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Mediatized transnational conflicts: Online media and the contestation of the legitimacy of the European integration project in times of crisis

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Abstract

This article analyzes the role of online media communications in intensifying inter-cultural conflicts and expressing new social and political cleavages under conditions of political and financial crisis. The politicised and mass-mediated aspects of EU politics have only recently started to receive scholarly attention. In a politicised European Union, the procedures of the EU political system are increasingly exposed to audience and media attention. The article sheds light on the impact of media attention in shaping the public debate regarding the legitimacy of the EU. In the theoretical section, the question of the EU meditiatisation is related to EU public sphere and legitimacy research. From this angle, EU actors and institutions generate demands to rely on media services while at the same time operating under the constraints of enhanced media attention. Can we speak in any meaningful way of the mass media as an amplifier of conflicts about European integration? Or are the mass media the major constraint of the political efforts to further integrate Europe. The notion of an EU mediatized democracy is introduced to understand this interplay between EU institutions and various attentive publics in the contestation of EU legitimacy. Empirically, the chapter builds on a comparative sample on the formation of voice publics in online user forums. Through a sequential analysis of user commenting, it will be analysed how members of the public interpret the European integration project in light of the crisis and how they feed into the normative debate about the nature of the EU polity, identity and values.

The European crisis and the media

The notion of crisis in political thought has always been intrinsically linked to periods of critical rupture and accelerated social change. Crisis signifies contingency, loss of control and arbitrariness, but also change, departure and search for orientation (Holten 1987). A crisis puts social integration at stake, that is, it impairs the 'consensual foundations of normative structures' of society (Habermas 1975: 3). As such, a crisis can be empirically observed in the opposition, dichotomies and resistances it generates. A crisis is accompanied by deep social conflicts and a fundamental challenge of political legitimacy. The drama of legitimacy struggles unfolds through the discursive strategies and practices of the particular actors involved. In our contemporary mediatized societies, the drama of crisis is therefore intrinsically related to the processes of media representation and contestation related to it. To raise the question how crisis is experienced, interpreted and contested by the members of society, we need to understand the media worlds through which crisis knowledge and experiences are shaped, through which responsibilities are attributed and legitimacy is contested. In other words, we need to develop a media perspective on crisis, which understands how media condition the presentation and perception of conflicts. In line with the

overall purpose of this volume, we need to apply mediatization theory to understand the interrelatedness of crisis, conflicts and the media.

By underlying such a conflictive-communicative paradigm of crisis related dynamics of conflict, the economic, financial and monetary crisis, which the European Union and European countries entered in 2008, poses two additional challenges. What is new in the case of Europe is that these conflicts stretch beyond the nation state and affect not only the legitimacy of the state but also of a supranational political body, the European Union. A second related challenge is that the media landscapes, through which these transnational dynamics of crisis contestation unfold, remain fragmented. Instead of a unitary national media sphere, crisis related conflicts are staged and amplified in different arenas and through diverse media channels. By looking at how the media condition the presentation and perception of crisis related conflicts we thus need to turn from a 'one arena model of mediatized political conflicts' to a 'plural arena model of mediatized political conflicts'. We need to take into consideration the performance of political actors who appear on different stages and the attention of the various audiences. Of particular interest in this context is the question how the enhanced conflictiveness of European crisis across various arenas of conflicts in a transnational context can be meaningfully related. As traditional offline mass media are frequently found to serve mainly as 'one arena mediators', i.e. to focus the attention of national audiences on the performance on the stage of national politics, we turn the attention in this paper to the new digital media's performance as a potential carrier of mediatized conflicts in a transnational setting.

The politicization of European integration

To approach the question of what kind of conflicts become salient in the context of European crisis, we mainly rely on previous research on the so-called politicization of Europe (De Wilde and Zürn 2012; Statham and Trenz 2012; Statham and Trenz 2013). Politicization research has turned the attention to the processes through which political parties, movements and citizens increasingly challenge the legitimacy of the EU and how these oppositions are translated into political conflict and cleavages. Legitimacy contestation in times of crisis is likely to become manifested precisely in such instances when struggles for redistribution combine with struggles over belonging (Vobruba 2012). The increased cross-border mobility, for example, that the Eurocrisis has brought about, may mobilize protectionist movements focused on creating loyalty and resilience *against* transnational integration on the receiving end of this intra-EU migration wave, as well as enhance nationalism and populism. This new salience of the EU in the everyday-live of the citizens may further empower social movements, which expectedly arise at times of crisis, as it facilitates cross-border collaboration, again both in physical and virtual terms. From this perspective, the European crisis encourages voice strategies that citizens, at a collective level, deploy in order to defend their rights and to protect their livelihood/families. The flip-side to these dynamics of bottom-up conflicts is that they can cause (or even become tools for) actions or policies that enhance new cleavages and tensions between the people of Europe or lead to new forms of exclusion. Among the economic losers of market integration, Euroscepticism gains ground occupying similar agendas of national (regional) protection and closure or, in some instances, even mobilizing a European alliance of nationalists (De Wilde et al. 2013). The negative consequences of crisis are therefore at the same time a litmus test for the sustainability of the European regime of rights and the fragile relationships of trust and solidarity on which it is based.

