanagnou 2013). The paper presents the results of the empirical research conducted on the emerging EU-blogsphere and relates them to the Habermasian notion of the public sphere. Conceptually, it traces the development of the public sphere as a normative category and establishes a series of criteria that seem to guarantee its effective operation as a democratic bridge between publics and authorities in a transnational context. In the process, it refers to the various empirical works in this area which aim to trace the public sphere in Europe (off/online). The empirical part analyzes the findings of the qualitative research conducted with EU-bloggers (expert interviews and content analysis). The results show that the EU-blogsphere to some extent exhibits characteristics of an effective (if inconsistent) transnational public sphere (extension of democratic debate, promoting an EU-common identity, achieving at times influence). Nonetheless, its deliberative quality is low and overall it remains too small and expert driven. However, Papanagnou cites that further systematic studies and explorations of the phenomenon of the Euroblogsphere are more than necessary if we are to have a more balanced picture (Papanagnou, 2013: 25).

The debate about the European Public Sphere is more intense. It is necessary to understand it to recognize the link within EPS and the Euroblogsphere. Scholars in the field of European Studies and European politics have been researching and writing about the European Public Sphere, not being clear if it exists or not. Apart of this blur conclusion, there are different tendencies to clarify this point in the literature. For Maria Heller and Ágnes Rényi (2007), all preconditions for a development of the EPS are ready but there are problems for its development that must be solved. Yet, there are two tendencies that must be considered: an Europeanization of national media, and the creation of a pan trans-national European media.

Jos de Beus (2010) supports an Europeanization of national media and consequently broken at the national level as the best way to build public debate. Koopmans goes in the same line arguing in his research that contrary to the hypothesis of a public sphere deficit, the German mass media, for example, “seem to quite accurately reflect the Europeanization of policy making, at least in those policy fields where a clear-cut transfer of competencies to the supranational EU level has taken place” (Koopmans et al. 2004: 97). For other scholars, for example Bruggmann (2009), the thesis is totally the other side: a multitude of EU transnational media have evolved over the last 20 years and that they have a small, but significant and growing audience. (Bruggmann, 2009: 694) even defines a typology of transnational media.

But the common conclusion is that the existence of an arena for interaction between the nations is necessary (Van de Steeg, 2009). Without informed citizens, there is no interest in Europe and democracy. The deficit in democracy can only be eliminated if an EPS comes into existence in which the democratic process is incorporated (Papanagnou, 2013). Communication environments that historically provided platforms for public debate are changing with the development of digital technologies and the World Wide Web (Wessels, 2009). The current emergence of an information society provides the context for the development of a twenty-first century Public Sphere, which may include some sort of EPS.

In order to understand if the Euroblogsphere is contributing to activate political participation on the internet with regards to EU topics and policies, and in summary contributing to the development of a European Public Sphere online, we need to understand what processes stand behind blogging, how and why the bloggers interact with each other. To understand the grounds, potential and limitations of this mode of EU civic engagement and its contribution to political participation and democracy within the EU.

### 3. Theoretical Background

The research is founded with the theories of the European Public Sphere, and e-participation. The former theory studies the building of a common space for debate within European citizens no matter of nationality, language, or background (Fossum and Schlesinger, 2007) On the other hand, e-participation explores the practices individuals, corporations and institutions are using for political communication, as well as civil engagement (Bannisch, 2006).

#### **European Public Sphere**

The notion of European Public Sphere forms the background of the research project. Scholars have been researching and writing about the European Public Sphere, being the uncertainty of its existence a common conclusion (Koopmans and Statham, 2010). The barriers for it are national media, languages and social cultures (Kaitatzi-Whitlock, 2007). However, there are simultaneous public debates on European issues on a national level. This also means that the information needed for participation in a public debate regarding the EU is available to the majority of Europeans through conventional media and not just to elites, who have access to more advanced media, such as

the Internet. Consequently, there exists the potential for an all-inclusive, democratic European public sphere to emerge (Michailiodou 2009).

In addition, in which way EPS could go in the future? John Erik Fossum and Philip Schlesinger (2007) established two models for the future of the EPS: the regulatory model and the federal model. Both of them are political models for the EU with different characteristics, and because of it, different public spheres, and thus postulate different models of public sphere. The first model defines EU as a “regulatory entity engaged in problem-solving”. The purpose of the EU is ultimately a “network governance” where the members are together to discuss through institutions the problems and to learn from each-other the solutions. The model of EPS developed here -since the members have closed the political space- is the Europeanization of national public spheres. Although transnational communication within the entire EU territory might be possible, it is not however, addressed to general public.

