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# Media and Euroscepticism: Exploring Uncharted Territory

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## Introduction

Common understanding has it that media play an important role in democratic societies. They provide valuable information about a range of issues, from arts to sports. Media play a particularly important role when it comes to politics, acting as intermediates between political actors and citizens, platforms for debate, and sources for political information. As W. Lance Bennett and Robert M. Entman (2001, p.1) put it, “many polities have reached a point where governance, along with a host of related processes such as opinion formation, could not occur in their present form without various uses of media.”

Throughout history media have gone through many transitions (Blumler and Kavanagh 1999). In addition to the rise of new media – from print, via radio and television, to the Internet and social media – the attention of media has also changed, with some scholars claiming that infotainment has become more important than information provision. For instance, Hénaff and Strong (2001: 27) argue that in contemporary society democracy “loses its rationality. Images replace arguments. Debates are turned into games. The show never stops.” Whether this truly is a problematic development, is a matter of debate (see, for instance, Street 2011). Yet, it has, for instance, been argued that the structural position of media as watchdogs (Krämer 2014: 49), as well as developments such as the aforementioned have played a role in the rise of populism (Mudde 2004: 553-554; Ruzza 2009: 92).

Such developments concern coverage of national politics, but also of European Union (EU) politics. There is a growing body of research into various aspects of media coverage – or the lack thereof – of European affairs (for example AIM Research Consortium 2007; Bee and Bozzini 2010; Koopmans and Statham 2010; Risse 2010). One argument that has been put forward in this context is that the misrepresentation of European affairs in national media is an important source of Euroscepticism (Leconte 2010).

Euroscepticism itself was long regarded as a predominantly fringe phenomenon, yet the current Eurozone crisis has led Vasilopoulou (2013, p. 162) to conclude that “widespread opposition to, doubts or reservations about the EU project have become a structural factor of the latter.” It has become a mainstream phenomenon (Brack and Startin 2015) that has attracted increased scholarly attention. Commonly understood as opposition towards the EU and European integration, research has particularly focussed on party politics and public

opinion (for example Clements, Nanou and Verney 2014; Hakhverdian, van Elsas, van der Brug and Kuhn 2013; Sørensen 2008; Szczerbiak and Taggart 2008).

Surprisingly, despite these two growing bodies of literature – on media coverage of EU affairs and on Euroscepticism – there has actually been little dedicated research that combines both perspectives. Yet, as has been argued by several authors (for example Usherwood and Startin 2013; Vasilopoulou 2013), there is a need to expand the scope of Euroscepticism research to other areas, including media. This is what this paper sets out to do. It will discuss conceptual and empirical issues related to the study of media and Euroscepticism in the broader context of democracy. The paper will also look into possible research avenues. As such, this paper will emphasise one of the main tenets of public sphere research: that media play an important role in linking politics and public opinion by acting as platforms for debate and the exchange of opinions.

## **EU democracy**

Although European integration has always attracted some degree of criticism (for example Brack and Startin 2015: 241; Crespy and Verschueren 2009), many have argued that the Treaty on European Union (better known as the Maastricht Treaty) of 1991 was a key turning point in terms of public support (for example Wallace and Smith 1995). ‘Maastricht’ constituted a leap forwards in integration, with the establishment of a Common Foreign and Security Policy, important steps towards the creation of a common currency, the establishment of European Citizenship, and so on. In other words, the EU ventured into politics, which also resulted in increased emphasis on the so-called ‘democratic deficit’.

The term ‘democratic deficit’ has become one of the buzzwords in debates about the EU. Definitions vary, but the problem mainly revolves around the fact that the EU makes *policies without politics*, whereas the Member States have *politics without policy* (Schmidt 2006). As a result, Europeans have limited opportunities to influence EU affairs and to hold European policymakers accountable. This, so the argument goes, decreases the legitimacy of the Union and its policies (for example Follesdal and Hix 2005: 4–6; Kohler-Koch and Rittberger 2007).