From the politicization to the mediatisation of European integration

Our approach in this chapter is meant to link the new politicized dynamics of European

integration in response to crisis to what we call the dynamics of mediatized EU legitimacy contestation. In accordance with the outline of this volume, mediatization defines the contours of public visibility and the media practices of collective actors contesting in the public arena. The EU political system is mediatized in the sense that its legitimating capacities are not uniquely depending on the efficiency of outcomes, nor on the quality of arguments brought forward by political parties in the competition for vote. Legitimacy is mainly shaped through the public mediation of political contents and through the public visibility of the competing arguments and justifications by government or by oppositional parties. There is, in short, no politicization without the mass media.

Mass media play a central part in these legitimacy contestations as an actor in the crisis (e.g. through the potential exacerbation of a critical situation or the creation of financial 'panics'), as an agenda-setter (e.g. through highlighting particular aspects of crisis, actors who are to deal with crisis or responses) and through media framing, as the general interpretator of 'public voice', perceptions and identities (e.g. through 'blaming', the ascription of political responsibilities or 'flaming', the hostile reactions to the 'other') (Raboy and Dagenais 1992). The role of the media is fundamental not only in shaping the perceptions and development of the crisis itself but also in driving political and social (re)actions to the crisis and any measures taken at elite level to counter it.

Mediatised public contestation is in this sense a crucial element for the attribution of responsibilities, the salience of new cleavages (North-South, Nordics vs. the rest of the EU) and the demarcation of new national or transnational spaces of democracy, belonging and solidarity. Cultural, social and political norms are brought under public scrutiny through media debates. Their meanings are contested, dismissed, reconfigured or strengthened (e.g. the norm of solidarity among EU countries; or the repercussions of the Stability Pact for the weaker Eurozone countries). Crisis contestation in the media sphere can further facilitate transcultural encounters and exchange of meanings (e.g. organization of protests across countries, confrontation of diverse cultures, debates across linguistic divides).

There is however no linear relationship between the politicization and the mediatisation of the EU (Meyer 2009). The degrees of media attention and the levels of political contestation of the EU might vary, and, in fact, often diverge (Trenz et al. 2009). This discrepancy between the degree of public contestation and media salience can be explained by the mediating role of journalists who filter messages send out by the political system in a selective way and can be more or less inclined to amplify partisan contestation or to pay attention to popular voice and resistance. In debating the current crisis, we find media attention for crisis generated negative consequences generally enhanced but levels of mobilization very unequally distributed across the range of countries and actors involved. On the one hand, we find a new focalization of media attention on the inter-governmental arrangements of crisis governance. On the other hand, we find a broad range of actors, who publically mobilize, but may find it difficult to access the mass media. Especially when politicization is channeled through new media and social media it needs to confront the dispersed attention of the audiences.

To measure this political actors-journalists-audience interface in the mediatisation of crisis related conflicts within and across plural arenas of political contestation, we turn in the following to the EU online news sphere as an arena of EU legitimation struggles. The mediatization of crisis related conflicts refers to the way in which governments, political parties and EU institutions strategically mobilize electorates through the use of online media technologies and communicative logics. The mediatisation dynamics of the online news arena however also stretches beyond the institutional arena to encompass – as also noted in the introduction to this volume – both a top-down and a bottom-up perspective. In the online news world, these bottom-up dynamics of mediatization can be researched systematically in

the salience of user commenting of political news, bringing thus in the citizens as a participant of conflict. There are thus two layers of conflicts that make up the dynamics of mediatized legitimacy contestation in the EU online sphere: the competition among political parties and governments and the struggle for voice of the users-citizens mobilizing support or opposition and gaining attention for alternative views and interpretations.