The second model –the federal EU- is the antagonist of the first model described above. Basing the EU as a democratic constitutional state, there is a need for a European identity. And for that there should be “a public opinion mobilized to influence”. It does not conceive -as the regulatory model does- a monolithic public sphere but an “overlapping public”. It means with a distinction between strong and weak public spheres (institutional and civil society), both of which are necessary for a discussion of different topics at the same level: European. In summary, this model aims for the Europeanization and transnationalization of national spheres, taking into consideration “a respect of democracy, difference, pluralism, human rights and vulnerable identities”.

None of these two models contemplate the use of internet in a big scale. There is a big lack of academic research about the use of internet as a source/complement of the European Public Sphere. Internet is here, and will be with us for a long time. A process of cannibalization is starting between different sources of public *fora*, being internet the one that is growing faster (Ruiz Soler, 2012: 16). In this regard of further research on the role of the Internet, Michailiodou’s (2009) research explores the institutions as facilitators of political debate (top-down approach) having as a conclusion that there is a break within Institutions and citizens.

For Maria Heller and Ágnes Rényi the current EPS might be right now in the first one, the regulatory model. However, thanks to the development and access of Internet Communications Technologies to everyone, it can change. The Internet will facilitate to reach small local and regional groups, and at the same time an increasing interactivity may lead to citizens’ more active participation in discussions, including in the transnational public sphere. The increase of interaction may lead to citizens more active participation at the EPS, and consequently enlarging democratic participation. In words of Heller and Rényi (2007: 183) it is the change from model one to two.

Bloggers can have a very important role in the hypothetical transition from one model to other. Blogosphere is the platform for citizens to express without restrictions their ideas, and to share with other bloggers, included from all Europe, common points and discussions of all possible topics. However, it is not easy, and until now, bloggers have been nationally divided, with the majority of them not aware of the discussions about the same topics in different languages or countries (Patz 2012). This constitutes, as it was mentioned before, the Europeanization of the national public sphere.

## **E-democracy and e-participation**

Citizens need to be able to express their opinions and debate over common European issues in a public sphere directly related to the centres of decision-making, if an all-inclusive, democratising Habermasian (1989) public sphere is to be achieved. It is not enough for citizens to only be able to discuss European issues, if they cannot influence and participate in the process of decision-making. At the moment, one of the main causes of the democratic deficit of the EU is that there is no regular feedback flow from the citizens to the EU decision making centres (Michailiodou ,2009).

The Internet, owing to its characteristics (cheap, global and two way communication) (Papanagnou, 2013; Michailiodou 2009) can be seen as one of the several possibilities that can contribute to the development of a European public sphere, combating thus this democratic deficit. In this regard, Professor Hans-Jörg Trenz from University of Copenhagen and Professor Asimina Michailiodou<sup>1</sup> from ARENA Centre for European Studies at the University of Oslo have been conducting until today the only research on the space of the Internet, building or contributing to the European Public Sphere, political communication and engagement of citizens in online discussions. (Michailiodou, 2009).

In that sense, the Internet is the ideal space for deliberative democracy and broader citizens’ participation at European level, where the multiple national publics of the EU could surpass their cultural/regional boundaries sufficiently to achieve the level of Europeanization required before one can talk about a European public sphere, without at the same time losing their national identities. Given the nature of the European public sphere (interconnected national public spheres, multilingual community and geographical distance between members of the

public) (Michailiodou 2009) it is the contention of this research that the Euroblogosphere can foster, inside Internet and in connection to the offline word (Ruiz Soler, 2012) the formation of a democratic, strong European public sphere.

## **Blogging**

Finally, some theoretical remarks about blogging are necessary as well to put the bloggers in the right place of the framework within the research. A blogosphere, in this case the Euroblogosphere, is made up of all blogs and their interconnections. The term implies that blogs exist together as a connected community (or as a collection of connected communities) or as a social network in which everyday authors can publish their opinions. They are interactive, allowing visitors to leave comments and even messages. Indeed, bloggers do not only produce content to post on their blogs, but also build social relations with their readers and other bloggers. Discussions "in the blogosphere" are occasionally used by the media as a gauge of public opinion on various issues. Because new, untapped communities of bloggers and their readers can emerge in the space of a few years, Internet marketers pay close attention to "trends in the blogosphere" (Bahnisch 2006).

A political blog, the focus of my research, is a form of internet blog covering politics. There are differing views as to whether political blogs constitute political participation. One view is that political blogs are used as a public forum for discussing the community, candidates, policy and voting. Another view is that political blogs are not about political participation but are merely online 'soapboxes' for people's political expression. However there is correlation between readers of political blogs with voting, support of a political candidate and attempts to persuade others to vote a particular way. The readers of political blogs are also able to interact with the author through the comment section or social media (Bahnisch 2006).