Some scholars have brought forward arguments against the existence of a democratic deficit. For instance, Majone (1998) argues that the EU does not really have

redistributive policies and, hence, does not need full democratic governance. Moravcsik (2002) claims that the involvement of both directly and indirectly elected representatives at all levels of the system of European governance already creates sufficient checks and balances. Scholars like Arthur Benz (2006) disagree and argue that because of the involvement of so many different, often anonymous, actors and the complexity of the European system of governance, accountability and legitimacy are inherently flawed. In this context, Myrto Tsakatika (2008) argues that the EU suffers from a responsibility deficit, because of the difficulties identifying responsible policymakers and holding them accountable.<sup>1</sup>

These considerations have also led to a debate about the desirability of the politicisation of EU affairs. Bartolini (2006: 47) argues that rather than creating more support for the principle of integration, politicisation might lead to more uncertainty and divisions and, as such, it could be “a medicine worse than the disease.” However, Hix (2006: 26) has argued that the risk of politicisation is low due to the EU’s many checks and balances, but “the costs of not allowing more politics in the EU is potentially high, as citizens will increasingly turn against what they see as a form of bureaucratic ‘despotism’.” For their part, Papadopoulos and Magnette (2010) have taken an in-between position by arguing that a left-right politicisation does not fit with the ‘consociational nature’ of the EU. At the same time, these consociational features take away many of the worries raised by Bartolini. Politicisation of the consociational EU, in combination with some elements of direct democracy, would go some way in tackling the democratic deficit. It may mean that further integration is no longer likely, but this has been under pressure anyways.

The recent economic and Eurozone crises have brought the issue of EU democracy to the fore in an unprecedented way, especially due to the tough political decisions that had to be made concerning redistributive matters. Scicluna (2014) argues that this has also resulted in new challenges, in particular the fact that politicisation has taken place without further democratisation. The salience of EU affairs has increased, but decisions have increasingly been taken by technocrats and executives, outside of the standard legal framework and often without the European Parliament (EP) and the European Court of Justice (ECJ) being involved. It is also within this context that opposition to the EU seems to have increased,

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<sup>1</sup> For a concise overview of arguments pro and con the democratic deficit, see: Kohler-Koch and Rittberger 2007.

underlined by the increased number of votes for parties that are dubbed 'Eurosceptic' during the 2014 European elections.

### **Euroscepticism: a problematic concept**

Even in Germany, long seen as one of the most pro-European Member States, the EU has been scrutinised more critically, with the rise of the critical new party *Alternative für Deutschland* (Alternative for Germany; AfD) as the most visible development (for example Arzheimer 2015; Grimm 2015). The party has campaigned for an alternative approach to engagement with the EU, in particular in light of the Eurozone crisis, and has received quite a lot of media attention (Grimm 2015: 270). Meanwhile, Startin (2015) argues that a "tipping point" has been reached in the UK, where rational arguments have become much less prominent in the UK debate than emotional ones based on sovereignty and identity. Even traditionally more pro-European politicians such as Liberal Democrats have become less vocally in favour of EU membership.

Yet the advance of Euroscepticism is far from uniform across the EU (for example Lubbers and Scheepers 2010). This even applies to countries that share many similarities. For instance, Belgium and the Netherlands are similar on many accounts and Flanders and the Netherlands, in particular, share a largely common language and history. Even so, criticism towards European integration seems to be less prominent in Belgium than in the Netherlands (Abts, Heerwegh and Swyngedouw 2008: 357).

While criticism on the EU may be on the rise, scholars have argued that this usually concerns qualified opposition to certain policies, institutional arrangements, etc., rather than opposition against the EU as such (for example Arzheimer 2015; Clements et al 2014; Katsourides 2014). Looking into party manifestos of radical right and radical left parties, Rodríguez-Aguilera de Prat (2013) concludes that only few of these parties really advocate an end to European integration. Instead, most want less integration or, on the left side of the political spectrum, more integration, but along different lines (decrease the rule of capital, increase the rule of the people). As such, the term Euroscepticism lacks nuance and does not even have to be an outright negative thing (see Krouwel and Abts 2007).