An important question related to EU mediatized contestation is further how the content generated at the actors-journalists-audience interface travels across different media platforms. Diffusion takes place either directly through sharing and liking or indirectly through the resonance of content and opinions that is framed in similar terms or defended by similar arguments in different arenas. Of particular interest is here the question whether online news media facilitate transnational diffusion of content thus opening up to processes of opinion formation beyond the national.

In the following section, we take a closer look at online news making and commenting as an arena for staging EU mediatized legitimacy contestation by combing four elements: 1) actors who compete in the EU –e-sphere, 2) EU news frames generated and manner of online debating, 3) online news comment forums, and 4) cross-national diffusion of actors, content and opinion.[1] Online news sites are thus regarded as the place where user-audiences meaningfully interact with political news, express political opinion and voice and use these communications to contest political legitimacy. To account for the transnational character of crisis contestation across different media spheres, we apply a cross-national comparative design.For the purpose of this article, we further build on a qualitative content analysis that confronts German and Greek user generated debates. Focusing on these two countries at the epicentre of the European crisis, we can examine systematically how the current configuration of the political order in Europe is contested through Eurosceptic sentiments, the use of national prejudices and stereotypes and the rise of new animosities between the countries and populations of Europe.

Actors: The EU online news-sphere as a playground of political elites

Online media, particularly social media, appear instrumental in the amplification of citizens' discontent and Eurosceptic frames. Are we witnessing a new era in EU public opinion making, whereby civil society' s and citizens' views have dynamically entered the European public sphere(s) or is the role of online news and social media hyped-up, with the usual public actors still very much in charge of shaping the public debate about the EU?

Professional journalists remain the main providers of political news online and internationally prominent professional journalism sources, such as the *BBC*, the *Daily Mail*, the *Economist* or the German *Der Spiegel*, can be classified as the 'influencers' of crisis related conflicts as portrayed in the media. Professional journalists continue however to be first and foremost national journalists who write for national audiences and apply a national filter on the selection and framing of EU news. Given the journalistic focus on the national perspective of EU events, it is not surprising to find that national politicians feature prominently in EU news coverage, followed closely by politicians of other EU member states. Over half (51 percent) of all the actors mentioned in relation to Eurocrisis news (3381 unique actors recorded in total) are politicians, with another 17 percent being EU institutions. If we add to these the number of times that banks and financial institutions or their representatives appear in Eurocrisis-related articles (we recorded 587 such unique actors), then the picture that emerges of online EU news coverage is one of the elites, with very little space left for alternative voices to be heard.

Top-down mediatisation: EU news frames provided by professional journalists

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[1] The following empirical section builds on Michailidou et al. 2014 where also full documentation of the methodologies and findings is provided.

In a mediatized arena, political conflict is staged not simply as an argumentative exchange or conflict of interest but as a symbolic struggle about the attention of the audience. In relation to the EU, news media coverage is often found to be heavily skewed, with emphasis on the national perspective and with a negative or Eurosceptic bias towards the EU (Diez Medrano and Gray 2010). Frames, in particular, are crucial in shaping attitudes towards the EU among audiences and readerships. The extent to which the media may feed into Eurosceptic attitudes depends, above all, on 'the pervasiveness of strategically framed news reporting' (de Vreese, 2007). In accordance with the mediatisation thesis, we would expect that EU news coverage of crisis related conflicts is dominantly framed in terms of 'winners and losers', using 'war and games' language when talking about the relationship between European countries and governments. Looking at some of the most sensationalist news coverage in across EU countries, one could readily conclude that EU politicization in the context of the Eurocrisis is rapidly degenerating into a 'moral panic' blame game, whereby certain national and EU political leaders and institutions are invoking the public's wrath on the basis not of their decisions before or during the crisis, but of stereotypical views about their nationality being inherently 'evil'.