## **4. The selected model for the research: Semi structured online interviews**

I concentrate the research in semi structured online interviews (Mann and Stewart 2000: 75) since the aim is to illuminate the perception of Spanish/English bloggers, and to understand them from the analytical perspective of an online EPS in order to recognize and situate the Euroblogosphere inside this EPS. The aim of the research is not the blog per se, but is the person who is behind the blog site: the blogger.

The selection of the twelve Spanish and English bloggers –six for each language- is made to give the study a broad and comparative dimension, with online written interviews being the best option to understand firsthand the social function of the Euroblogosphere inside the context of the EPS. With the sample of two different languages, and a priori two different styles of political blogging, the study offers a fuller, more robust picture as well as a more nuanced analysis.

The criteria I used for selection were that the bloggers:

- Are listed in [bloggingportal.eu](http://bloggingportal.eu).
- Write mainly in Spanish/English.
- Are users of twitter, with more than 300 followers
- Focus mainly in European affairs.
- Published their last post not more than 3 months ago.
- Have a personal blog domain.
- Consist of an individual speaking by him/herself.

I have followed a sampling illustratively strategy (Mann and Stewart 2000: 126). It means that the sampling done tries to find "an example" of how bloggers interact, but the result of the research is not an absolute truth that can be generalized to all blogosphere. Following the overview for the planning and preparation procedure for qualitative interviews by Jenifer Mason (2002: 75), written interviews of ten big questions plus several sub questions were sent to the personal emails of the bloggers selected, in Spanish for the bloggers of this language, and in English for the bloggers of that language. Furthermore, the questions gave enough room to the participants to add more information requested in the case they would like to comment something was not included in the interview. I started the indexing, codification and categorization of the available data, using the methodology of data-driven coding (Kvale and Brinkman 2009: 205). An inductive approach that implies that the research starts out without codes, and develops them through reading the material.

## 5. What do they say?

### 1. The influence of the euroblogosphere

Although this point has not been asked explicitly in the interview, the bloggers coincide in two points. The first one is that in general the Euroblogosphere is not big enough yet to be influential in any topic.

*Still small, still very few participants.*

**James, English speaking blogger**

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*[...] It is very much atomized<sup>ii</sup>*

**José María, Spanish Speaking blogger**

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And the second common point within all bloggers is that the Euroblogosphere has a huge potential for being a source of influence for topics, together with other platforms.

*Given that a public sphere is all about public communication, blogs can definitely play a very important role in both shaping and dominating the general debate.*

**Protesilaos, English speaking blogger**

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The blogger Pau Solanilla, in this respect claims that the Euroblogosphere lacks in what is called “soft power”. It is the pressure and influence that normal citizens, together, can get in some topics. The problem for Pau, and it is common in the arguments of all participants, is that the Euroblogosphere, is a “microcosmos of multiplicity of isolate opinions”, an atomized space without any kind of organization.

The question is what the Euroblogosphere needs in order to be more influential. There is diversity of opinions between the interviewees, but in general they express that what the Euroblogosphere needs is more integration and cooperation between them.

*Building links by promoting a culture of reading widely” might increase the size and participation of the Euroblogosphere, and so the Euroblogosphere may become more influential.*

**Conor, English speaking blogger**

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It is one of the affirmations all participants do: the euroblogosphere has a limitation of influence. In this specific point, the participants make a comparison between the European blogosphere and the US blogosphere. The US blogosphere has more influence and more of the called “soft power”. Some US bloggers, if we follow the argumentation of the participants in the interviews, have a huge potential in what they are writing. Putting them together, the influence they can cause is huge in some topics. However, in Europe there are almost no individual bloggers that have very huge influence. This last point is linked with the second pattern –the influence a blogger can incite to others- and again we conclude that for a blogger is very hard to get enough relevance to have repercussion in some topics by itself.

*The EU blogosphere remains a rather elitist talking shop between young academics and EU professionals. Secondly, and related to the first point, there are few connections between the European blogosphere and established national media which could allow blogposts to reach a wider audience in one of the member states. Other than in the United States, it rarely happens that an EU blogger’s post inspires an article in a national newspaper.*

**André, English speaking blogger**

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## 2. Situation of the European Public Sphere and role of blogs in the online EPS.

The contribution of the bloggers to the Euroblogosphere, and the contribution of the Euroblogosphere to the EPS are evident by the answers given at the interviews. For the bloggers, the Euroblogosphere bears a responsibility of developing debate and sharing information. However, this contribution, due to the nature of the blogosphere, is very small if we take into consideration all the channels of communication the citizens have at their disposition.

The general understanding from all the interviewees is that the Euroblogosphere might contribute to the Online European Public Sphere. However, this contribution will be small. It is explained by the bloggers that the Euroblogosphere, although has grown in size, and some sort of influence, it is very narrow and elitist.