All of this emphasises that 'Euroscepticism' and 'Eurosceptic' may be widely used terms, both in and outside academia, yet it is regularly left unexplained what they actually

entail. Leconte (2010: 5) calls Euroscepticism a 'plastic notion', meanings of which vary across countries and across time. The term originated in the British press during the 1980s. It was used to describe Margaret Thatcher's strained position towards European integration. Since then it has increasingly become what Rodríguez-Aguilera de Prat (2013) refers to as a 'catch-all' concept, especially in the context of media reporting, though some scholarly work and other publications also have not helped clarifying what Euroscepticism is and is not (see, for instance, Byfält and Johansson n.d.).<sup>2</sup> Similarly, Usherwood (2013: 280) argues that "[i]t is tempting to think of those opposed to the European integration process as an uninformed and undifferentiated group of people, a thought best summed up in the pejorative connotations in the overly reductive term 'eurosceptic'."

Scholarly work on Euroscepticism has tried to achieve a better understanding of Euroscepticism, although here too different approaches exist. For instance, Mudde (2012) explains, the two main research 'schools' on Euroscepticism, North Carolina vs. Sussex, use different definitions and approaches to Euroscepticism, each with their own contributions and challenges. Yet, one prominent improvement has been the search for a more fine-grained typologies of Euroscepticism.

One of the most cited conceptualisations concerns the distinction between 'soft' Euroscepticism (qualified opposition) and 'hard' Euroscepticism (principled opposition), as introduced by Taggart and Szczerbiak (for instance Taggart and Szczerbiak, 2008). Kopecký and Mudde (2002), for instance, argue that the definitions put forward by Taggart and Szczerbiak are too broad and that it is not easy to distinguish between them due to unclear criteria. Instead, referring to differences between diffuse and specific support, they propose four categories: Euro-enthusiasts, Eurosceptics, Europragmatists and Eurorejects. Krouwel and Abts (2007) also argue that Kopecký and Mudde's categories are still not precise enough. Different arguments as well as different degrees of opposition should be taken into account, resulting in five-step scale of attitudes towards European integration, with Euroconfidence being the most positive attitude and Euro-alienation the most negative.

Finally, based on his research on political parties, and taking into account ideas put forward by Kopecký and Mudde, Rodríguez-Aguilera de Prat (2013) argues that there are

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<sup>2</sup> Similar arguments have been put forward for the use of the term 'populism'. For instance, writing about the use of 'populism' in British media, Bale, van Kessel and Taggart (2011) argue that its is 'thrown around with abandon', with there being little consistency in its use.

four types of party positions when it comes to the EU and European integration: the mainstream, Europhile parties; the negative Eurosceptic conservative and agrarian parties that except 'simple intergovernmental economic cooperation'; the positive Eurosceptic radical left parties that tend to support a much more ambitious supranational project and are critical of the current direction; and the Europhobe radical right parties that dismiss both the principle and the direction of European integration.<sup>3</sup>

Leconte (2015) explains that studies have shown that Europe means different things to different people and, hence, it is a positive development that academic work has started to move beyond pro/con distinctions. One of the questions to be asked is if the term 'Euroscepticism' is useful, especially when compared to other politics. Or, as Harmsen (2010: 336) claims, the current use of the term Euroscepticism has "blurred the distinction between genuine oppositions to European integration and that which might more reasonably be regarded as a normal (and desirable) politicization of European issues within the framework of a multi-level polity."<sup>4</sup> Leconte (2015) argues that a discursive perspective – Euroscepticism as a discourse – may constitute a rewarding approach to further exploring varieties of criticism on and opposition towards the EU and its policies. Since discourse often takes shape in media debates, it is worth looking at how media cover debates about EU affairs.

### **Media and EU affairs**

Attention for media coverage of European affairs has been triggered by the aforementioned concerns about EU democracy. While EU governance is largely based on representative democracy – for example through the direct election of the EP, but also the indirect election of the members of the Council of Ministers in national elections – it has been argued that representative channels should be complemented by other forms of democratic involvement (see Curtin 1997: 55). In the words of Christopher Lord (1998: 129), "the EU has developed an elaborate system of deliberation at *elite* level (...) however, the public is scarcely involved at all."<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> For a more in-depth discussion of this conceptual debate, see Guerra (forthcoming 2015).

