

'Mirroring or setting the political agenda? The role of the media in the Eurosceptic debate'

**Asimina Michailidou**

## **Abstract**

From the opinion-swinging British tabloids which have become synonymous with anti-EU sentiment, especially during the 'Brexit year' of 2016, to the Commission's Euromyths-busting service, dedicated to counteract Eurosceptic inaccuracies in media reporting, the message is clear: Euroscepticism in the media is a force to be reckoned with. But does this also mean that EU politics is hostage to media reporting? Are media responsible for the rise of Euroscepticism? Placing the rich empirical literature on Euroscepticism and the media in the context of mediatization and democratic public sphere norms, this chapter argues that media-driven EU contestation can be an indicator of a healthy European public sphere.

## **Introduction**

The relationship between EU institutions and the media can be defined as awkward at best: Once associated almost exclusively with countries that are typically referred to as 'Eurosceptic', like the UK and Denmark, media Euroscepticism – along with political party and public opinion Euroscepticism - is now prominent across most EU member states (Stokes 2016); so much so that the phenomenon prompted the pro-EU think-tank 'The European Council of Foreign Relations' to liken the spread of Euroscepticism across the continent to that of a virus (Torreblanca et al. 2013). Increasingly, national media reserve the most critical of treatments not only for specific EU policies, but also for the EU institutions themselves (de Wilde et al. 2013; Lloyd and Marconi 2014). It is not uncommon for news media to portray

the European Commission as a faceless, corrupt bureaucracy that consumes vast amounts of taxpayers' money to produce a virtually endless string of pointless regulations.<sup>1</sup> Similarly, the European Council rules in an opaque, unfair manner, where the level of intrigues, backstabbing and plotting are often compared to those in ancient and medieval imperial courts of Europe. Such critique is also extended to the European Parliament (EP), which is frequently depicted as an ineffective, resource-wasting institution not only by dedicated Eurosceptic media but also by elite, international media largely considered pro- EU.<sup>2</sup>

When the media are not critical or outright hostile towards EU institutions and procedures, they appear largely indifferent. It is a permanent grievance of EU officials from all institutions that the EU project either gets unfair, inaccurate coverage or no coverage at all from national media (Meyer 1999; Bijsmans and Altides 2007; Michailidou 2012; Martins et al. 2012). No amount of media and communication actions – and in recent years the Commission and EP have been implementing significantly more sophisticated and targeted multi-media strategies –<sup>3</sup> has succeeded yet in ‘communicating Europe in partnership’ (European Commission 2007) to the extent that the EU institutions have hoped for (European Commission 2014b and 2009a; Toulemonde and Delahals 2009).

The standard ‘view from Brussels’ is that a large share of responsibility for the public’s ‘ignorance of EU affairs’ (in the words of EU institutions and officials themselves) rests on the media’s shoulders. For EU officials, it is certainly not for lack of effort on the part of their institutions that EU politics is underreported or misrepresented in the media of the member states. Over the past 14 years, the Commission has produced numerous information and communication policy documents (White Papers, Communications, Memoranda of Understanding with the other EU institutions and member states) with the sole aim to bring the EU closer to its people, recognising that ‘[c]ommunication is essential to a healthy

democracy. It is a two-way street. Democracy can flourish only if citizens know what is going on, and are able to participate fully.’ (European Commission 2006).

Initially focused mostly on ways to make accurate information about the EU available to its citizens, the EU’s communication strategy soon became all about democracy, participation and transparency (Brüggemann 2010; Michailidou 2012; Bijsmans 2014),<sup>4</sup> while in more recent years, there has been a turn towards streamlining of the EU’s public image and embracing of online social media. In the second Barroso Commission (2010-2014), the EU’s communication strategy became part of the portfolio for Justice, Fundamental Rights and Citizenship (under Commission Vice-President Viviane Reding) and, while it maintained the principle of engaging citizens with the EU, it took a more corporate turn, with emphasis on streamlining the Commission’s image, symbols and form of public communication (European Commission 2013; European Commission 2014a). In the current Commission (2014-2019), DG COMM works directly under the responsibility of Commission President Jean-Claude Juncker. The EU has its own YouTube page, featuring several channels, among which the Council of the EU’s channels and the EP’s web-TV. Among the main EU institutions, the European Parliament is by far the most popular one on Facebook: three years after its launch, the official EP Facebook page was ‘liked’ by 1,292,545 Facebook members by March 2014 (Michailidou et al. 2014). Michailidou et al. (2014) put this figure in context by drawing parallels with national parliaments’ social media activity. At the time, only five of the 28 EU national parliaments – the UK Parliament, the Estonian Parliament (Riigikogu), the French Senate (Sénat), the Croatian parliament (Hrvatskisabor), and the Romanian Chamber of Deputies (Parlamentul României Camera Deputaților) – had a Facebook page, and they were ‘liked’ by 55,674 readers collectively. Two years onwards, the European Commission and the European Council remain the only other EU institutions with Facebook pages and are collectively ‘liked’ by 2766283 Facebook users. On Twitter, on the other hand, on which all

seven EU institutions maintain pages but which is considered more of a niche or elite social platform, the Commission and ECB profiles, i.e. two of the more technocratic institutions, are by far the most popular among EU institutions and have more than tripled their followers since 2014 (the European Commission has 650000 Twitter followers as of October 2016, from 193,000 it had in 2014, while the ECB has 357000, up from 114,000 in 2014). At the same time, among the high-ranking EU officials, such as the President of the Commission or the President of the European Council, we can observe the same trend of personalization of politics, as at national level, whereby individual politicians rather than institutions, dominate in visibility the media sphere. Jean-Claude Juncker's Twitter profile, for example, has 327000 followers, Donald Tusk's combined following from his European Council and personal official profile exceeds one million followers, while the President of the European Parliament, Martin Schulz, has more followers on his two Twitter profiles (personal and EU President) than the profile of the European Parliament itself. In the 2014 European Parliament elections, the EP launched a 16-million euros media campaign and not only masterminded the concept of the EU's 'Spitzenkandidaten' or top candidates for the post of Commission President but also drove the organisation of televised debates amongst these.<sup>5</sup> The debates were streamed online and were simultaneously broadcast by national channels in most member-states, scoring a historic media 'first' for EU politics.

