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## JOURNALISM, REPRESENTATION AND THE PUBLIC SPHERE

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# Table of Contents

## INTRODUCTION

*Leif Kramp, Nico Carpentier and Andreas Hepp*  
Introduction: Researching the transformation of societal self-understanding ..... 7

## PART 1 RESEARCH

### SECTION 1: JOURNALISM AND THE NEWS MEDIA

*Leif Kramp*  
The rumbling years. The communicative figurations approach as a heuristic concept to study – and shape – the transformation of journalism ..... 23

*Bertrand Cabedoche*  
New challenges for journalism education. A contribution to UNESCO politics .57

*Eimantė Zolubienė*  
Risk discourse in news media. Power to define danger? ..... 69

### SECTION 2: REPRESENTATION AND EVERYDAY LIFE

*Ebba Sundin*  
The role of media content in everyday life. To confirm the nearby world and to shape the world beyond our reach ..... 83

*Saiona Stoian*  
Media representations of suffering and mobility. Mapping humanitarian imaginary through changing patterns of visibility ..... 93

*Maria Schreiber*  
“The smartphone is my constant companion”. Digital photographic practices and the elderly ..... 105

## SECTION 3: PUBLIC SPHERE, SPACE AND POLITICS

*Alexandra Polownikow*

Bringing qualities back in. Towards a new analytical approach for examining the transnationalization of public spheres..... 119

*Hannu Nieminen*

Three levels of the crisis of the media – and a way out ..... 131

*Simone Tosoni*

Beyond space and place. The challenge of urban space to urban media studies ..... 145

*Magnus Hoem Iversen*

Employing a rhetorical approach to the practice of audience research on political communication ..... 157

## SECTION 4: RETHINKING MEDIA STUDIES

*Georgina Newton*

Socialist feminism and media studies. An outdated theory or contemporary debate?..... 171

*Irena Reifová*

Theoretical framework for the study of memory in old and new media age .... 183

*Maria Murumaa-Mengel, Katrin Laas-Mikko and Pille Pruulmann-Vengerfeldt*

“I have nothing to hide”. A coping strategy in a risk society ..... 195

## SECTION 5: ACADEMIC PRACTICE

*Nico Carpentier*

Recognizing difference in academia. The squire as a metaphor for agonistic interchange ..... 211

*François Heinderyckx*

A practical guide to using visuals to enhance oral presentations in an academic context ..... 227

*Leif Kramp*

The digitization of science. Remarks on the alteration of academic practice ... 239

**PART 2****THE EUROPEAN MEDIA AND COMMUNICATION DOCTORAL SUMMER SCHOOL 2014 AND ITS PARTICIPANTS**

Andreas Lenander Ægidius.....	255
Susanne Almgren .....	256
Sara Atanasova.....	257
Shani Burke.....	258
Simona Bonini Baldini.....	259
Rianne Dekker .....	260
Stephanie de Munter .....	261
Flavia Durach.....	262
Scott Ellis.....	263
Paula Herrero .....	264
Gabriella Fodor.....	265
Antje Glück.....	266
Magnus Hoem Iversen .....	267
Søren Schultz Jørgensen .....	268
Ralitsa Kovacheva .....	269
Linda Lotina.....	270
Aida Martori.....	271
Saadia Ishtiaq Nauman .....	272
Georgina Newton .....	273
Can Irmak Özınanır.....	274
Bina Ogbemor .....	275
Arko Olesk.....	276
Ezequiel Ramón Pinat.....	277
Daria Plotkina .....	278
Alexandra Polownikow.....	279
Kinga Polynczuk-Alenius .....	280
Subekti W. Priyadharna.....	281
Song Qi .....	282
Michael Scheffmann-Petersen .....	283
Monika Sowinska.....	284
Maria Schreiber.....	285
Saiona Stoian .....	286
Jan Švelch .....	287
Robert Tasnádi .....	288
Michal Tuchowski.....	289
Jari Väliverronen.....	290
Monika Verbalyte.....	291
Susan Vertoont .....	292
Yiyun Zha.....	293
Dan Zhang.....	294
Eimantė Zolubienė.....	295