*Bloggingportal.eu may list around 1000 EU-focused blogs, but most aren't regularly updated (my own included), and the vast, vast majority would struggle to get daily readership numbers in triple digits. It's now become a closer-knit community (partially through Bloggingportal, as there's now a core of c.25 Eurobloggers who are all (theoretically) editors on that site who all email each other fairly regularly.*

### James, English speaking blogger

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And comparing the Euroblogosphere within other channels of communication online and offline, the Euroblogosphere represents a very small portion of what will be the EPS. There is not entire unanimity of what role the Euroblogosphere has to play inside the EPS, however the participants, linked to their motivation think that the Euroblogosphere is a space where everyone can have a voice and can express their ideas, regardless of the ideological position of the blogger.

I speak in future when talking about the concept of EPS because with exception of one blogger, that believes there is already a sort of EPS, the rest of bloggers think the EPS is still at the very beginning, or not existing yet at all. I find, consequently, two groups between the interviewees: the blogger that thinks there is already an EPS, and a big group that thinks the EPS is not yet developed. For the first group, or the blogger who thinks there is sort of EPS, he believes that it exists because brings people from different cultures together and reinforces the feeling of being European, but however in a very limited level not reaching yet people on the ground.

*As an elitist concept, I think the European public sphere already exists and brings people from different cultures together under a common umbrella.*

### André, English speaking blogger

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Inside the second group I find two ways of thinking. One goes in the direction that an EPS will never happen. A second way of thinking is that the EPS can happen in the future if the conditions are set up.

There is not unity when speaking about the EPS. We can say as well that each interviewee has a different overview on the EPS. It is true that some thoughts are in the same line for some, or all the bloggers. Nevertheless the argumentations given and the order of these arguments show that they have different pictures in mind of what is the European Public Sphere, and what will happen to it. It may indicate that they do not know exactly what processes the EPS needs in order to take off. Some bloggers think that there must be a common institutional policy and image to make the citizens feel that the institutions are for them and not just the face of the national leaders in Brussels. For others the problem is that there is a need to show people how the EU affects them, in order to create interest. Following this point, I quote an interesting proposition made by one of the bloggers:

*People will care about the EU when they know that they are directly affected by it - and a very good way for that to be realized is through direct taxation. Once you get European-level taxation, you will get European-level discussions on how to reform the executive and legislative branches of the EU, how to decisively address the democratic deficit, how to make everything more approachable, understandable, transparent and human. Yes human, since now everyone is acting like an emotionless drone, thanks to the kind of "super-official" status EU institutions have.*

### Protesilaos, English speaking blogger

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One of the most interesting thoughts between bloggers is that three of them believe there is not EPS, or has not been developed –depending which interviewee is giving the arguments- because of the current design of the European Union. For them, this current design, and the lack of a political union is the main cause why EPS did not take off.

Since the institutions are not enough transparent, and the citizens do not feel they can partake and control politics, is very hard to engage them and to create debate. If this does not change, an EPS will hardly develop.

One of the propositions that call the attention was the proposition of the Spanish blogger José María. He argues that the EU must be listened, by “imperative”. His proposition is to launch a series of TV commercials to explain what the EU is doing, in a kind of explanatory session of the activities of the institutions in the EU. I think that this point is very controversial issue, and other bloggers or people might differ, or could see it as a propaganda or brainwashing.

*Now is when the Union must commit itself to be heard and seen on radio and television, even by legal imperative that public television must run the ads the Union considers. Citizens must feel close to their institutions as they have been created by and for them.<sup>iii</sup>*

**José María, Spanish speaking blogger**

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One question of the interview sample was openly asking the relation between the European Public Sphere and democracy. For some scholars the public sphere is central precondition for democracy because it enables widespread public debate (Fossum and Schelesinger 2007, 4). Analysts have consistently stressed that an important component of the EU’s democratic deficit is the absence of viable European Public Sphere.

For the bloggers this question is open to different answers. The most common thought extracted from the answers is that both concepts –democracy and EPS- need each-other. There cannot be democracy without PS, and there cannot be PS without democracy. What is clear is that in all this process the blogs are an element of democratization, and a necessary element, in the online environment, to create debate.

*I think this is absolutely true. No democratic debate, no democracy, it’s that simple.*

**Craig, English speaking blogger**

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For the bloggers, blogs alone are not enough but they can be a key player in the EPS. The Euroblogosphere is a very important democratization tool because it provides voice and debate to people about questions that would otherwise be impossible for these people to express themselves.