By comparing themes, crisis framing and frames in the main text of articles provided by the most salient professional journalism online newssites we found this 'moral panic' hypothesis however only partly confirmed. While sensationalist newspaper such as the German Bildzeitung, the British Daily Mail or the Greek xx were heavily exploiting the Eurosceptic and national conflict news frames to build their news stories about the crisis and to ascribe political responsibilities, we also found a strong countervailing discourse supported by professional journalists in defence of technocratic crisis governance. Against the *sensationalised news framing* that was meant to enhance conflict and politicisation of the EU, stands the *technocratic news framing* that was meant to hide the inherent conflictiveness of crisis related policies and to depoliticise the EU crisis governance. There was thus a strategic attempt by political elites, especially governments and EU institutions to escape the dynamics of mediatised conflicts. This technocratic news framing became dominant on professional journalism newssites, where technocratic and political elite actors (i.e. political actors in decision-making positions) dominated media coverage of the Eurocrisis. This combined with the seemingly 'neutral' crisis framing that news reporters adopt – namely, most frequently simply presenting the actions of various decision-makers as facts rather than providing commentary or analysis of those – leaves the technocratic hegemony discourse on online newssites virtually unchallenged. 40% of the articles we analysed (462 articles) presented the crisis and/or the specific crisis event in a neutral manner, i.e. without providing an evaluation of the reported actions or attributing responsibility to any actors. Furthermore, only 374 of the analysed articles contained some type of analysis or commentary and when they did, the 'go-to' category of actors for providing analysis has largely been that of economic technocrats. Top-down mediatisation of crisis related conflicts was thus contained by political elites and mainstream political parties. Euroscepticism and elements of a moral panic that invoked the public unrest were certainly present but did not become mainstream on the most salient online newssites that represented the national media spheres in our analysis.

Bottom-up mediatisation: the staging of user's voice
In a situation where top-down mediatisation of crisis related conflicts is contained by professional journalists in allegiance with elite's attempts of depoliticisation, online news media provide specific features for the bottom-up mediatisation through the articulation of users' voice and commenting. Readers' opinions in both Greece and Germany express a popular, anti-elite voice that is directed against mainstream domestic political parties, government and the EU. The overall tone is mistrust: the government but also mainstream

political parties in general, banks and EU actors are suspected of lying to the people and of downplaying the real consequences of the Eurocrisis. Crucially, we find a trend for convergence that encompasses not only the themes that are considered of relevance but also readers' opinions to the extent that they apply similar interpretative frames to the Eurocrisis. It is clear that the issues at the heart of online Eurocrisis news coverage and debates stretch beyond the particularities of the national debates and have an international appeal. The main driver for online debate is the 'us versus them' divide, which finds expression in several different combinations: citizens against national, foreign or EU political elites; Greece against Germany; people against the banks or global markets; right versus left. In the following, we focus on the Greek and German arenas of user-generated mediatised conflicts, in order to tell the story of Eurocrisis public opinion formation.

Citizens versus journalists

Opinions in the reader forums are visibly detached from those expressed by the journalists or politicians in the main article, with members of the public frequently contesting the interpretations that are given by the journalists. Instead of going along with the journalistic cues of the main article, readers-commentators often collectively participate in the reframing of the article, staging a rebellion against journalistic elites and raising the issue of democracy and popular sovereignty. Several voices would go as far as accusing journalists of imposing conformity. Journalists are 'bombers' attacking 'the Greek freedom heroes.' Others accuse the press of allying with the ruling elite class and of risking becoming meaningless if they turn against the value of democracy:

'it is always again interesting for me to observe how certain persons react on the announcement of the use of democratic means. It is only right that the people are consulted on so far reaching changes. Why should Europe be appalled, if the Greek want to decide about their own destiny?' (Reader *yves1981*, DEC3)

'Isn't it great that the people are finally consulted? This shows however as well how little understanding of democracy there is in the economic and political sector?' (Reader *snoozer*, DEC3)

Readers also take it upon themselves to assess whether journalists adhere to the standards of their profession and are quick to point out any 'slip-ups'. 'A thousand "bravo" for protothema, instead of providing a link for the CNN article, it has a photo of it!!!!!' quips one reader (ELS1). Greek readers are also very likely to point out the close connections that journalists have with the national political establishment – a common theme encountered in Greek threads and not exclusive to those covering Eurocrisis or EU-related topics - in order to stress their unreliability as news sources. Journalists are 'sellouts', 'politicians' parakeets' or 'thugs'. Another frequently encountered 'citizens versus journalists' line of argument encountered in the Greek threads is that of foreign news media as 'agents' of foreign governments or 'interests' more abstractly. Readers adopting such a perspective invariably include 'the Americans', 'the markets', 'the British', or 'crook investors' in their list of external 'powers' to which journalists pay lip service. Nothing, however, seems to invoke more passionate reactions than the workings of the national political system, as we discuss in the following paragraphs.