# Bringing qualities back in. Towards a new analytical approach for examining the transnationalization of public spheres

*Alexandra Polownikow*

## Abstract

In the article, I develop a normative argumentation and an analytical concept to further the study of transnationalization of the public sphere by incorporating media content qualities. With the ongoing expansion of politics beyond national borders, there has been a debate about its 'public sphere deficit'. As a response, the concept of transnationalization of the national public sphere has been introduced: With national media covering international and transnational politics, the public can inform itself and potentially participate in discussions on these issues. So far, research has mainly measured the extent of transnational media coverage. However, this approach for empirical examination of the transnationalization of public spheres poses a contradiction to its critical 'public sphere deficit' rationale and the normative basis of public sphere theory. To resolve this discrepancy, I suggest the incorporation of media content qualities into transnationalization research. Therefore I discuss the concept of media quality in the context of public sphere theory and examine the few studies that have already dealt with the quality of transnational media coverage. On this basis I develop my own qualities concept. And finally, to investigate these qualities, I outline the research design for a quantitative content analysis. Here the juxtaposition of transnational with national media coverage marks the main analytical contribution, since national coverage can serve as a benchmark for evaluation. This new approach constitutes a good starting point for further normative discussion on the transnationalization of the public spheres.

**Keywords:** transnationalization, public sphere, media quality, media coverage, quantitative content analysis

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## 1. Introduction: The public sphere deficit of transnational politics

At a time when the crises of financial markets or climate change are just two examples of pressing transborder challenges, and when a heightened sense of mobility as well as technological advances shape our everyday life, national borders are becoming continuously more permeable. To keep pace with this development, international cooperation is increasing and a transfer of political decision-making from the nation-state to the inter- or supranational level is taking place. These processes are studied under keywords such as Europeanization (e.g. Radaelli, 2003) or Global Governance (e.g. Zürn, 2012), and have sparked an extensive debate about the democracy and legitimacy deficit of institutions like the European Union (EU) (e.g. Follesdal and Hix, 2006; Moravcsik, 2002; Scharpf, 2009) or Global Governance regimes (e.g. Keohane, 2011; Zürn, 2004). In these cases a public sphere deficit is often diagnosed as a core problem (de Beus, 2010). Since the creation of a uniform European – let alone global – public sphere is neither likely nor debatably expedient (Risse, 2003: 4-6), the *transnationalization of national public spheres* poses a possible response to the lack of public sphere and citizen support. Only if citizens – who are still mostly situated in a national framework – can access information about transnational political processes, can they potentially contribute to the discussions and decision-making on these issues. At this point, national media is introduced as the most important actor in the creation of a public sphere, as well as a forum for the citizenry and the political system (Koopmans, 2004: 3). Hence the qualities of media coverage of transnational political processes move into focus – a fact that has mostly been neglected in studies on the transnationalization of public spheres.

In the article, I focus on the transnationalization of the public sphere and develop a theoretical argumentation as well as an analytical concept to further the research by incorporating media content qualities as an additional dimension of analysis. Therefore, I first define the concept of transnationalization of public sphere and present central empirical results. Second, I point out a contradiction between the normative background of transnationalization studies and the mostly empirical approach for measurement. From that I develop the central theoretical argument: the need for incorporating media content qualities into the research of transnationalization of public spheres. Furthermore, I introduce studies that have already dealt with the quality of transnational media coverage and use them as a point of reference for the next part. In this, I outline a research agenda by bringing together the theoretical backdrop of public sphere theory, and the approaches used in media qualities research, condensing them into my own empirical design. Here the main contribution is the

utilization of national media coverage as a benchmark for analyzing the qualities of transnational media coverage. In conclusion, I discuss the implications of the new approach for the research on transnationalization of public spheres.

## 2. Theory and state of research I: Studying the transnationalization of public spheres

Transnationalization is most often examined from the perspective of Europeanization with a focus on the European public sphere. Research activities can be differentiated broadly into two perspectives. The first discusses the (im)possibility, necessity and theoretical understanding of a transnational public sphere (e.g. Habermas, 2001; Schlesinger, 1999; Splichal, 2006; van de Steeg, 2010), whereas the second is more analytically orientated, and focuses on the empirical measurement of the transnationalization of media coverage and the public sphere (e.g. Hepp et al., 2012; Wessler et al., 2008; Wessler and Brüggemann, 2012). The difference between the perspectives is not clear-cut, since empirical studies often base their rationale on normative discussions similar to the first strand. However, there is a tendency to center on the second perspective, i.e. on the transnationalization of the public sphere as an empirical concept.