Yet, despite the rising visibility of EU institutions and leaders in the media sphere and the more concerted, professionalised efforts of the EU establishment to reach out to its citizens, Euroscepticism remains on the rise. The mediatized communication efforts of the European Parliament during the 2014 elections did not succeed in attracting more voters to the ballot and at the same time, more Eurosceptic politicians passed the gates to the European Parliament than ever before. More recently, the role of Eurosceptic national media has come under scrutiny as a potential catalyst in the historic developments surrounding the UK's

departure from the EU block and, although it is perhaps too early to draw any scientifically sound conclusions (Hellman 2016; Howard and Kollanyi 2016), the line of argument made by proponents of the ‘Remain’ camp reaffirms the popular belief that the media drive Eurosceptic sentiment (Greenslade 2016). So how are we to approach the relation between professional news media and the persistent rise of Euroscepticism?

Scholarly research over the past two decades has produced a rich body of empirical and analytical works that investigate precisely how the media report on the EU and what the effects of that reporting are on the EU citizenry. Although these works differ in their theoretical and methodological approach, they all point to a clear trend of rising Euroscepticism in the media and a preference for negative EU reporting. But while there is no doubt that the media are core component of the EU public contestation mechanism, evidence that the media are to blame for ‘the spiral of Euroscepticism’ (de Vreese 2007) is less clear-cut. In the remaining of this chapter, I first present in more detail the body of literature on Euroscepticism and the media, including analyses of media content; investigations into how the media perceive their role in EU politics; and an overview of the concerted efforts of the EU institutions to improve their public visibility and communication with citizens.

Subsequently, an explanatory framework on the role of the media in Eurosceptic public discourse is put forward, based on normative assumptions about the role of the media in democratic public sphere and on the concept of mediatization. Drawing on these, the concluding part of the chapter calls for a positive outlook on Euroscepticism in the media, as necessary ingredient for the normalization and democratization of EU politics.

**Euroscepticism in the media: frames, impact on public opinion and journalistic attitudes**

Scholarly research on Euroscepticism and the media is rich in terms of data volume, thematically broad, yet inconclusive. It is often restrained by conceptual haziness that has as much to do with the concept of Euroscepticism itself as with broader political communication and media theories. Nevertheless, researchers working on Euroscepticism and the media consent that the latter are one of the ‘vital ingredients’ of EU contestation, which stopped being determined exclusively by ‘insulated elites’ over twenty years ago (Hooghe and Marks 2009; de Wilde and Trenz 2012). We can broadly distinguish three main empirical approaches of Euroscepticism and the media, reflecting different methodologies: a) research that focuses on media coverage of EU politics and policies; b) research on the effects of media frames on public opinion about the EU; and c) research that focuses on the ‘production of news’ aspect, mapping and analysing the agenda, work values and self-perception of journalists covering EU issues.

*EU news reporting: defined by national frames and a negative outlook*

The first broad group of studies largely aims to quantify the visibility of news about the EU and to measure the prevalence of positive and negative EU news coverage, as well as the presence in news reporting of national and EU political and civil society actors (Boomgaarden et al. 2013; de Vreese et al. 2006; Gattermann 2013; Hinrichsen 2012; Kevin 2003; Kriesi 2007; Maier and Maier 2009; Peter et al. 2003 and 2004; Trenz 2004). In terms of focus, such studies are either event- or issue-specific, examining for instance media coverage of European Parliament elections, the Constitutional Treaty, or EU enlargement; or they take a more ‘holistic’ approach of EU reporting, comparing media coverage across two or more topics. Nearly always, these studies span more than one country and occasionally bring together data from all, or almost all, EU member states. Despite their variance in EU news topics, selection

of countries and time span, empirical analyses on media coverage of the EU persistently confirm the national perspective of EU news reporting and a progressive increase in the visibility of Euroscepticism in national media spheres. It is crucial to note, however, that there is no common definition of Euroscepticism among these studies, nor do they point to a definitive set of factors that can be held responsible for the rise of Euroscepticism in public discourse.

More recently, research has turned to the conditions of economic and social crisis, which have favoured the mainstreaming of Euroscepticism across several EU countries (Michailidou et al. 2014; Risse 2014). The media across Europe appear to have descended into a blame game, whereby national and EU political leaders and institutions are invoking the public's wrath on the basis not necessarily of their decisions before or during the crisis, but of stereotypical views about their nationality being inherently 'evil' (the Germans) or 'lazy' (the Greeks) (Michailidou et al. 2014; Papathanassopoulos 2014). Negative stereotyping of nationalities, particularly the anti-German line of discourse, has been identified as a diachronically core component of Euroscepticism (e.g. Anderson and Weymouth 2014 on Euroscepticism in the British Press during the 1990s). European media have also been found guilty of systematic misinformation, restriction of the diversity of political views and manipulation of public opinion during the Eurocrisis (Tracy 2012; Tzogopoulos 2013).

But dig a little deeper and one actually finds that the biased coverage has been largely in favour of EU and national political and technocratic elites: Technocratic and political elite actors have been found to dominate media coverage of the Eurocrisis in professional news platforms and their public statements virtually never contain any critique or hint of doubt of their own actions (Michailidou et al. 2014). 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 provide commentary or analysis of those – leaves

the technocratic hegemony discourse virtually unchallenged. In a recent empirical study, Hans-Jörg Trezz, Pieter de Wilde and the author found that eight out of 10 actors appearing in national news coverage of the Eurocrisis and of the 2009 EP elections are decision or policy-makers in political or technocratic roles (Michailidou et al. 2014).<sup>6</sup> Moreover, the prominence of Euroscepticism even in member-states with previously pro-EU public opinion seems to be the result as much of the media's attention to otherwise-considered marginal parties or groups as of the wide-spread public disaffection with EU institutions, as living standards continuously drop in several member-states because of the Eurocrisis and related austerity measures (Braun and Tausendpfund 2014, Kuhn and Stoeckel 2014).