Citizens versus national political elites

In the Greek threads, the national political system is identified as the main source of the crisis and is rejected as shamelessly corrupt and self-serving. As only two parties (Socialist PASOK and conservative New Democracy) have ever been in power since the fall of the junta in the mid-1970s (the very brief period in the early 1990s when Greece had coalition and 'national unity' government being the only exception, pre-crisis), the age-old 'PASOK versus ND' cleavage is hard to escape. This means that the majority of readers evoking the 'citizens

versus political elites' frame, reject the Greek political system because they equate it with whichever of the two parties they oppose. The ills of the Greek political system are thus acknowledged but arguments are so tied up to specific political parties or even individual political actors, that all debates inevitably degenerate to emotive, 'enraged fan' behaviour (personal attacks, outright dismissal of different points of view, slogan-style comments, denial of facts). Since these national politics polarizing frames are present also in offline public discourse, as well as public opinion surveys, we can safely assume that to a large extent they constitute the backbone of EU crisis discourse in Greece (Michailidou 2014).

On the German news sites, readers express their indignation against domestic elites by reference to broader ideological (left-right) cleavages. The general disenchantment with politics (*Politikverdrossenheit*) is given expression in manifold ways, but at the same time, commentators display their political engagement and are creative in discussing alternatives to representative politics. The debate thus turns to the possibility or the necessity, as some would see it, to widen the political spectrum and to increase the plurality of political parties. Typically, it is argued that the two mainstream parties CDU and SPD offer no real alternatives and that the interplay between government and opposition has become dysfunctional. At the same time, possibilities for the empowerment of citizens are discussed, either through protest vote and alternative political parties like the Pirate Party, the *Alternative für Deutschland* or *Die Linke*. Adherents of alternative political parties sometimes use the commenting forum for strategic campaigning, e.g. by posting links to the political parties websites. This choice of protest vote is again contested by others who put the competence and democratic legitimacy of the alternative parties into question.

In spite of the prominence of national party politics in online Eurocrisis debates, a broader 'citizens versus political elites' conflict is also present. Particularly the announcement of the Greek referendum, which is the event that nearly all most popular articles in our sample cover, gave rise to a broader debate about democracy in Greece. Readers' opinions are split between those who see the referendum as a great opportunity for the voice of the people to be heard, and those who see in the Prime Minister's move nothing but treachery and potential disaster for the Greek or the German people. The pros and cons of such proposals for referenda are discussed by bringing in arguments from national history, discussing constitutional barriers, procedural considerations relating to the Greek constitution or German federalism or the lack of competence of the average voter (against referenda), but also by pointing out the incompetence and non-representative status of the German/Greek MPs who serve particular interests or lack themselves the factual understanding to vote for the bailout package.

Outrage against Brussels

The Eurosceptic or EU hostile voice is strongly expressed in online forums in both Germany and Greece. While national democracy and the possibility to hold a referendum in Germany are discussed in a much more plural and balanced way (see above), the role of the EU appears to attract mostly negative, emotive comments. Among German readers, knowledge about Brussels is rather low as reflected in the regular wrong attribution of EU competences or responsibilities. Factual misinformation often goes uncontested. In an extreme case, a reader even claimed that the Lisbon Treaty allows Germany to establish the death penalty and that an EU military has been authorized to shoot rioters in Germany (Reader *Hans Peller*, DES3). The Euroscepticism of readers' comments is partly reflected in the journalistic content and framing of the main article on which users opt to respond. Eurosceptic journalistic inputs trigger off more intense online debates and the main critical tone of the article is amplified. The debate thus becomes progressively homogenous in the sense that a pro-European voice is almost non-existent in user commenting.

These expressions of outrage against the EU are not reflected in mainstream German political discourse. On the right side, they echo the slogans of right-wing extremist parties at the

margin of the political spectrum, whereas the arguments of more moderate EU sceptical commentators are closer to the slogans of the new political party *Alternative für Deutschland*. On the left side, arguments in defence of national welfare are typically brought forward by *Die Linke*. There is however an inbuilt ambivalence in Eurosceptic argumentation, to the extent that readers rarely identify with political party positions. Online commenting of EU politics does not lead to a polarisation of right versus left extremist positions but rather to an affirmation of general values like democracy or economic prosperity that most voters can identify with. The online community of *bild.de* or *spiegel.de* readers is thus united in its outrage against Brussels, which is given expression in emotionally charged phrases such as 'Brussels dictatorship', 'EUSSR-Apparatschniks', but which is not necessarily associated with specific party positions.

From a Greek reader perspective, the image that jumps out of the comments' analysis is of a nation in turmoil that is struggling to find a way out of a precarious situation in a united manner. Debates are introvert in that 'others' (EU partners, EU peoples, EU institutions or countries beyond the EU) are sparsely mentioned and then largely to appoint blame (it is the EU/ Troika/ Germany/ global markets' fault). There is hardly any mention in the top six threads examined here of other EU countries in crisis (Ireland, Spain, Portugal, Italy) but when these countries do appear in the conversation, it is usually either to remind us that Greece is in a worse position (i.e. the others countries got a better 'deal' because they 'played the game more smartly') or to warn us and the people of other EU countries that we are all on the same boat and will soon be sharing the same 'austerity fate'. Crucially, from a public legitimation perspective, the Eurocrisis has strengthened the view that the EU system is built on inequality of power and now also of access to resources.