According to this notion, the transnationalization of public spheres is understood as the extension of public communication flows beyond the national frame of reference (Brüggemann et al., 2009: 395). National public spheres are not replaced by transnational ones, but they keep on existing in and beside each other (Wessler and Brüggemann, 2012: 64). Transnationalization of public spheres is a long-term process of structural transformation with different social-spatial scopes (e.g. European, Western, global) and can be characterized according to different dimensions (Wessler et al., 2008: 9).

In a newer concept the dimensions that constitute the transnationalization of public spheres are the extension of infrastructure, actors, the audience and media content beyond national borders (Wessler and Brüggemann, 2012: 64-67). However, transnationalization of public spheres is commonly conceptualized as the transnationalization of media coverage and measured with the following dimensions<sup>1</sup>: 1. Monitoring governance (also called vertical transnationalization), 2. Discursive integration (horizontal transnationalization), 3. Discourse convergence, and 4. Collective identification. The first dimension of vertical transnationalization refers to the visibility of supranational actors and/or policies in media coverage (e.g. reports on the elections of the EU-parliament or the current Secretary-General of the United Nations). Horizontal transnationalization denotes media coverage of foreign institutions, actors and/or policies (e.g. the crisis in the Middle East, or the US Secretary of State). Discourse convergence goes one step further and refers to the similarities in



different national media discourses concerning the perceived relevance and definition of a problem, similar discourse coalitions and repertoires of justifications (e.g. similar coalitions of pro-life and pro-choice activists debating the matter of abortion in different countries at the same time naming similar arguments). The fourth and most demanding dimension refers to a collective identification, described as the acknowledgement of certain collectives (e.g. the Europeans, the Western world) and the expression of belonging to these collectives (e.g. us Europeans, our Western values) (Wessler et al., 2008: 10-12; for a specification of vertical and horizontal transnationalization see Koopmans and Statham, 2010: 38).

Central empirical results – which mostly focus on the Europeanization of public spheres – point to an increased vertical Europeanization in print media outlets, though still to a minor degree. Indications of foreign European actors and policies stagnate on a rather high level. Discourses in different European countries are convergent with respect to the topic and cited actors, but not as much regarding the focus of the argumentation. Collective identification in form of collective references as (us) Europeans are infrequent (Hepp et al., 2012: 63-83; Koopmans, Erbe and Meyer, 2010; Wessler et al., 2008: 40-52). Furthermore, the degree of transnationalization highly depends on the policy field that is covered by the media (Koopmans, Erbe and Meyer, 2010: 76-79). Moreover, each national public sphere bears differences – e.g. the British *Times* is Europeanized very little vertically as well as horizontally, whereas within the coverage of the French *Le Monde* the vertical dimension is strong and in the German *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* the horizontal dimension dominates (Wessler et al., 2008: 63-70).

The different patterns of Europeanization between media outlets can be explained by the number of foreign correspondents and the editorial mission of the quality newspaper as well as the power and the size of the reporting country (Brüggemann and Kleinen-von Königslöw, 2009). The last important influence on the degree of Europeanization is the type of media outlet – tabloids and regional newspapers are far more nation-oriented than quality newspapers (Brettschneider and Rettich, 2005: 148-150; Kleinen-von Königslöw, 2012).

Recapitulating, the transnationalization of public spheres can be summarized as a multi-segmented and somewhat steady process over time, thus becoming more relevant on the level of national public spheres.

### 3. Theory and state of research II: The need for a media qualities perspective

The aforementioned studies on the transnationalization of public spheres reveal a contradiction between their normative background and the merely analytical measurement of the phenomenon: On the one hand, citizens' EU-skepticism and the need for public debate vis-à-vis a deepening and widening of European integration or the public sphere deficit are chosen as a rationale behind empirical examinations. On the other hand, measurement of the transnationalization of the public sphere neglects the implications of public sphere theory as well as the perspective of informing the citizens, because it merely focusses on the extent of vertical and horizontal transnational media coverage or similarities in discourses, and the quantity of expression of commonalities. My suggestion – following the comments made by Fraser (2007) and Trenz (2010) – is to reestablish a normative component in the research on transnationalization of public spheres by paying closer attention to the theoretical basis of the public sphere concept. To be able to do so, I first need to consider what generating a functioning debate and public sphere entails theoretically.