When it comes to online media, evidence clearly points to the online news sphere playing an increasing role in patterns of opinion formation on EU issues (de Wilde et al. 2013; Leconte 2010). Empirical data from the past decade shows that the online public sphere has potential not only to structure but also to clarify the debate on EU elections and also to offer more direct, less interpretive reporting of issues (Carlson and Strandberg 2005; Lusoli 2005). As regards online Euroscepticism in particular, Eurosceptics and pro-Europeans do not occupy radically different spaces in the online media public sphere, yet the dynamics of online news media debates tend to support opposition over affirmative voice (de Wilde et al. 2013: 59). Crucially, it is the readers' views that mainly account for the high salience of EU critical evaluations in online news media, amplifying diffuse Euroscepticism - a partial, underspecified public critique of the EU polity - as the most prevalent form of expressing discontent with the EU and the course of European integration (de Wilde et al. 2013: 59). Online news articles and readers' comments that accompany them frequently convey 'an unmistakable distaste and disapproval of the EU, but stop[s] short of outlining what should change in the polity's set-up and to what end (i.e. what would be the desirable outcome of any

change proposed?)’ (Michailidou et al. 2014). This type of Euroscepticism can be encountered in all types of online contexts and is not exclusive to dedicated anti-EU platforms.

### *Euroscepticism in the media and the shaping of public opinion*

A second set of studies, led for the most part by Claes de Vreese and his team at the Amsterdam School of Communications Research, have looked closely at the news frames routinely used by mainstream media to report on EU issues in relation to potential effects that these frames have on individual readers. Not only is framing consistently shown to play a defining role in shaping attitudes towards the EU among audiences and readerships (a correlation has been shown, for example, between trust towards EU institutions and media frames); but negative frames of EU issues in particular are found to be more influential than positive ones (de Vreese et al. 2003; de Vreese and Kandyla 2009; de Vreese and Semetko 2004; Leconte 2010; Schuck and de Vreese 2006; van Klingeren 2014; Vliegthart et al. 2008). Such findings would perhaps suffice to place the responsibility for the rise of Euroscepticism squarely on the media’s shoulders. Nevertheless, in one of the most substantial and influential studies of this issue, de Vreese’s research shows that the extent to which the media may feed into Eurosceptic attitudes depends on two factors: ‘the pervasiveness of strategically framed news reporting’ on the one hand; and individual level characteristics, such as the level of ‘political sophistication’ on the other (de Vreese 2007). This means that when EU news coverage is not worded in a suggestive manner, pointing at winners and losers, using ‘war and games’ language, focusing on opinion polls and/or specific candidates, then cynicism about EU affairs decreases. However, individuals may have a high level of political sophistication (to be interested and knowledgeable about EU matters) and still be dismissive of politicians and their performance (ibid.). Marijn van Klingeren (2014)

has further shown that the ‘spiral of negativity’ observed in EU news reporting is not reciprocal, i.e. although negatively-framed media coverage increases Euroscepticism, increased Euroscepticism (as measured in public opinion) does not lead to more increased negative media reporting.

### *Euroscepticism and news professionals: fair reporting?*

Yet another cohort of empirical research on approaches Euroscepticism in the media from the perspective of news professionals themselves, mapping journalistic attitudes towards the EU and the ‘editorial room’ mechanisms that influence EU reporting (Heikkilä and Kunelius 2006; Martins et al. 2012; Raeymaeckers et al. 2007; Statham 2008). For journalists, the responsibility of communication rests with the EU institutions themselves. When presented with the standard research finding that EU news reporting is very much anchored in national politics and national frames of reference, they retort that they would be able to ‘Europeanize’ themselves to a greater extent ‘if politicians improved their own communication efforts and made European governance more relevant to citizens’ (Statham 2008: 398). Crucially, from the media’s perspective, EU politics do get sufficient coverage; just not quite the type of friendly, uncritical coverage that EU officials are after. If EU Commissioners do not get much air time on national television, or the public debates of the candidates for the presidency of the European Commission (nominated by the EP’s party coalitions) are ignored by the national press in favour of statements by national parliamentarians; this does not imply biased reporting on behalf of the media, but rather reflects the degree of recognisability (or lack thereof) that different representatives possess.

For many news professionals, the size of the EU Press Corps (the body of journalists accredited by EU institutions) is further testament to the national media’s recognition of the

central role that EU institutions have in European politics: it boasts 1277 journalists and technical press staff representing 514 media organisations from 62 different countries, making it one of the largest in the world.<sup>7</sup> Even in times of crisis for news corporations across Europe, with budgets shrinking and journalists being fired *en masse* sometimes, the EU Press Corps has maintained its size.

And when EU institutions overstep their democratic authority, then the media have a duty to expose them. If, for example, the European Parliament decides to tackle cyber-Euroscepticism during the 2014 EP election campaigns with dedicated teams that scour online news platforms for Eurosceptic ‘trolls’, then it is certainly the duty of loyally Eurosceptic journalists such as the Telegraph’s Bruno Waterfield to expose what is perceived by many as a wasteful ‘attack on freedom of speech’ (Michailidou et al. 2014). Eurosceptic media reporting may be steeped in inaccuracy and exaggeration. Indeed, as Lloyd and Marconi put it, Eurosceptic media news ‘[should be] taken with a truth warning – these reports may damage your understanding of what really happened’ (Lloyd and Marconi 2014: 91). Nevertheless, it is also very much the case that the EU institutions are far from perfect<sup>8</sup> and the media often help to highlight cases of corruption in the EU structure. Arguably, Eurosceptic media in particular ‘has the value which disruptive and unregulated media always have: the occasional ability to hit on the head a nail which more accurate and careful media ignore.’ (Lloyd and Marconi 2014: 91). This brings us to a key weakness of empirical research on EU media reporting: the normative context within which to evaluate the way in which the media cover EU politics is often absent or little explored. How ought journalists to report on Europe? Is their preference for negative frames, Eurosceptic views and national context extraordinary – a style of reporting they reserve only for the EU polity – or is it on par with standard journalistic preferences? To answer these questions, we need to turn to the process of mediatization and the norms of a democratic public sphere.