### **3. The role of the European Institutions and institutional aspects of media**

There is not a majority of bloggers with one opinion. Some of them think that European institutions must participate in some sense in the debate, providing a framework but never interfering with it. Other bloggers think it is better that European institutions are totally out of any kind of management, organization or creation of framework for debate. These bloggers think the public sphere must come by itself, and if it does not come, it is because we are not ready yet. For the bloggers, the EU needs to change if we want the EPS to take off. I compiled three different ways the EU must follow in order to achieve the EPS that the bloggers explained at the interviews.

- For Jon the problem is that the EU has institutional issues that prevent even active citizens from being able to have any control over what is happening. That is, for this blogger, much more important to fix than the communications aspects. Firstly it is necessary to make the EU a properly democratic system and federal, and the communications will sort themselves out.
- For Pau, the EU has changed in terms of aim and structure. The aim of the founders was to create a federal union. However, now the EU does not look as the original project by size, neither by objectives. The crisis, the lack of leaders and the weight of nationalism -for example in elections with national list- does not permit to build a European Public Space in a short or medium time.
- For Protesilaos the fundamental obstacle to a European public sphere is the perverse and ill-shaped institutional structure of the EU. No language barrier, no cultural diversity, no national medium can be a greater obstacle than this. Consequently if we really want to see a European public sphere out there, we need to be aware that we must ultimately ask for thoroughgoing reform in the way things are done in Europe, being the main obstacle the current EU design.

In that sense, the Internet has the potential to improve public communication. As it was said by the bloggers, institutions should try to communicate and make the citizens feel that institutions are for them. Because in order to get close to democracy, institutions must be sensitive with the reality and problems, to keep in touch with people by referendums, votes, etc, and a close relationship between speaking and being heard.

The bloggers agree that the Internet is the best way to communicate and to create debate. However it is a very elitist channel of communication and the users are still low compared to traditional media (TV, radio, newspaper, etc), although increasing fast as I showed at the theoretical chapter. A problem with the Internet, which at the same time might be an advantage, is that everybody can have a voice. In opinion of Habermas (2012), it can cause some problems of unreliable information. However it is good that citizens can have a cheap channel of communication, as it could be the Euroblogosphere, where to stand up and to organize themselves. Furthermore, the Internet offers tools to contrast the information that the traditional media does not.

In the Euroblogosphere context, Euroscepticism is given by the bloggers as a source of unreliable information. By the point of view of bloggers, the Internet loves extremism, and it is more common to find euro-sceptics comments as it is a cheap way for the people with these ideas to express them. These comments and non right and accurate information that spread very fast, starting false myths of the EU. Furthermore, aside of publishing their own material they go explicitly to comment the Europhiles blogposts criticizing European institutions.

*[... ]The proliferation of Euroscepticism can be virulent in some countries, and can be spread easily on the Net, sowing the seed of populism, so easy to turn in times of severe economic crisis.<sup>iv</sup>*

**Eva Peña, Spanish speaking blogger**

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*If a medium says one thing, the citizen can immediately check it on the internet.<sup>v</sup>*

**Macarena, Spanish speaking blogger**

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The bloggers, in the opinion of the interviewees, can contribute, but as the same as other groups. Bloggers are not the only group on the Internet that can develop debate and interaction. Associations, local media and others are contributors at the same level with eurobloggers. The difficult falls in to put all of them together working in the same line.

Some interviewees explain that the bloggers are speakers that sadly are not used by European institutions to promote pan-European debate. Another interviewee, following this argumentation, indicates that policy-makers fail listening to the Internet. In this case the Internet is viewed by the bloggers as a forum where all opinions are expressed and where Institutions and organizations can learn or can take notes of what is being said. Additionally the interviewee expresses that bloggers can provide feedback of what is being spoken, in a kind of channel between citizenship on the street and European Institutions.

Finally, concerning other channels of communications as TV, radio, newspapers, the bloggers agree that they are still very important due to their audience. The problem with this media is that, as more than one interviewee said, they are the gatekeepers of information, and consequently this media controls the flow of information. Furthermore, the information provided is always nationalized information. It connotes that instead of information with a neutral point of view, the information is put in perspective depending of the country.

## 6. Discussion

### Understanding Euroblogosphere is understanding European Public Sphere.

The Euroblogosphere can be seen as the current embodiment of the Public Sphere in Europe, but on a rather small scale. It means that the Euroblogosphere fulfils the characteristics of the European Public Sphere, and by examining the Euroblogosphere one can in a sense grasp the contemporary reality of the actually existing EPS, its advantages and its problems.

The Euroblogosphere fulfils the basic requirements of a public sphere because it is a forum of communication that can be joined and observed, in principle, by every citizen (Koopmans and Zimmermann 2010). According to Oddvar Eriksen (2007), a Public Sphere is “the social room that is created when individuals deliberate on common concerns. It depicts a relationship between the speakers and the audience that is created by social actors experiencing the by-products of cooperation, which in turn prompts the inclusion of affected parties.”