Greece versus Germany: on solidarity, justice and redistribution

Questions of justice, solidarity and power drive the online debate on the role of Greece and Germany in the Eurocrisis and European integration more broadly. As with all the other variants of the 'us versus them' frame, the debate is emotionally charged, frequently of low informative value and highly polarizing.

In this context, it is not uncommon, in the Greek threads, to encounter comments that make explicit or implicit references to two of the darkest periods in Greece's recent history, the World War II Nazi occupation of 1941-1944 and the civil war of 1946-1949. The role of Germany in the Greek crisis has re-awoken bitter memories of military occupation, torture, humiliation and heroic resistance and has brought to the fore the unresolved issue of war reparations. There is at least one mention of Germany, the German government or chancellor Merkel in such context in all articles of the Greek dataset, including the top commented and shared ones. Reader 'Antonis' neatly encapsulates the mood of both the online and offline spheres towards Germany with his declaration that it is 'BETTER [to have] DRACHMA THAN GERMAN OCCUPATION' (ELC3, Table I.2, Annex I). Articles or readers supporting the Memorandum agreements and austerity measures or comments that convey any support for the 'hard-working Germans' are instantly labelled 'traitors', 'collaborators of the German occupation forces' or 'traffickers' (in direct reference to those who profiteered during the Nazi occupation at the expense of the Greek people).

Similarly, references to specific gruesome events of the civil war period are used to threaten or warn other readers that such a fate awaits Greeks in general or the collaborators of the new 'occupying forces' (The EU, the IMF and Germany or Germany and France). The brutalities of the civil war are also used by those who support the austerity measures and the role of Germany and of the EU in the Greek crisis, to warn anti-austerity protesters in general or specific commentators with anti-austerity/anti-German/anti-EU views, of the gruesome end 'communists' will again face if they try to impose 'red fascism' on the Greek people once more.

In Germany, the bailout package is generally interpreted in terms of a direct transfer of money from Germany to Greece or as a way to write off Greek debts but not as a complex programme for the consolidation of Greek debts, which de facto it was. Nevertheless, the voice of many users-citizens who are not principally opposed to solidarity with Greece is present in online commenting. This is remarkable especially in the case of *Bild.de* where a minority of readers resists the sharp us-them distinction that underlies the tabloid style news coverage and turn to more nuanced positions on the question of justice, solidarity and redistribution in the European space than this is defended by the journalists in the main article. These defenders of solidarity with Greece remain a minority but, on the other hand, also the xenophobic opponents of solidarity do not monopolize the online debates.

Against banks, capitalism and the monetary system

The commenting section is partly also used as the place for a critique of capitalism dismantling the European Stability Mechanism imposed by the troika for its lack of a social dimension and democratic accountability. In Germany, this ideological conflict is promoted by a minority of users who adhere with anti-capitalist left parties or the anti-globalisation movement. In discussing the bailout package, these commentators raise the point that it is not Greece that is rescued but the German banks (e.g. reader *Andreas Pilgium*, DES3). Typically, these commentators will also reject the nationalist framing of conflict. It is mentioned several times that the people in Greece will not profit directly from the bailouts, which are only meant to flow back to the creditor countries. Greek citizens are thus seen as innocent victims and their street protests and even violent riots are met with sympathy.

This latter strand of the 'citizens versus banks' frame has a strong presence in the Greek online debates, reflecting the general public perception that Greeks are isolated doubly: by their national political leaders who are only interested in saving themselves or the business/bank interests they serve, but also by the EU institutions and the political leadership of other EU member states, who are also putting 'money above principles and people'. While attacks to specific financial institutions are not very frequent in the commenting area, generic references to the 'global financial powers' that dictate policy in Greece abound. The term 'Troika', which encompasses the ECB, the Commission and the IMF, has come to signify everything that is wrong with the system – corrupt national politicians, corrupt and cynical EU elites and ruthless global financial interests – so much so that it is frequently used as a pejorative, without further elaboration.

Fragmented mediatisation or cross-national diffusion?

