

CURRENT PERSPECTIVES ON COMMUNICATION AND MEDIA RESEARCH



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Transnational news media and the elusive European public sphere¹

François Heinderyckx

Abstract

Various initiatives to unite the people and the nations of Europe have often met resistance when trying to reach a level of integration that would comprise significant political and cultural components. European authorities have nurtured high hopes that mass media could play a decisive role in creating and securing a form of European public sphere driven by the development of a European media sphere. Despite daring and resolute initiatives, any significant European media sphere has remained as elusive as a comprehensive Europe-wide public sphere. Adding to the complexity of the matter, the articulation between regional, national, and European public and media spheres forms a range of complex configurations. Ultimately, while preserving the budding of transnational media spheres, attention should be shifted toward making existing public spheres more porous while interconnecting them to enhance mutual understanding and empathy among the peoples of Europe.

Keywords: public sphere, media sphere, news media, television news, European Commission, transnational media, Eurikon, Europa-TV, Arte, 3-SAT, TV5, CNN, Euronews

1 This paper originally appeared in *International Journal of Communication* 9(2015) 1-20.

Decades of relentless efforts toward European integration did not bring about the shared sense of community among the peoples of Europe that could have resulted from pacification and increased economic exchanges. The European public sphere has eluded the European Union. This article discusses the role played by news media in trying to facilitate a public sphere that transcends national boundaries.

Initially, an integrated public sphere (the notion was hardly theorized at the time) was not seen as an aim in itself. After World War II, a core of European nations was, above all, determined to end the recurring cycles of devastating wars among European nations. Exacerbated nationalisms had for too long been feeding competing and conflicting national public spheres. Their strategy was pragmatic: Nations would stop fighting if it was in their mutual interest. And the best way to put nations in that configuration was to make them economic partners. Economic interdependence was thought to be an efficient pacification strategy. Of course, money is also the source of most conflicts among humanity, but if the absence of large-scale war in the past 60 years is any indication, it can be reasonably assumed that the strategy was appropriate.

Ever since the initial Treaty of Rome in 1957, Europe has consistently been a union in the making, a work in progress.² The idea that economics was a clever entry point, but was only a stepping-stone toward a broader, more durable, and thorough alliance, was widely accepted early in the process. “European construction” was not just a temporary state of affairs; it was a process leading to a receding horizon.

1. Toward a political union

The ultimate goal is, and always has been, to achieve a *political* union. After the Union went a long way to harmonize financial and business practices, lift trade barriers, and develop a common currency, it seemed only natural to give people more of a sense of community, shared values and principles, and compatible ethics—a “post-national, de-territorialized, civic conceptualization” (Michalis, 2007: 170). It was time for a “Europeanization of national societies” (Statham, 2010: 3).

The sense of affinity should find itself enhanced by the ever more integrated economic union, while it is also required to legitimize and operationalize that same economic union. In other words, all efforts to harmonize the economy should

2 The Treaty of Rome, or the “Treaty establishing the European Economic Community,” is the founding convention signed in 1957 (taking effect on January 1, 1958) by the six founding nations of what has now become the European Union.

create, mechanically, an increased sense of community among Europeans, and this sense of community is, in turn, necessary to make the economic union (and the accompanying constraints) acceptable to the European citizens. People are more likely to accept the free trade among European nations, the forced limitations to public deficits, and the harmonized regulations if they feel they share values, principles, and strong ties with Europeans from other countries, and this is more likely to happen in the context of integrated markets. The sense of community is both the by-product and driver of economic integration, which makes European integration an unstable and vulnerable process.

Therefore, to foster European integration, the leadership of the European construction has clearly identified the need to create, promote, and bolster a shared public sphere; a space where citizens of the Union can exchange, debate, engage, agree, disagree, and mobilize; a space where they belong and feel a sense of unity and common values. And, most importantly, a configuration where nationalism is kept in check so that it can never again be used to feed nation-based conflicts that have consistently turned Europe into a murderous battlefield in the past.