They meet virtually -or some of them even face to face-, they deliberate concerning topics of interest, and they interact with each-other, networking and exchanging ideas and thoughts. Anyone can open a blog and start publishing their opinions and reflexions about different European topics, regardless of their economic, social or identity background. There is not limitation or filter to any citizen to spread content. The blogs are not moderated by press media corporations or any other filter and all of them share the same possible audience. We have seen by the answers given by bloggers, that an influence and implication of the bloggers, although still small, it is growing slowly at European level. We can see some bloggers or representatives of [bloggingportal.eu](http://bloggingportal.eu) site present in conferences, seminars or talks<sup>vi</sup>. Also they start to be influential in politics when criticising some aspects and the mass media takes them to an upper level. Though, the blogger as an entity does not have power of political decision or decision-making, and the influence of the entire Euroblogosphere and individual bloggers, it still is very small, although growing.

Fossum and Schlesinger affirm that “a viable public sphere is a central precondition for democracy because it enables widespread public debate” (2007: 1). In that sense the Euroblogosphere is a democratization tool as it has elements of democratic governance. It has the three principles of participation, deliberation and governance (Eder 2007: 24). Any citizen can participate in the Euroblogosphere, and can discuss any topic the blogger considers relevant. Finally the blogger can elaborate or choose what election or idea is better by or for his point of view. However the last principle, governance, is not totally true at the Euroblogosphere level. The blogger can pick up what thought is better under his point of view and to discuss it in the public arena. Though, the blogger as an entity does not have power of political decision or decision-making, and as we have seen the influence of the entire Euroblogosphere and individual bloggers, it still is very small, although growing.

On the other hand, a blogger can influence people or other blogger in the sense that citizens without enough expertise of one issue can relay about one topic on a blogger that has build trust during the time speaking or writing about that specific topic. This is called liquid democracy (GlobalFree 2011). It does not occur nowadays by the impressions given in the interviews as the influence bloggers have is still very small. However institutions should be aware of the potential of bloggers to influence other people, for or against European projects.

I must note that bloggers do not have any specific or unique model of the blogosphere, Furthermore neither do they have a specific model of EPS. It goes in concordance of what is said by scholars. Eriksen (2005: 351) explains that is difficult to realise a common EPS in the foreseeable future, but that there are traces of a segmented EPS in the making on some issues. In my research I described two models of EPS with the purpose of situating the Euroblogosphere in their respective contexts. I situate the Euroblogosphere in the middle of these two models. Euroblogosphere has developed from being focused nationally to start an interaction within other countries, in a pan European debate. It has grown in size and specialization, although nowadays the Euroblogosphere is facing a problem of deepness of discussions. Internet and the social media have changed the behaviour of reading and writing, promoting the speed of information more than the reflexion of the information.

In summary, what the bloggers have in mind, each one of them with different perspective of the Euroblogosphere, correspond to what scholars have found in their researches: we are still at the beginning of the process, and a transnational European Public Sphere still has long way to go, and multiple problems to solve. It is a small community of citizens specialized and interested in European issues, with interactivity in different levels –local, regional, national, international and transnational- and with an increasing importance and presence –although this last point very slowly-. If we believe in one big and exclusive trans-European public sphere without an overlapping of other types or models of EPS, I must say it will not happen, at least not in the short or medium term.

## Growing slowly

The Euroblogosphere has changed from a more familiar general public to a much specialised corner of European topics. In spite of this, comparing the Euroblogosphere with the US blogosphere, the second has much more influence and more specialization. The experiences provided by the bloggers give a good background of the Euroblogosphere and its contribution and position inside the EPS. From the bloggers we extract that there is a real intention to build a Pan-European blogosphere/demos where people can share thoughts and expressions despite of their economic, political or religious background. Only with more engagement from the bloggers and together with other associations and groups, online and offline, it can push enough to build a real Pan-European Public Sphere, and consequently a real democratization of the European debate in all levels.

After having analysed the interviews with the bloggers, I conclude that the Euroblogosphere is a key factor in helping to fight the democratic deficit by integrating more people and more voices, not understanding the blogosphere just the citizens who write in personal basis, but all the community and sites online, among coordination with the “offline world”. Civil society can use these tools in order to reach audience. Blogging has shown to be very important for the interviewees as a way of expression, keeping an eye to the European institutions and any other company of NGO with voice at the European level.