<sup>4</sup> Emphasis in the original.

<sup>5</sup> Emphasis in the original.



Based on the assumption that media constitute important platforms for public deliberation, there has been an increase in scholarly attention for mass media reporting about European affairs. Despite some exceptions (for example Nitiou 2015), research has predominantly focussed on both the extent and the content of EU affairs reporting by *national* media, a choice based on the widespread assumption that these media will constitute the main platforms for the so-called European public sphere (see Risse 2010: 109-113).<sup>6</sup> The fact that politicisation occurs therefore does not rule out that it may look different across Member States due to differing circumstances (Statham and Trenz: 2013a).

Research has focussed on several policy fields, events, and so on. Some have approached these issues from the perspective of the formal and informal rules that govern journalism or at communication strategies of the European institutions (for example AIM Research Consortium 2007; Baisnéé 2002). Others have specifically looked into the quality and quantity of media coverage (for example Kevin 2003; Koopmans and Statham 2010). There has also been research into the possible effects of mass media coverage of EU affairs on citizens – a more complex topic than often assumed (for example Azrout, van Spanje and de Vreese 2012).

Media coverage of EU affairs has increased, especially at times of important events and when European policies are considered to be controversial at the national level (for example Boomgaarden, Vliegthart, de Vreese and Schuck 2010; Sifft, Brüggemann, Kleinen-v. Königslöw, Peters and Wimmel 2007). Risse (2014) refers to the impact of the recent economic and Eurozone crises as having a potentially beneficial impact on European democracy. Notwithstanding the debate about the desirability of politicisation mentioned above, EU affairs *have* already gradually been politicised in Europeanising national public spheres. Risse argues that such politicisation is crucial for European democracy, because it helps confront the *policies without politics* challenge mentioned earlier.

However, at the same time the increased visibility of the EU in national media has not been an even development, there being differences between countries, policy fields and institutions (for example Seifert 2006). It has, more generally, been argued that the way in which EU affairs are covered is problematic, with the focus on national perspectives and the misrepresentation of policymaking often identified as important shortcomings. Many issues

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<sup>6</sup> Although the term ‘public sphere’ itself refers to the wider ‘scope of citizen interaction’ (Crowley and Giorgi 2006: 5), this focus on media coverage makes sense for reasons touched upon above.

actually go unnoticed. In addition when discussions concerning the EU and its policies take place, political decisions taken at the EU level may be mentioned in the media, but little real discussion precedes them (Sifft et al 2007: 49; Teschner 2000: 81; Wimmel 2005: 473).

According to Leconte (2010) such apparent deficiencies in media reporting may already stimulate Euroscepticism, as European politics are only discussed in a national context with fairly limited attention for the European level and for related developments in other Member States. Commenting on the British case, Hardt-Mautner (1995) refers to the use of stereotypes as an important source for misrepresentation of European politics. Anderson (2004: 170) writes that unbalanced reporting by British media makes it difficult for people to “weigh adequately the benefits against the costs of the EU”.

### **Media and Euroscepticism**

Claim that media reporting about EU affairs leads to Euroscepticism may seem tempting, yet there has not yet been a lot of dedicated research on the link between the two. As Vasilopoulou (2013: 157) writes, “we still have not established the precise link between media, on the one hand, and opposition to European integration, on the other.” In fact, the problematic use of the terms ‘Euroscepticism’ and ‘Eurosceptic’ highlighted above also applies to the use of the term in the media, as well as to references to ‘Eurosceptic media’ in scholarly work. For instance, in his interesting study on the reporting of EU climate change policy by transnational media, Nitiou (2015: 2) looks into how this coverage differs from that of national media “dominated by Eurosceptic media reporting”. Amongst his conclusions is the following:

These findings also point to the fact that within the ‘Brussels bubble,’ *Eurosceptic* journalism seems to be almost non-existent in the discourse of transnational media toward global climate change policy. *Criticism* toward the EU only surfaced in relation to the Union’s inability to live up to its ambitious goals or the tendency of some member states to act individually while disregarding the common values shared by the Union. Nitiou (2015: 15)<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Emphasis added.