## **Eurosceptic news reporting, mediatization and democracy**

Decision-makers, the media and citizens are locked in a continuous negotiation of power that is politics. From government and culture to the economy and knowledge, all aspects of life in any society are influenced by the media of communication that people have at their disposal. It is not only the means of communication as such - clay slabs and stylus, papyrus, paper and pen, printing, radio, television, email, social media – that determine how we express our thoughts. It is also the institutions built around those means – public broadcast corporations like the BBC, television channels, Facebook, newspaper conglomerates – and their culture, standards and agendas that also affect, dictate even, the issues on which public communication is to focus on and the context in which to do so. We do not only adjust our communication acts as individuals, our speaking, reading, marching, to the mode of communication available to us at any given time, but at a collective level, all other functions of society – politics, culture, economy – become adjusted to and to an extent determined by the media of the time (McLagan and McKee 2012; McLuhan and Fiore 1967).

At the same time, as they are an integral component of society, we can safely expect that the media adjust their function, reach and scope to meet the expectations, values and laws of the society in which they operate. In democracies, one of the key preconditions for citizens to be able to exercise their fundamental rights of autonomy and accountability is having access to a) information (about their representatives, about policies and conflicting interests); and b) to the public sphere (as spectators and participants). This precondition requires free speech and infrastructure that facilitates the wide circulation of political information and exchange of opinions (Christians et al. 2009).

The media simultaneously depend on the principle of free speech to fulfil their democratic role and provide the infrastructure needed for the widest possible exchange of information and opinions. In an ideal democratic scenario, the media's ownership structures ought to be transparent and sufficiently independent from the state to guarantee impartiality; they have a duty to report accurately on events and also to allow all 'voices' to be heard without prejudice and discrimination. For its part, a democratic state has to ensure that there are no obstacles to the media's fulfilling their role: from anti-trust laws that prevent the concentration of information and communication channels to a handful of owners to legislation that prevents censorship and protects journalists from persecution, a state's obligation towards the media boils down to the unequivocal protection of freedom of speech.

The process of mediatization often goes against this ideal scenario: increasingly the 'process of political communication depends on the media infrastructure and is subject to change as the media are changing' (Kriesi 2013), in such a way that 'media logics', and, in particular the commercial logic of the media industries in marketing public attention, increasingly become a frame of reference for the 'staging' of the political process and thus of democracy (Mazzoleni and Schultz 1999; see also Trenz in this volume). The power of the media has become such that politicians constantly seek to adapt to the media logics and culture not only in order to ensure their own visibility in the media sphere but also to ensure that the policies they formulate will receive media approval. What is made public is not necessarily that which is needed for voters to make informed choices, but that which is most likely to be media-friendly and thus which is more likely to get the media's attention: think here of the way that (some of) the media report on seminal political events (e.g. an EU summit or EP elections) by focusing on the public persona of individual leaders (often including their fashion sense and dinner choices) and on generic values or ideas that carry a strong emotional load but are decidedly vague in terms of the impact that specific decisions will have on the lives of voters.

To echo the Habermasian critique of the declining quality of the public sphere, under conditions of mediatization, the media often expects a show of politics and, returning to the case of the EU, Euroscepticism happens to make for a great media show (Loyd and Marconi 2014).

Mediatization is not all negative, however: the more the EU system of governance operates through rules of democracy, the more it relies on publicity-generating mechanisms provided by the media (Michailidou and Trenz 2013 and 2014). Mediatization of the EU takes place wherever the EU and its institutions rely on the news media as part of their own operations. This includes not only instances when the EU institutions succeed in engaging the media, but also all the failed attempts to get the media on board in their publicity efforts; as well as the instances when the intention to engage the media is expressed (fulfilling the public's expectation for transparency) but never really pursued.

While it is undoubtedly true that the Commission and the European Parliament have committed resources in their communication efforts with the public, a closer assessment of their communication strategy reveals two major weaknesses, an externally-imposed one and a self-inflicted one. As regards the former, EU institutions are restricted in their public communication efforts by the other core partner of the union, namely its member-states. For decades, national politicians have often used the EU institutions as a point of reference to contextualize their own political battles. The EU then becomes an arena where national politicians have to defend national interests rather than work together with politicians from other member-states towards a common future (this is all in terms of rhetoric, of course, because the working reality points precisely towards the latter). National media take their cues largely from national politicians and continuously reproduce this 'us versus Brussels' frame, which does little to bring citizens closer to the EU. However frustrating this situation may be, it does not point towards mediatization, but rather towards a power imbalance within the EU

and towards national politicians putting their personal political careers above the democratic legitimacy of the system.

Then there is the self-inflicted flaw in the EU's media and communication strategy: Although both the Commission and the EP correctly recognise the value of free, accurate information as a key component of a democratic public sphere, they confuse the availability of such information with a positive change in public opinion about the EU. As is evident from the communication strategy proposals and action plans that both institutions have produced over the years, EU institutions assume that if citizens have the right information about the EU, then they will appreciate its work and value more; they will like the EU more. This misconception about the purpose of building a strong relationship with the media and the public leaves EU institutions permanently unprepared for the type of critical, often hostile even, public debates that unfold through national television, newspapers and social media. Gaining public legitimisation is rightly and understandably a top priority for EU institutions, but it will not happen 'painlessly'. Conflicts and polarization are not only to be expected but also welcome in the case of the EU, in so far as they function as structuring and integrating elements in an otherwise fragmented public sphere. Perhaps the most recent turn of the Commission's communications strategy from 'building a European public sphere' to corporate communication is a result of the recognition that the EU institutions can only ensure that they are open and accessible to the media and the public but cannot control how the media and the public receive them. Exposing themselves to the whole range of media coverage and public debates, from the uncritically pro-European to the fanatically anti-EU, is the necessary rite of passage for EU democracy to come of age. Embracing the European public sphere, diverse and imperfect as it is, will facilitate the 'normalization' of EU politics, so that they will no longer be seen as something remote and irrelevant for people's everyday lives.