In accordance with the idea of transnationalization, the public sphere can be conceptualized as a network of forums of public debate that are linked by communication flows (Wessler and Brüggemann, 2012: 57). A public sphere is essential for establishing a relationship between citizens and the political system, providing a forum for public debate, hence attributing legitimacy to political processes and decision-making. Various democracy theories mention different requirements for public spheres (Ferree et al., 2002a). One of the more normatively demanding yet realistic models for the functions of public spheres has been conceptualized by Neidhardt (1994: 8-9): According to his precise and thus operationalizable concept, a public sphere needs to provide transparency and validation. This in turn results in a reflected public opinion offering orientation for citizens as well as for the political system. If on the input level the public sphere is to fulfill the function of transparency, it needs to allow for all societal groups, topics, and opinions (principle of openness). On the throughput level, a public sphere meets its function of validation if the debate is led in a discursive manner (principle of discursivity).

Mass media play a crucial role in establishing a public sphere: Due to the fact that the media can (at least in theory) reach the whole population, on the one hand, they constitute the “*master forum*” (Ferree et al., 2002b: 10), where issues of interest to the society as a whole are depicted, evaluated and discussed. On the other hand, it is the media's public function not only to depict political and societal processes, but through news selection as well as implicit and explicit commentary in the media coverage serve as an independent actor for shaping the debate. Whereas the first role of the media as a mirror of polit-

ical processes has been considered in transnationalization research, the latter as an advocate for public debate has mostly been disregarded. Thus, I propose that – to enable an informed public debate and ultimately a functioning public sphere – *the media's performance and thereby the quality of media coverage needs to be incorporated into the research on transnationalization of public spheres.*

In general, the term quality is a relative measure (Rosengren, 1991: 22), describing the accordance of an aspect or product with certain expectations or demands, thus always depending on the point of reference. So far, there have been many suggestions on how to structure the abundance of research on media content quality, some differentiating between the points of reference for evaluating quality (Arnold, 2009: 80-104; Neuberger, 2011: 35-74). Concerning the topic of transnationalization of the public sphere, one strand of quality research proves especially useful: The normative strand that alludes to democratic and/or public sphere theories as point of reference to deduce criteria for media content quality<sup>2</sup> (e.g. McQuail, 1992). Even though most research uses *quality* as a central concept, I want to establish the term *qualities*: Since defining quality criteria is always a matter of perspective, and talking about quality might imply a judgment about what is better and what worse, I want to employ a more neutral terminology by conceptualizing qualities as characteristics of media coverage that are deduced from a theoretical point of view. This allows for a more open examination without an anticipated outcome; the normative evaluation is left for the interpretation of empirical results.

However, before I can develop my analytical concept for qualities in transnational media coverage, the few studies explicitly dealing with the issue require mentioning: Four studies – curiously all in the German language – examine the quality of transnational media content in a relative manner, comparing the quality of media coverage in different countries (Dietzsch, 2009; Kantner, 2006), points in time (Engelmann, 2009) or media outlets (Brantner, 2008). As criteria they mostly focus on the inclusion of actors from civil society in the public discourse, the rationality and balance of articles as well as the variety and extent of coverage on the EU. The results cause a worrisome assessment: Despite Europeanized media coverage in German print media being rather balanced and rational (Engelmann, 2009: 49-51), only an average 15 percent of civil society actors are taken notice of (Brantner, 2008: 228-231; Kantner, 2006: 156-158), and the coverage lacks extent as well as variety (Dietzsch, 2009: 159).

Even though these studies mostly reference public sphere theory, the interpretation of the results proves difficult due to the lack of context. Therefore for further research, it is worthwhile to go back to the theoretical point of departure to provide a solid theoretical base as well as a benchmark for interpreting findings.

4. Considerations on a research design: Towards a new approach

Following Neidhardt’s (1994) principles of the public sphere (see table 1), first and foremost *openness* can be demonstrated as a distinct variety of actors and positions within the media coverage. This aspect is one of the most basic and widely used criteria in media quality studies; similar descriptives would be diversity or pluralism (e.g. McQuail, 1992; Zerback, 2013). In the assessment of the second principle, *discursivity*, there is an abundance of literature, starting with the considerations on deliberation by Habermas (1990, 1992) and taking a more empirical turn with concepts on how to measure discursivity. For example, Steenbergen and colleagues (2003: 27-30) develop a quantitative Discourse Quality Index, applying dimensions such as the level and content of justification, respect for other speakers’ positions and the mention of counterarguments. Similarly, Wessler (2008: 4-5) operationalizes deliberativeness, among others, through justified counter-argumentation as well as the civility of discourse. Besides these qualities, balance is another central criterion for discursivity (e.g. Dryzek, 2000). The quality criterion of balance goes one step further than variety; as positions or arguments do not need to be many and different, but above all need to have a similar status within the media coverage to provide a nuanced picture.