Here, scepticism and criticism are more or less treated as being the same, whereas, as we have seen before, this does not reflect the fact that conceptually we can distinguish between several possible critical positions regarding the EU.

Existing studies have often opted for different approaches to media and Euroscepticism. Some have looked into the extent to which media are Eurosceptic. The anti-European stance of parts of the British press is rather well documented (for example Daddow 2012; Price 2009). In a recent article Startin (2015) explains how media (the tabloid press in particular) have played a key role in the radicalisation of the British EU debate. Even though he admits that it is difficult to determine their precise impact on readership, Startin argues that UK tabloids have undoubtedly had an impact on the framing of (debates about) the EU.

Even for the British case authors sometimes just make anecdotal reference to ‘the media’ (for example Taylor 2008: 17). Yet, the body of work on this case is at least more substantial than that on media and Euroscepticism in other European countries, certainly when taking into consideration the substantial amount of work on media coverage of EU affairs in general terms. Karner (2013) has looked at the Austrian case, with an analysis that includes television, quality and tabloid newspapers. He identified three types of discourse: a sceptic, a pragmatic and a pro-EU discourse. Katsourides (2014) combines an analysis of public opinion with that of media coverage for the Cypriot case. He concludes that the Cypriote media have become more soft-Eurosceptic since 2013.

Others have examined the effects of media coverage on opinions about the EU, in general, and the spread of Euroscepticism, in particular (for instance Adam 2009). The work of de Vreese (2007) is interesting, because it highlights the difficulties of establishing such effects. He asks whether or not media fuel cynicism about the EU. Based on an experimental study focussing on television, de Vreese (2007: 280) concludes that “the media can play a double role in both fuelling and reducing Euroscepticism”, depending on the way in which issues are framed and on the characteristics of individuals. Elsewhere, however, he notes that negative media evaluations of the EU could have an impact on voter choice in European elections (van Spanje and de Vreese 2014).

Media analysis has also been used as a means of exploring other aspects of Euroscepticism. Skinner (2012) argues that economic interests cannot explain the Norwegian ‘no’ against EU membership. She employs a newspaper analysis (combined with other

material) to develop a more detailed conceptual map of Norwegian Euroscepticism, based on the so-called VCR (political values, political culture and rural society) model. Statham, Koopmans, Tresch and Firmstone (2010) have analysed media to gain a better insight into party competition. Among their findings is that party contestation remains strongly pro-European, with criticism usually concerning the substance of policies, which is in line with Harmsen's earlier mentioned argument that we may be witnessing a normalisation of the European debate.

Finally, research on stereotypical coverage of certain countries in media could, arguably, also be looked at from the perspective of Euroscepticism. This research is not so much concerned with Euroscepticism as in 'opposition to the EU', but rather in terms of how certain European countries are depicted by mass media in other countries. For instance, according to Daddow (2012) the rhetoric of the British press emphasises "destructive dissent" based on perceived "threats to British sovereignty and identity" originating from a German-run continent – Grix and Lacroix (2006: 387) even talk about a "war-related stereotype".

The way in which the British press covers European affairs may be quite extreme, but similar stereotyping has surfaced in the ongoing Eurozone crisis. Tzogopoulos (2013) refers to stereotypical – even hostile – media coverage of the Greek crisis by British, French, German, Italian and US media. Touri and Rogers (2013) have specifically looked into how British media made sense of the Greek crisis. They suggest that controversial language was actually largely absent due to the fact that the tabloid press did not pay that much attention to the crisis. Coverage was mainly framed from a domestic perspective, yet the crisis itself was mainly seen as a Greek and Eurozone issue, not one that would directly affect the UK.