## **EU politics held ‘hostage’ to mediatized Euroscepticism?**

Analysing media reporting on EU politics offers us necessary empirical tools to assess the democratic credentials of EU contestation. Some researchers have focused on the analysis of specific news media dedicated to the ‘Eurosceptic cause’ and their links to political power. Others have looked more closely at the news frames routinely used by mainstream media to report on EU issues, as well as (perhaps more controversially) at the potential effects that these frames have on individual readers. More recently, research has turned to the conditions of economic and social crisis, which have favoured the mainstreaming of Euroscepticism across several EU countries. This seems to be the result as much of the media’s attention to otherwise-considered marginal parties or groups as of the wide-spread public disaffection with EU institutions. The enhanced networking and publicity capabilities that online media offer to Eurosceptic parties, groups and ad hoc movements have contributed to the strengthening of Euroscepticism in the public sphere, so much so that some scholars discern a cross-country ‘synchronization’ of anti-EU sentiment.

Methodologically, research on Euroscepticism and the media moves at times on shaky ground: measuring a direct link between media frames and personal attitudes is one such instance; selecting some EU countries as ‘representative’ of the media and political EU space in order to conduct cross-country comparative research is another. Nevertheless, it is precisely its conceptual and methodological shortcomings that give research on Euroscepticism and the media its value. To begin with, this field of study offers us a unique glimpse into the workings of several European public spheres: the codes of professional conduct, the terms of participation, the expectations, frames and ideas that underpin mediatized political discourse. Through the critical appraisal of this rich body of literature, we can free our analysis from media or technological determinism; seek more sound methods for comparing and

synthesizing our findings; and above all to refine our understanding of the media's role in shaping EU public contestation.

To accept that the media have complete autonomy over EU politics would be to deny any agency on the part of politicians or citizens. So far, no definitive evidence has been produced that confirms such a thesis. Crucially, it is necessary to bear in mind that in democratic politics the burden of proof insofar as the accountability of the decision-makers is concerned ultimately rests with the decision-makers themselves. Political leaders have a responsibility to make themselves and their decisions available to institutional and public scrutiny. Even if they opt for a largely 'silent' management style, especially in times of crisis, their actions will be publicly contested: this is the effect of the democratic public sphere. The media, political opponents, agencies, legislators, interest groups, investigation committees and citizens all have a say in the evaluation of political leadership and the outcome may be far from fair for political leaders. Yet, by maintaining transparency and facilitating the accountability process, political leaders help safeguard the core functions of democracy and preserve *the democratic legitimacy of the system* as a whole rather than their personal, short-term political survival. That is ultimately the role of the media too: to protect the democratic legitimacy of the system, not to maintain the legitimacy of individual actors within it. And yet, no democratic system is perfect, nor is its public sphere: the democratizing effect of the media rests primarily with their power to 'open up decision-making to public critique' (Statham and Trenz 2014: 7). The outcome of that critique cannot be guaranteed but citizens can rightly expect that the process of public scrutiny is set up on solidly democratic foundations.

## References

- Anderson, Peter J. and Tony Weymouth (2014) *Insulting the public? The British Press and the European Union*, Oxon/New York: Routledge.
- Bijsmans, Patrick (2014) 'The Commission, the politics of information, and the European public sphere', in T. Blom and S. Vanhoonaker (eds) *The Politics of Information: the case of the European Union*, Hampshire/New York: Palgrave MacMillan, pp. 179-192.
- Bijsmans, Patrick and Christina Altides (2007) '“Bridging the Gap” between EU Politics and Citizens? The European Commission, National Media and EU Affairs in the Public Sphere', *Journal of European Integration*, 29(3): 323-340.
- Boomgaarden, Hajo G., De Vreese, Claes H., Schuck, Andreas R.T., Azrout, Rachid, Elenbaas, Matthijs, Van Spanje, Joost H.P. and Rens Vliegenschart (2013), 'Across time and space: Explaining variation in news coverage of the European Union', *European Journal of Political Research*, 52(5): 608–629.
- Braun, Daniela and Markus Tausendpfund (2014) 'The Impact of the Euro Crisis on Citizens' Support for the European Union', *Journal of European Integration*, 36(3): 231-245.
- Brüggemann, Michael (2010) 'Information Policy and the Public Sphere: EU Communications and the Promises of Dialogue and Transparency', *Javnost - The Public*, 17(1): 5-22.
- Carlson, T. and Strandberg, K. (2005) 'The 2004 European parliament election on the web: Finnish actor strategies and voter responses', *Information Polity* 10(3-4): 189-204.
- Leconte, Cécile (2010) *Understanding Euroscepticism*, Hampshire/New York: Palgrave MacMillan.
- Christians, Clifford G., Glasser, Theodore L., McQuail, Denis, Nordenstreng, Kaarle, and Robert A. White (2009) *Normative theories of the media: Journalism in democratic societies*, University of Illinois Press.

de Vreese, Claes H., Banducci, Susan A., Semetko, Holli A. and Hajo G. Boomgaarden (2006) 'The News Coverage of the 2004 European Parliamentary Election Campaign in 25 Countries', *European Union Politics*, 7(4): 477-504.