## Internet, the new dominant channel for the future.

Internet nowadays is already in the everyday life of the majority of population, and still, the presence and services offered are increasing very quickly (Hanlon 2012). At some point Television will be a complement of the Internet, via technical convergence. Mainstream TV is already available on the net, and web TV has become a common feature. The Euroblogosphere because of its characteristics is a tool complementing each-other. For example, access to the Euroblogosphere –or Internet- in the TV when watching a political debate on live. Or the other way around: publishing a blogpost while watching with a web TV the political debate.

In that sense scholars argue that the Internet is ready to contribute to the European Public Sphere and it has developed enough tools (Bohman 2004: 135). Bohman goes further and argues that the internet can facilitate a transnational public sphere (Bohman 2004: 139). Latzer and Saurwein (2006: 16) summarize that the current digital European public sphere is constituted of many partial public spheres that represent interest groups or elites, yet a European public sphere for the masses does not exist. Margot Wallström, ex Vice-President of the European Commission responsible for Institutional relations and communication strategy, said: “I believe the Internet is THE new channel for debate and communication. The EU needs to get more into the blogosphere and engage in real debate” (Walström 2012).

In any case, traditional mass media will have an important role in the next coming years. Traditional media is the main source where citizens nourish information. A good –new- policy of communications from the European Institutions is needed in order to foment debate at the national level, and to be able to upload this discussion to European Level. Here is where the challenge is major: to pass from an Europeanization of national debates, to a trans-national European debate, and where the Internet will have an increasing role.

Furthermore the bloggers suggest that European institutions must show more transparency and accountability, to combat this democratic deficit in the institutions and the EU as a political project. Until now there has been some initiatives, the most recent is the EP NewsHub (2012), a website created by the European Parliament communications team, and that shows all the Twitter posts the parliamentarians are publishing on internet. A real time window onto digital diplomacy in action. This might be the right way to create more transparency and get in touch with citizens. First because all parliamentarians are in one site, in a database. And second because the European institutions are not only based in Brussels or Strasbourg, but they are present in each member state, and consequently better coordination within the different institutions present in the member states is needed.

The difference between online and offline Public Sphere is getting blurry day by day. The interviewees showed that this division is not valid anymore and consequently the two worlds might be unified. Citizens connected anywhere, and constantly uploading content in the daily life is something not strange today. The Euroblogosphere is not exclusively an online phenomenon, but also an offline. The presence of bloggers in offline meetings, as well the production of material from offline events has made blur the difference between online and offline. In addition, the repercussion of the offline events have on the Internet, and vice versa –online events having repercussion in the offline world- has made the division not valid anymore.

Taking the definition of Axel Bruns and Joanne Jacobs (2006: 5), a blogosphere is the “overall community of blogs and bloggers, which is interlinked through a large number of cross-references between individual blog entries” However, I think the definition is not quite accurate. We have to take into consideration other tools bloggers are using in order to interlink and interact. They are, for example, Twitter and Facebook. Live blogging also is taking importance, as for example the live blogging of the last EU summit celebrated 29 of June (Rachman 2012). The research has shown that apart from personal blogs, the bloggers are using other tools. It is a symbol of how the Euroblogosphere and the blogosphere in general have developed in recent years: there is a growing movement from the specific platforms of the blogs towards a broader incorporation of social media.

In summary, the Euroblogosphere is not exclusively an online phenomenon, but also an offline. The presence of bloggers in offline meetings, as well the production of material from offline events has made blur the difference between online and offline. In addition, the repercussion of the offline events have on the Internet, and vice versa –online events having repercussion in the offline world- has made the division not valid anymore.

## 7. Conclusions and looking ahead

Research to date has focused on the media, but not on the audience or the authors involved (Sicakkan 2012, 105 and Statham 2010, 299). The main core of the research is the opinion and experiences of bloggers, listening them in their worries and problems they face when publishing articles or interacting with other people. The research about the experience of bloggers in the Euroblogosphere illuminates and complements the literature of both Public Sphere,

and blogosphere, as well it explains the role of the Euroblogosphere inside the online European Public Sphere, and how it helps to the democratization of the debate. Secondly, since blogging is one of the channels of communication for citizens, the research shows that it can be used by institutions, organizations and individuals. I have in mind the fact that 2013 is the European year of citizens (European Commission 2012), or the European elections in 2014, but any other event with virtual communication could also be added, as for example the rotating presidency of the Council of the European Union. A further research seems ideal for these periods.

The bloggers give evidence of an actor-based online European transnational blogosphere by describing the existence of a community of individual citizens that share information and thoughts about European topics. They share the same practices, problems and worries when interacting and consequently there are not significant differences between the two groups analysed here. They form an identity blogging with common characteristics described at the analysis and the discussion. In addition, the bloggers in the two groups share interest and support of the EU, in a sort of European feeling.