In sum, the short expose above shows that there has been fairly limited scholarly attention for the link between media and Euroscepticism. What's more, existing studies have looked at several aspects of this link. As such a more focussed research agenda seems to be missing. A third challenge concerns the fact that the few studies on media reporting and Euroscepticism that have been published so far – but also studies some that do not specifically refer to Euroscepticism (for example D'Haenens 2005) – often resolve around the question whether news media coverage of EU affairs is predominantly negative or positive. Yet, as discussed before, research on the concept of Euroscepticism has resulted in more fine-grained typologies. In other words, there is a real need to move beyond this

negative/positive dichotomy (Crespy and Verschueren 2009; Kopecký and Mudde 2002; Krouwel and Abts 2007).

### **New research avenues?**

Usherwood and Startin (2013: 4) have argued that opposition to the EU has become embedded within broader society and therefore warrants ‘a more holistic, nuanced and interdisciplinary approach’. The latter applies to both the geographical scope, as well as the thematic focus. Recent scholarly work does signal a move towards a broader focus, with studies discussing other Member States than the ‘usual suspects’ France, Germany and the UK (for example Verney 2012) and exploring the influence of Euroscepticism in, for instance, the European Parliament (for example Brack 2015). New studies on media and Euroscepticism require not only a wider empirical focus, but also need to address conceptual challenges.

#### *Conceptual questions*

So far, only few media studies have attempted to develop new typologies. One of the key reasons for this is that a more fine-grained typology may also be difficult to apply. Szczerbiak and Taggart (2008: 246) warn that “the more complex and fine-grained the typology, the more difficult it is to operationalize and categorize.” Vasilopoulou (2013: 156) raises the same matter and concludes that it all boils down to “how “inclusive” or “exclusive” one seeks to be.” In other words, whereas a pro/con contrast or Taggart and Szczerbiak’s soft vs. hard Euroscepticism may offer too little scope for researching media representation of opinions about the EU and its policies, those proposed by Kopecký and Mudde or Krouwel and Abts may be difficult to apply, especially since it is hard to distinguish between some of the categories.

Yet, this does not mean that studies of EU media coverage and Euroscepticism have not picked up varieties of criticism on and opposition to the EU and its policies. In his analysis of Austrian Euroscepticism, Karner (2013) argues, among other things, that Austrian quality media include alternative evaluation of European affairs. Based on a claim-making analysis of political party positions as covered by the media, Statham et al. (2010: 271) argue

that criticism mostly concerned ‘the substance of Europe’. That is, certain aspects of the EU and its policies were criticised and sometimes alternatives were put forward, but integration as such was not questioned. Statham and Trenz (2013b) refer to so-called ‘Eurocritical claims’ to describe claims that are based on alternative visions of Europe, rather than an outright rejection of any form of European integration. Their detailed study of the debate about the Constitutional Treaty in the French public sphere suggests that these types of claims have become more important, indicating a normalisation of politics about the EU.

Attempts to develop new typologies also exist, increasingly taking into account opinions for and against, thus acknowledging that opinions for and against the EU and European integration are two sides of the same coin. Price (2009: 358) argues that “[t]he world is not black and white, but shades of grey; and an understanding of the shades of EU news production is important...” His analysis of British EU affairs reporting results in four-part classification: Euro-neutral, Euro-critical, Euro-hostile and Euro-phobic news. De Wilde, Michailidou and Trenz (2013; see also Michailidou 2015) have designed a new typology consisting of six possible positions towards European integration: affirmative European, status quo, alter-European, Eurocritical, pragmatic, anti-European, diffuse Eurosceptic.<sup>8</sup>

The drawback of Price’s typology is that it is very much based on the rather special British position. The typology designed by de Wilde, Michailidou and Trenz (2013) may be challenging to use in terms of distinguishing between different categories. Moreover, it only deals with European integration in general terms, not with policies. The author of this paper has developed a typology that distinguishes between Euroscepticism and what John FitzGibbon (2013) has called ‘Euroalternativism’. The latter is an expression of ‘pro-system opposition’, implying that actors support the EU and European integration, but are critical towards (elements of) policies that are being pursued, often presenting alternatives or demanding further integration. Here too, pro-European opinions are included. Hence, as set out in *Table 1*, four possible positions can be identified: support for the EU and its policies, Euroalternativism, soft Euroscepticism and hard Euroscepticism. Combining insights from some of the aforementioned works, the first three of these have been slightly adapted and further broken down into two sub-categories, concerning (I) institutional design and (II) actual policies (see also Bijsmans forthcoming 2015; Bijsmans forthcoming 2016).