De Vreese, Claes H., and Boomgaarden, Hajo G. (2003) 'Valenced News frames and public support for the EU: Linking content analysis and experimental data', *Communications: The European Journal of Communication Research*, 28: 361–381.

De Vreese, Claes H. And Kandyla, A. (2009). News framing and public support for a common foreign and security policy. *Journal of Common Market Studies*, 47: 453-482.

De Vreese, Claes H., and Semetko, Holli A. (2004). News matters: Influences on the vote in the Danish 2000 euro referendum campaign. *European Journal of Political Research*, 43: 699–722.

De Vreese, Claes H. (2007) 'A spiral of Euroscepticism: The media's fault?', *Acta Politica* 42(2-3): 271–86.

de Wilde, Pieter, Michailidou, Asimina and Trenz, Hans-Jörg (2013) *Contesting Europe*. Essex: ECPR Press.

de Wilde, Pieter, Michailidou, Asimina and Trenz, Hans-Jörg (2014) 'Converging on euroscepticism: Online polity contestation during European Parliament elections', *European Journal of Political Research*, Early View (online), 1-18.

European Commission (2006) White Paper on a European Communication Policy, COM(2006) 35 final.

European Commission (2007) Communicating Europe in partnership, COM(2007) 568 final.

European Commission (2009a) 'Annual Activity Report 2009: DG COMM', (Comm.\_aar\_2009\_final). Available at [http://ec.europa.eu/dgs/communication/pdf/aar/comm-annual-activity-report2009\\_en.pdf](http://ec.europa.eu/dgs/communication/pdf/aar/comm-annual-activity-report2009_en.pdf) (last accessed 3 December 2014).

European Commission (2009b) 'The return of the curvy cucumber: Commission to allow sale of "wonky" fruit and vegetables', Press Release 12 November 2008, European Commission.

Available at: [http://europa.eu/rapid/press-release\\_IP-08-1694\\_en.htm](http://europa.eu/rapid/press-release_IP-08-1694_en.htm) (last accessed 4 September 2014).

European Commission (2013) 'The visual identity of the European Commission', DG Communication webpage. Available at:

[http://ec.europa.eu/dgs/communication/services/visual\\_identity/index\\_en.htm](http://ec.europa.eu/dgs/communication/services/visual_identity/index_en.htm) (last accessed 3 December 2014).

European Commission (2014a) 'Information Providers Guide – The EU Internet Handbook: Communication Policy & Strategy'. Available at:

<[http://ec.europa.eu/ipg/basics/policy/index\\_en.htm](http://ec.europa.eu/ipg/basics/policy/index_en.htm)> (last accessed 4 May 2014).

European Commission (2014b) 'Management Plan 2014: Listen, Advise, Engage- DG COMM as a corporate communication service, brings Europe closer to its citizens'. Available at: <[http://ec.europa.eu/atwork/synthesis/amp/doc/comm\\_mp\\_en.pdf](http://ec.europa.eu/atwork/synthesis/amp/doc/comm_mp_en.pdf)> (last accessed 13 March 2014).

European Commission (2016) 'Communication: What we do', DG Communication webpage.

Available at: [http://ec.europa.eu/dgs/communication/about/what\\_we\\_do/index\\_en.htm](http://ec.europa.eu/dgs/communication/about/what_we_do/index_en.htm) (last accessed 13 October 2016).

European Ombudsman (2015) 'Decision of the European Ombudsman closing her own-initiative inquiry OI/10/2014/RA concerning the European Commission', published 6 January 2015. Available at:

<http://www.ombudsman.europa.eu/en/cases/decision.faces/en/58668/html.bookmark> (last accessed 7 January 2015).

Gattermann, Katjana (2013) 'News about the European Parliament: Patterns and external drivers of broadsheet coverage', *European Union Politics*, 14(3): 436-457.

- Habermas, Jürgen (1989[1962]) *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere, An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society*. Cambridge: MIT Press.
- Harding, Gareth (2014) ‘The myth of the shrinking EU press corps’, Clear Europe blog entry, 22 January 2014. Available at <http://cleareurope.eu/myth-shrinking-eu-press-corps/> (last accessed 3 October 2014).
- Heikkilä, Heikki and Kunelius, Risto (2006) ‘Journalists Imagining the European Public Sphere: Professional Discourses about the EU News Practices in Ten Countries’, *Javnost-The Public*, 13(4): 63-80.
- Hellman, Mikaela (2016) ‘Whats in a frame? Media framing in the 2016 ‘Brexit’ referendum’, MA thesis, Department of Political Science, Lund University. Available at: <http://lup.lub.lu.se/luur/download?func=downloadFile&recordOid=8873236&fileOid=8873243> (last accessed 10 November 2016).
- Hinrichsen, Malte Carlos (2012) ‘Religion, the media and EU membership of Turkey’, *Comparative European Politics* **10**: 198–217.
- Hooghe, Liesbet and Gary, Marks (2009) ‘Sources of Euroscepticism’, *Acta Politica*, 42: 119-127.
- Howard, Philip N. and Bence, Kollanyi (2016) ‘Bots, #Strongerin, and #Brexit: Computational propaganda during the UK-EU referendum’, (June 20, 2016). Available at SSRN: <https://ssrn.com/abstract=2798311> (last accessed 2 November 2016).
- Kevin, Deirdre (2003) *Europe in the Media: A Comparison of Reporting, Representation, and Rhetoric in National Media Systems in Europe*, Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.
- Kriesi, Hans-Peter (2007) ‘The role of European integration in national election campaigns’, *European Union Politics*, 8(1): 83-108.
- Kriesi, Hans-Peter (2013) ‘Introduction – The New Challenges to Democracy’, in H. Kriesi, S. Kuhn, Theresa and Florian Stoeckel (2014) ‘When European integration becomes costly: the

euro crisis and public support for European economic governance’, *Journal of European Public Policy*, 21(4): 624-641.