Fusing the theoretical and empirical approaches from quality research with the previous studies on the quality of transnational media coverage (Brantner, 2008: 232-239; Engelmann, 2009: 50-51), it becomes possible to divide the principle of discursivity into the qualities of discourse rationality (operationalized by the degree of justification provided for an argument), balance (between arguments in favor of or against certain issues) and civility (as the lack of extremely negative or disrespectful evaluations).

**Table 1: Category system for measuring the qualities of media content**

<b>Public Sphere Principles</b>	<b>Qualities</b>	<b>Operationalizations</b>
openness	variety	variety of actors mentioned
		variety of arguments
discursivity	rationality	degree of justification and proof for argument
	balance	ratio between positive and negative arguments/evaluations
	civility	tone of evaluation of actors and arguments

As mentioned before, going back to the hitherto existing results on the qualities of transnational media coverage, the contextualization and interpretation proves difficult. Therefore, I suggest using national media coverage as a benchmark.

Such an approach carries the risk of wrongly turning the national media coverage into an ideal. However, while taking into consideration that the national public sphere might be deficient in the first place, only the comparison between the national and transnational media coverage enables the interpretation of the transnationalization process within the frame of reference of a changing and evolving public sphere.

A second pitfall might be the comparability between national and transnational media coverage, since political decision-making processes on different systemic levels follow different logics and patterns. Also there are sound assumptions and empirical evidence that journalistic news gathering and reporting vary in their national and transnational media content (Balčytienė and Vinciūnienė, 2010: 146-153; Statham, 2008). Nevertheless, the final product – the media coverage – needs to fit into the same media outlet, follow similar style and production rules, and cater to the same target group. From the perspective of the domestic audience, politics from different systemic levels are part of the same information routine and thus comparable. By examining the qualities that stand out and interpreting these vis-à-vis different public sphere theories, different political logics can potentially be traced within different media coverage.

Combining the theoretical and empirical standpoint, I consider the question of qualities of national and transnational media coverage worthwhile and suggest a quantitative content analysis to account for potential patterns. Since there is empirical evidence on different degrees of transnationalization in different types of media outlet and policy field, examining a broad picture of the media landscape as well as different political issues is beneficial. A multi-step analysis is to be applied. First, the articles need to be categorized according to their degree of transnationalization. Taking into account that even inherently transnational topics or events might be covered from a merely national perspective, there is a need to establish which media coverage is to be considered national versus transnational by measuring the media content. The second step of analysis entails a comparison of the articles with a high and a low degree of transnationalization per topic and media outlet according to their qualities. The relative comparison can prevent confusion by keeping the relevant attributes constant, only varying the degree of transnationalization.

## 5. Conclusion: What does the new approach (not) provide?

In the article, I showed that the research of transnationalization of public spheres can benefit from incorporating a qualities perspective into its agenda. For developing my own qualities for transnational media coverage, namely variety, rationality, balance and civility, I discussed central criteria from public sphere theory, referring to a strand of quality research and previous studies. For the empirical analysis, I outlined a multi-level research design, first categorizing media coverage according to its degree of transnationalization, secondly forming extreme groups of lowly versus highly transnational articles and, finally, analyzing them according to their qualities. Using national media coverage as a benchmark poses an essential analytical contribution: Only by comparing the qualities of national and transnational media coverage can we estimate the characteristics of the transnationalization process of public sphere and acquire a deeper understanding of what and how the domestic audience gets to know about transnational political processes. Even though this approach doesn't allow for insight into why the qualities might differ, knowing the difference can provide a starting point for interpretation vis-à-vis diverging public sphere theories, and thus bring the normative perspective back to the research on transnationalization of public spheres.

## Notes

- 1 The analysis of media coverage as an approximation of public sphere is a common approach in empirical communication studies, even though equating these two entails theoretical as well as empirical problems. One downside is, for example, that the debate depicted in media discourse is prone to an elite bias; thus, depending on the media sample, the public discourse portrayed may not be completely accurate. However, it can be assumed that media coverage in high quality outlets, and/or outlets with a broad reach can satisfactorily reflect and even shape the public discourse.
- 2 Other strands for the quality evaluation of media content are 1. a more functional approach, focusing on professional journalistic norms, or 2. a market- and user-oriented approach, dealing with the preferences of the audience.

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## Biography

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