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<sup>8</sup> The latter refers to an unspecified and diffuse dissatisfaction.

Table 1: Possible positions on European integration

	Explanation
<b>Support</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>I. Support for European integration and the current institutional design</li> <li>II. Support for the policies currently being pursued (or not)</li> </ul>
<b>Euroalternativism</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>I. Support for European integration, but promoting a more supranational institutional design</li> <li>II. Support for EU involvement in a policy field, but not for the current policy approach, or support for EU involvement in a new field</li> </ul>
<b>Soft Euroscepticism</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>I. Support for a form of European integration, but opposition to the current supranational institutional design</li> <li>II. Opposition against EU involvement in a policy field</li> </ul>
<b>Hard Euroscepticism</b>	Principled opposition to integration and aiming for withdrawal from the EU

### Empirical questions

More general studies on EU media coverage have suggested that there is variation between countries and issues (for example Seifert 2006). Also, events play an important role (for example Boomgaarden et al. 2010). Hence, beyond these conceptual questions, there is also a need to look at different empirical questions. This includes the need to look at different countries, different cases, different media and different years.

Existing research highlights this need. As mentioned before, research by Karner (2013), Statham and Trenz (2013b) and Statham et al. (2010) has found that alternative visions rather than outright rejection of European integration seems to dominate debate about the EU and its policies. This would suggest a normalisation of politics about the EU. Own research reached similar conclusions when looking at a year of media coverage in three national quality newspapers. The debate about policy alternatives seemed much more important than Eurosceptic claims in EU affairs reporting by *Die Presse* (Austria), *The Irish Times* (Ireland) and *NRC Handelsblad* (the Netherlands) in 2012 (Bijmans forthcoming 2015).

Yet, there is also research that suggests that context and events play an important role. Research of online media debates by Michailidou (2015) reveals a difference between journalistic contributions as compared to citizen contributions, where the latter are much more critical about the EU and its policies (even though this criticism often remains vague).

Own research has suggested that events play a role, but that there are also differences between countries. Analysis of Dutch and Flemish media debates in the context of the 2014 revealed that Flemish newspapers mostly seemed to be observing debates elsewhere. Yet, the Dutch newspapers also covered a national debate in which being for or against the EU was a core issue. For each country articles from one leading quality newspaper and one popular title were analysed – respectively *De Standaard* and *Het Laatste Nieuws* (Flanders) and *NRC Handelsblad* and *De Telegraaf* (the Netherlands). Although one may expect differences between popular and quality newspapers, soft and hard Eurosceptic claims were prominent in both the two popular and two quality newspapers (*De Standaard* and *NRC Handelsblad*) analysed for this study (Bijsmans forthcoming 2016).

## **Conclusion**

For the past couple of years EU policymaking has often figured on newspaper frontpages, websites, television and radio. The Eurozone crisis was characterised of heated debates on austerity vs. investment and critical voices seemed to be on the rise. The body of knowledge on EU affairs reporting, as well as the body of knowledge on Euroscepticism have grown. But in the current context we would also benefit from more research that combines both perspectives. The plurality of opinions on the EU and its policies in addition requires scholars to focus beyond pro vs. con evaluations. It may seem trivial, but we need more dedicated studies looking at different countries, different cases, different media and different years.

In light of repeated debates on EU democracy, this is all the more important. Naturally, the question is to what extent Eurosceptic voices will really be included in the debate in such a way as to encourage a dialogue between the EU and its critics. For instance, Brack (2015) believes that Eurosceptic voices may have a positive effect on EU legitimacy through politicisation of EU affairs. Yet, she also writes that while the 2014 European elections may have seen a rise of the number of Eurosceptics in the EP, it is not very likely that they will be able to play a role due to established institutional procedures. But this may also be the result of the fact that critics – whether critical of certain policies or rejecting integration completely – tend to all be labelled as Eurosceptics. More conceptual and empirical research can help.



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