Lavenex, F. Esser, J. Matthes, M. Bühlmann, and D. Bochslers (eds.), *Democracy in the Age of Globalization and Mediatization*, London: Palgrave Macmillan.

Lloyd, John and Cristina Marconi (2014) *Reporting the EU: News, Media and the European Institutions*, London/New York: I.B. Tauris & Co.

Lusoli, Wainer (2005) ‘The Internet and the European Parliament elections: Theoretical perspectives, empirical investigations and proposals for research’, *Information Polity*, 10(3-4): 153-163.

Maier, Michaela and Jürgen Maier (2009) ‘News coverage of EU Parliamentary elections’, in J. Strömbäck and L. L. Kaid (eds), *Handbook of Election news coverage around the world*, Oxon/New York: Routledge, pp. 403-420.

Martins, Ana Isabel, Lecheler, Sophie and Claes H. De Vreese (2012) ‘Information Flow and Communication Deficit: Perceptions of Brussels-Based Correspondents and EU Officials’, *Journal of European Integration*, 34(4): 305-322.

Mazzoleni, Gianpietro and Winfried Schultz, (1999) ‘“Mediatization” of politics: A challenge for democracy?’, *Political Communication*, 16(3): 247–261.

McLagan, Meg and Yates McKee (2012) *Sensible politics*, New York: Zone Books.

McLuhan, Marshall and Fiore, Quentin (1967) *The medium is the message: An inventory of effects*, Corte Madera, CA: Gingko Press.

Meyer, Christoph (1999) ‘Political Legitimacy and the Invisibility of Politics: Exploring the European Union’s Communication Deficit’, *Journal of Common Market Studies*, 37(4): 617–639.

Michailidou, Asimina (2012) *The European Union Online*, Berlin: Verlag Akademiker.

Michailidou, A. and Trenz, H.-J. (2013) 'Mediatized Representative Politics in the European Union: Towards Audience Democracy?', *Journal of European Public Policy*, 20(2): 260-277.

Michailidou, A. and Trenz, H.J. (2014) 'The mediatization of politics. From the national to the transnational', *Partecipazione e Conflitto Journal of Sociopolitical Studies*, 7(3): 469-489.

Michailidou, Asimina, Trenz, Hans-Jörg and Pieter de Wilde (2014) *The Internet and European integration*, Berlin: Barbara Budrich.

Papathanassopoulos, Stylianos (2014) 'European media views of the Greek crisis', in S. Schifferes and R. Roberts (eds), *The media and financial crises: comparative and historical perspectives*, Oxon/New York: Routledge, pp. 103-118.

Peter, Jochen, Lauf, Edmund and Holli A. Semetko (2004) 'Television coverage of the 1999 European Parliamentary elections', *Political Communication* 21(4): 415-433.

Peter, Jochen, Semetko, Holli A. and Claes de Vreese (2003) 'EU politics on television news: A cross-national comparative study', *European Union Politics*, 4(3): 305-327.

Raeymaeckers, Karin, Cosijn, Lieven and Annelore Deprez (2007) 'Reporting the European Union: An analysis of the Brussels press corps and the mechanisms influencing the news flow', *Journalism Practice*, 1(1): 102-119.

Risse, Thomas (2014) 'No demos? Identities and public spheres in the Euro crisis', *Journal of Common Market Studies*, 52(6): 1207-1215.

Schuck, Andreas R.T. and Claes de Vreese (2006) 'Between risk and opportunity: News framing and its effects on public support for EU enlargement', *European Journal of Communication*, 21(1): 5-32.

Statham, Paul and Hans-Jörg Trenz (2014) 'Understanding the mechanisms of EU politicization: Lessons from the Eurozone crisis', *Comparative European Politics Advance online publication* 3 March 2014, DOI: 10.1057/cep.2013.30.

Stokes, Bruce (2016) 'Euroskepticism beyond Brexit', June 7<sup>th</sup> 2016, Pew Research Center Global Attitudes & Trends. Available at:

<http://www.pewglobal.org/2016/06/07/euroskepticism-beyond-brexit/> (last accessed 14 November 2016).

The Economist (2014) 'The European Parliament: Elected yet strangely unaccountable', May 17<sup>th</sup> 2014, The Economist: Briefing. Available at

<http://www.economist.com/news/briefing/21602200-european-elections-will-neither-lend-new-credibility-european-parliament-nor-give> (last accessed 4 December 2014).

Torreblanca, Jose Ignacio, Leonard, Mark, Bechev, Dimitar, Buras, Piotr, Drulák, Petr, Francescon, Silvia, Guérot, Ulrike, Klau, Thomas, Kundnani, Hans, Parello-Plesner, Jonas, Tiilikainen, Teija, Walton, Nicholas and Jan Marinus Wiersmaet (2013) 'The continent-wide rise of Euroscepticism', Policy Memo, European Council on Foreign Relations. Available at [http://www.ecfr.eu/page/-/ECFR79\\_EUROSCEPTICISM\\_BRIEF\\_AW.pdf](http://www.ecfr.eu/page/-/ECFR79_EUROSCEPTICISM_BRIEF_AW.pdf) (last accessed 4 December 2014).

Toulemonde, Jacques and Thomas, Delahals (eds) (2009) 'Evaluation of the Plan D / Debate Europe citizen consultation projects: Final report', Report 1.4, Euréval / Matrix / Rambøll-Management: Brussels.

Tracy, James F. (2012) 'Covering "Financial Terrorism"', *Journalism Practice*, vol. 6, no.4, 513-529.

Trenz, Hans-Jörg (2004) 'Media coverage on European governance: Exploring the European public sphere in national quality newspapers', *European Journal of Communication*, 19(3): 291-319.

Tzogopoulos, George (2013) *The Greek crisis in the media: stereotyping in the international press*, Farnham: Ashgate.

van Klingeren, Marijn (2014) ‘ “Welcome” to Europe: How Media and Immigration Affect Increasing Euroscepticism’, PhD Thesis, Amsterdam School of Communication Research, Digital Academic Repository: University of Amsterdam.