The capacity of the media to focus public attention needs to be considered as a central condition for mediatisation to take effect. To speak of 'fragmented mediatisation' might therefore appear as an oxymoron, Nevertheless, cyber-pessimists have often argued for the fragmented nature of the online news spheres that breaks down the unitary public sphere into ever-smaller sphericules (Gitlin 1998). Our data clearly contradict the fragmentation thesis of the cyber-pessimists. Rather than fragmenting national news spaces, online newssites keep them unified and reaffirm the borders of the national community. The flip side of this is that online mediatized conflicts are also less plural and open to diverse arguments. The absence of fragmentation correlates with a new wave of online concentration both in terms of media ownership and audience attention. With regard to the content of political news and debates that is diffused through top-down mediatisation, our quantitative data provides sufficient evidence to sustain the argument that online news is largely identical to the offline newspaper or television news content, in terms of news frames, newsworthiness criteria and reporting style of EU events. What sets the online mediatized sphere apart is the possibility that is opened up for bottom-up mediatisation through the articulation of users' voice that is different and often expressed in sharp contrast to the elite's voice. Here again, online news sites have a

potential to focus public attention and channel public opinion formation. In practical terms, this means that a community of news readers and news consumers is still gathered around the same topics of relevance and exposed to a form of public opinion and will formation that feeds democracy. There is however one serious limitation in the sense that this community of news consumption is still mainly a national community that is firmly grounded in the national public sphere. The concomitant question is whether the unification and concentration trends of online national news-making sustains the parallel fragmentation of the European media sphere.

With regard to the possibilities of transnational diffusion and opinion-formation, our findings are mixed. While these online arenas of mediatized conflict still remain fragmented by nationality, they are also unified through the reference to the same events/news items and the parallel use of the same frames and interpretations. These processes of transnational diffusion are best grasped by the agenda of Europeanisation research through which topics and media frames travel across space (Trenz 2008). What also unites the Greek and German online reader communities that we have examined here is their self-understanding as constituting a popular voice that mobilises against their corrupt representatives. Several of the most commented upon stories portray the European, German and Greek elites as cheating the people by presenting yet another financial bill for the citizens to pay in the form of the bailout or budget cuts. The immediate commenting invited by such stories are expressions of outrage against government, established political parties and the EU. While debates are frequently launched through such an 'outcry of anger' of the popular voice, they then tend to become slightly more plural as the commenting proceeds. Discussion tends to drift from the immediate event that generated the thread such as the Greek referendum or the bailout decision to more fundamental political or societal concerns, such as the state of democracy and questions of trust and solidarity within the EU.

Conclusion

Online news sites play a key role for the dynamics of mediatised transnational conflicts through which the legitimacy of the European Union as a political project is contested. Our data on contesting actors, EU news frames, manners of online debating and transnational diffusion point however to a contradictory development: there is uniformity in online media framing and evaluation of EU legitimacy, which however contributes to the deepening of existing conflicts between member states rather than the achievement of common understanding. The framing of EU politics is virtually confounded to the national, as is the scope of actors most visible in news reporting about the EU, even when a news item concerns events taking place in another EU country (e.g. reporting on the Greek 'bail-out' in Dutch or French media). More broadly, we find four 'unifying' traits of the online news space of mediatized conflicts. Firstly, online news arenas of mediatized conflict mirror the offline arenas in terms of media ownership and quality of news products. Secondly, online news arenas reproduce rather than challenge the dominant frames of offline media. Thirdly, the quality of readers' public exchanges varies but is not necessarily dependent on the journalistic frames and style of reporting. Fourthly, disaffection with EU institutions is palpable in online debates of mainstream online news media; Euroscepticism is no longer confined to the fringes of the online public sphere, or to specific public actors. In particular, the raising of the popular voice in online is revealing with regard to citizens' attitudes towards European integration and the extent to which they align along national cleavages and oppose the EU.

To test the assumption that mediatized political conflicts account for public opinion formation and legitimacy contestation, we have analysed the dynamics of online participation and opinion-making. Regarding participation, we observe that the online newspaper is no longer monopolized by professional journalists. Through online commenting we see many different

citizens take the floor and crowd out elite and professional journalist voices. In this sense, we find that the cyberoptimists are vindicated who claim that newspaper websites have a potential to develops into a meeting place for the community of newsreaders (Papacharissi 2009). It invites user activism mainly through verbal action and reflection but also through other formats such as liking, sharing or polling.