Second, the contribution of the Euroblogosphere to the democratization of the EU is clear. The euroblogosphere congregates the characteristics of the democratic governance. Any citizen can participate and be active in the discussions. Nevertheless this contribution against the democratic deficit of the Euroblogosphere is limited to the citizenship participation. Regarding the democratic deficit at the Institutions, the Euroblogosphere does not contribute, yet, too much. The Euroblogosphere is still very small and niche, to contribute to combat it.

It has been very difficult to establish a difference between EPS and the Euroblogosphere. How by understanding Euroblogosphere, one easily can understand the state of the other. Both of them share and interlink characteristics that make very hard to produce a difference. And it is the same for the participants, when answering questions and arguing for both Euroblogosphere and EPS at the same time. What the bloggers have in mind, each one of them with different perspective of the Euroblogosphere, correspond to what scholars have found in their researches: we are still at the beginning of the process, and a trans-national European Public Sphere still has long way to go, and multiple problems to solve. The Euroblogosphere can be seen as a partial public sphere by itself –an Overlapping Nested Sphere- (Sicakkan 2012, 10), or a reduced size of the entire EPS. It is a small community of citizens specialized and interested in European issues, with interactivity in different levels –local, regional, national, international and transnational- and with an increasing importance and presence –although this last point very slowly-. If we believe in one big and exclusive trans-European public sphere I must say it will not happen, at least not in the short or medium term.

The major problems that face the Euroblogosphere are the idiomatic barrier and the lack of deep and productive debates. The interactivity, although limited by the lack of time within bloggers, has increased in the last years, though; the level of debate has decreased exponentially, affected by social media and its limitations. It means that the interaction and the deepness of the debates have entered in stagnation. The second problem is idiomatic. The excessive presence and domination of the English language produce an irregular and broken Euroblogosphere, having different small blogospheres, and being the English one the bridge within them.

Due to these two barriers, the trans-nationality of the Euroblogosphere is very weak –although existing-. I conclude that the Euroblogosphere's phenomenon has slowed down in its grow and influence because these two problems. However, the Euroblogosphere can be important in the construction of an EPS. If the Euroblogosphere, continues to grow in size and influence, will be an important complement to the building of the EPS, but the research has show that will not differ from other channels or groups of communication. In any case, citizens can find in the Euroblogosphere the perfect way to express themselves without restriction or filtering. The website [bloggingportal.eu](http://bloggingportal.eu) is one more platform together with hundreds of blogs, and hundreds of websites, projects and platforms fostering for more integration and European project.

As stated at the revision of the bibliography, further research is needed. The European elections in 2014 might be the best moment to conduct a research how and why EU-oriented bloggers interact across Europe and the significance of this for political participation and influence. Here we have an opportunity for research in how and why this hypothetical influence can be used – not only by individuals, but for private companies, national, international, and transnational institutions. I see here a huge potential for future research that I will attempt to overcome with a PhD in the nearly future. In addition, further research in the Euroblogosphere might explore other languages or nationalities, not only from Europe but bloggers from other countries, and other platforms of online discussions such forums or social media in order to produce a more accurate picture of the situation of the Euroblogosphere. As the research pointed out, this should contain also actors in the offline arena that are linked with the bloggers, such as associations, NGOs, parties, and events on the street.

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<sup>i</sup> A media perspective on political representation: Online claims-making and audience formation in 2009 EP election campaigns', 2012. In: S. Kröger and D. Friedrich (eds), *The challenge of democratic representation in the European Union*, Hampshire and New York: Palgrave MacMillan, pp. 133-152 (with H. J. Trezn).

<sup>ii</sup> Original in Spanish: "Está muy atomizada."

<sup>iii</sup> Original in Spanish: "Ahora es cuando la Unión debe apostar por hacerse escuchar y ver en radios y televisiones, que incluso por imperativo jurídico las televisiones públicas deban emitir los anuncios que estime la Unión. La ciudadanía debe sentir cerca a sus instituciones pues han sido creadas por y para ella."

<sup>iv</sup> Original in Spanish: "La proliferación de un euroescepticismo que puede ser virulento en algunos países, y puede contagiarse fácilmente por la Red, sembrando la semilla del populismo, tan fácil de prender en épocas de grave crisis económica."

<sup>v</sup> Original in Spanish: "Si un medio dice una cosa, el ciudadano puede inmediatamente comprobarlo en internet."

<sup>vi</sup> Bloggingportal.eu has been contacted by the EU representation of Cyprus in Brussels to organize a meeting.

"Cyprus Presidency meeting with bloggers: Call for involvement!," *Bloggingportal.eu*, accessed July 29, <http://www.bloggingportal.eu/blog/cyprus-presidency-meeting-with-bloggers-call-for-involvement/>.

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