Vetters, Regina, Jentges, Erik and Hans-Jörg Trenz (2009) ‘Whose project is it? Media debates on the ratification of the EU Constitutional Treaty’, *Journal of European Public Policy*, 16(3): 412-430.

Vliegenthart, R., Schuck. A. R. T., Boomgaarden. H. G., and Claes, De Vreese (2008). News coverage and support for European integration, 1990-2006. *International Journal of Public Opinion Research*, 20, 415-439.

---

#### Notes

<sup>1</sup> Think here of the infamous, yet inaccurately reported, ‘bent cucumber ban’ directive that broadly circulated British media a few years ago. This most persistent of Euromyths is based on the Commission Regulation (EEC) No 1677/88 of 15 June 1988 laying down quality standards for cucumbers. The myth purports that the EU for years banned the sale of curvy cucumbers. The truth is that the Commission, with the abovementioned regulation, laid out the criteria for the quality classification of cucumbers, so that the flawless and straightest ones would sell for a higher premium. In 2009, this regulation was repealed anyway (European Commission 2009b) much to the satisfaction of Eurocritics, who interpreted this as a victory of common sense over senseless Brussels bureaucracy.

<sup>2</sup> During the 2014 European Parliament elections, for example, the Economist printed a highly critical article of this EU institution, finding that ‘the parliament’s cost and travelling circus’ justly attract ‘ribald comment’, and maintaining that for an elected institution, the EP is ‘strangely unaccountable’ (The Economist 2014).

<sup>3</sup> Consider for example the EP’s campaign ‘Act.React.Impact.’ to motivate EU citizens to vote at the 2014 European Parliament elections, which targeted young voters through social media and fast-flowing videos that aimed to convey the benefits of the EU in an easy-to-relate-to, upbeat, emotive manner. The European Commission’s overall EU communication strategy has also become more streamlined and multi-media oriented since the early 2000s, if not too corporatist, as the mission statement of DG COMM also indicates: ‘**Listen. Advise. Engage.** DG Communication, as a corporate communication service, brings Europe closer to its citizens.’ (European Commission 2016; see also Michailidou 2012; European Commission 2014a).

---

<sup>4</sup> Communication reform towards an EU that would be more open and closer to its citizens was driven by the long-serving Swedish Commissioner Margot Wallström, whose EU communication portfolio quickly made her known as the ‘Citizens’ Commissioner’ among her supporters and ‘Propaganda Commissioner’ among her critics. Margot Wallström served as a Commissioner from 1999 until 2010. In her second period as Commissioner for Institutional Relations and Communication strategy (2004-2010), she was also first Vice-President of the Commission. She understood the need for the Commission to have a more human face, but also for the EU institutions to open up their procedures to public scrutiny. She ushered in a new era for the Commission’s communication strategy with a focus on direct interaction with the public and plans to make full use of the communication power of online media. During her time as Commissioner for Communication, the EU’s first official public debate forum ‘Debate Europe’ was launched (2006); today the Commission channels public consultations on specific policies via its ‘Your Voice in Europe’ website and maintains a separate online forum for debate on EU current affairs (‘Debating Europe’). Wallström was the first Commissioner to have her own blog. In the Barroso Commission, seven Commissioners maintained their own blogs, along with four EU representations (one local, in Barcelona; and three national in Belgium, Estonia and Spain), several Commission Directorates-General and other EU bodies or initiatives. As for the Council of the EU, all member states that have thus far held its presidency have had at least a website and a dedicated press relations team.

<sup>5</sup> The European Parliament was the only EU institution to recognise the need for a comprehensive and cohesive EU information and communication strategy already in the early 1990s (Michailidou 2012) and has since then invested a lot of resources (material and otherwise) to improving its communication channels with the public.

<sup>6</sup> Our study focused on popular news media in France, Germany, Greece, Norway, the Netherlands, Spain, Sweden and the UK. Of the 3405 actors found in the analysed news items, 87% (2962) were decision or policy-makers in political or technocratic roles. Nearly a quarter of all actors found in the selected news items (24% or 809 actors) were Troika institutions or their representatives (European Central Bank, the IMF and the Commission). Another quarter of the coded actors were national governments – mostly the Prime Minister of the country under examination - or MPs or political parties (898 actors).

<sup>7</sup> Statistics provided to the author by EuropeDirect in October 2014. To get an idea of what this size means, consider that the press corps accredited in Washington D.C. and London number approximately 1500 foreign journalists in each location. See also Harding 2014 on the how the size of the Brussels Press Corps has progressively grown and eventually stabilized over the years.

---

<sup>8</sup> As regards transparency, or its lack thereof, consider for example the critical findings of the European Ombudsman regarding the lack of transparency on the part of the Commission during the Transatlantic Trade and Investment Partnership (TTIP) negotiations between the EU and the US. In her decision, EU Ombudsman Emily O'Reilly concluded that the Commission needs to intensify its effort to ensure 'public access to consolidated negotiating texts, greater proactive disclosure of TTIP documents and increased transparency as regards meetings that Commission officials hold on TTIP with business organisations, lobby groups or NGOs',. She rejected the Commission's argument that 'greater transparency could lead to confusion and misunderstandings among citizens' as 'profoundly misguided', reiterating that '[t]he only effective way to avoid public confusion and misunderstanding is more transparency and a greater effort proactively to inform public debate [...] the Commission should, if it considers that a document is open to misinterpretation, simply provide the necessary explanations when it releases the document. It should also engage with those who express legitimate concerns.' (European Ombudsman 2015). Similarly, the Council of the EU's efforts to exempt itself from the implementation of the European Court of Justice Judgement that the public has a right to see what positions Member States hold in the Council working parties before a final decision is taken by ministers (Case T-233/09 *Access Info Europe v Council* [2011] ECR II-1073; Appeal Case C-280/11 P), have prompted a request for the EU Ombudsman to intervene.