What can we say about the contours of this activated reader community? In terms of reaching beyond the local and the national our findings are mixed. In all online forums, we find fellow citizens who appropriate international topics from an insider perspective (i.e. as topics that concern 'us'). Users are thus primarily motivated to express concerns about the state of democracy in their countries and to a lesser extent in Europe. We further find online news readers to develop a self-understanding of representing the 'public voice'. They often claim to be representative for the passive readers or of the public at large. These representative claims are building on plural arguments and both the borders of the community that is represented and the primary values through which it finds expression are contested.

Membership, rights and rules of political participation are discussed in a controversial way and beyond a European horizon. Even though the international dimension is weak and fades as discussions proceed, there remains the underlying concept of 'The People' (das Volk, o laos), which are duped by the EU and national elites. The consequences of the crisis for specific other EU peoples receive clearly less attention, but the possibility is opened to consider them as part of 'The People'. Equating the 'people' with the community of national citizens is no longer as clear cut: the e-reader communities can thus reach beyond their nationally-defined online spheres. Online debates are not simply a random sequence of isolated voice, they are staged as 'voice' that claims common relevance and that reflects about the public good and the state of democracy.

From this latter perspective, the stage of online mediatized conflicts becomes important not in the reporting of facts or as an indicator of an article's popularity but as an element of public opinion making. When it comes to public opinion formation, our findings are again mixed. On the positive side, most commentators refrain from the most violent forms of hate speech. This may be the effect of controls by the editors of the platforms who remove contributions that blatantly violate nettiquette or it may be the pre-emptive expectation that such contributions would be removed that motivates people to self-censor their comments. Yet, flaming in the sense of overuse of capital letters and exclamation marks and insults hurled at politicians, Greeks/Germans, banks, elites, the EU and other citizens are very frequent as elements of online mediatized conflicts. In terms of argumentation, we find a strong dominance of the anti-elite outrage and the populist us-them distinctions that are applied against the EU and national representatives.

Finally, this article has raised the question whether online mediatized conflicts give greater salience to populism and turn against deliberative or representative democracy. Our analysis shows that the populist and the deliberative mode are not mutually exclusive in online commenting. Despite the dominance of populism in expressing outrage against political elites and the system of representative-parliamentarian democracy, we also find many instances of plural and informed argumentation. The Greek referendum debate, on which most of the user comments analysed focus, is a prime example: It can be classified plural in the sense that a large range of both pro- and counter- arguments are brought forward and heard. It can be called informed in the sense that facts are brought in and arguments are developed. The debate about the pros and cons of direct democracy has a high argumentative value, bringing in historical parallels, arguments from economic theory, discussing detailed legal aspects, questions of morality and fairness. There are also instances of commentators assessing the European context from a comparative perspective and reflecting on collective European experiences (Greece in relation to Italy and Spain or the Greek referendum initiative as an

example to follow in Northern Europe). Overall, it needs to be conceded therefore that reader forums also offer the opportunity to break away from populist framing and open the floor for more plural argumentation. Especially the question about the authenticity of citizens' voice and the desirability to increase the influence of ordinary citizens in EU crisis governance through referenda is discussed in an informed way. Readers thus reflect on their own status and whether they should be empowered through more direct forms of democratic decision-making.

What our findings firmly confirm is that 'bottom-up mediatisation' through readers' comments adds an important dimension to the dynamics of mediatized conflicts. User commenting establishes as an independent genre, partly detached from the journalistic text source but at the same time attached to political news-making in a way to reach the passive readers or the traditional audience. The new genre of news-commenting becomes one of the playgrounds for mass self-communication (Castells 2009), which is more emotional and more passionate than the original content provided by the journalist, but not necessarily more biased as users often display the pleasure of dispute, draw attention through provocation and challenge the dominant frames and interpretations. The new genre of news commenting becomes an important reference point for mediatisation research. News readers can – and do – check, some more systematically than others, the opinions of other readers with regard to the coverage of political events. Postings about controversial issues on mainstream news sites become a stage that galvanizes readers' interest in a particular topic. Besides the high entertainment value that reading other people's comments has, it also requires more active and interpretative tasks: the audience (those readers who do not contribute their own comments) evaluates arguments in a similar way as the online contestants do. They decide about the winners and losers in the debates and thus actively filter and select opinions. In normative terms, readers-commentators constitute a 'vocal' public, which engages in opinion-making, making its voice a part of the interpretation of news and the formation of news audiences. In this sense, it becomes an important element of what we describe as mediatized democracy, because it adds a layer to the legitimacy claims under which political actors and institutions operate, whether they directly respond to it or not. As such future research should analyse it less in terms of its contribution to participatory or deliberative democracy but rather from the perspective of what we have labelled audience or media democracy (Michailidou and Trenz 2013).

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