The means to achieve those ambitious goals have been subject to much debate and attention. The role of the media, and the news media in particular, is consistently center stage, though without consensus as to how news media might hinder or contribute to building a sense of European identity in a compelling way. This is not just a function of how much Europe is present in the news and how it is framed, given that “a sense of European belonging is probably not only incited by frequent news reports about the EU in national news media but also by ‘hidden’ and naturalized identity constructions in everyday news reporting” (Olausson, 2010: 139).

2. Competing public spheres

The European Union doesn’t replace its member nations, but merely federates them and adds an overarching layer of political coordination above them. Likewise, no European identity is likely to replace national or regional identities. At most, it might add a significant component of shared identity to help people acquire “a sense of themselves as *also* Europeans” (Gripsrud, 2007: 490). Olausson (2010) even argues that “identity positions do not inevitably destroy each other but function both interactively and side by side” (p. 149).

In fact, only 12% of Europeans feel that the European Union means a loss in their identity (European Commission, 2013c: T38) and 8% of Europeans even expect “European values” from the European Union (European Commission, 2013a: 6–7).

In any case, it can be assumed that any significant foundation of a European identity should symbiotically feed and be fed by a European public sphere, defined as “a truly inter- or transnational shared space where those holding political and bureaucratic power confront a well-informed, critical public” (Gripsrud, 2007: 480).

Whatever European public sphere is contemplated, it will be competing with the existing public spheres. Worse, the advent of the Union has revived interest in regions and regional identities and hopes among their supporters. The notion of a “Europe of the regions” has become popular, with the blessing of the European authorities that saw the rise or return of *regional* identities as a welcome adjuvant to weaken *national* claims and identities.

Public spheres are not, at their essence, exclusive, although it can be seen as a zero-sum game whereby engagement in or prompting by one particular public sphere will happen to the detriment of the others. A Europe-wide public sphere can cohabit with 28 national and any number of regional spheres. From the point of view of citizens, only two to three public spheres will be competing for attention: the European, their country’s, and possibly their region’s or city’s. In most cases, the national public spheres are still dominant and show no sign of weakening. This is reflected in surveys organized by the European Commission (European Commission, 2013a) showing that 9 Europeans in 10 are fairly or very attached to their country; slightly less (87%) to their city, town, or village; and less than half (46%) to the European Union. The situation is far from homogeneous across Europe. Attachment to the European Union ranges from less than 30% in the United Kingdom, Greece, and Cyprus to over two-thirds in Luxembourg; attachment to the country increases with age (European Commission, 2013a: 9), which might indicate a potential generational effect.

The (news) media have always been seen as a major agent in structuring, asserting, and sustaining public spheres (Dahlgren, 1995; Dahlgren & Sparks, 1991; Fossum & Schlesinger, 2007; Kleinen-von Königslöw, 2012; Koopmans & Statham, 2010; Schlesinger, 1993). This largely explains why the media have been the object of so much attention from public authorities and various stakeholders since the very first newspapers. In the second half of the 20th century, efforts to build a unified Europe identified, early on, the importance of the media. Europeans were primarily informed about the European construction and its institutions and dynamics through their national media, in a context where Europe suffered from an enduring “communication deficit,” meaning that European citizens had lost touch with the European construction and its governance. It then became fashionable to claim that overcoming the communication deficit required the development of a

European public sphere. Still today, nearly three Europeans in four consider that people in their country are not well informed about European matters (European Commission, 2013b: 33–36).

Television is still seen as a particularly influential medium; for some, the most important institution in national public spheres after parliaments (Gripsrud, 2007: 483). To this day, television remains the medium where Europeans get most of their news on national as well as European politics (European Commission, 2013b: 33–34).

3. Pan-European media

At some point, it became apparent that it was technically possible to set up transnational media outlets (i.e., aimed at audiences that transcend national media markets and national borders) that could reach a large section of European citizens simultaneously. The European Broadcasting Union (EBU), a group of public-service broadcasters, has consistently, since its creation in 1950, innovated in technologies and formats offering shared experiences across Europe, starting with Eurovision, which allows the simultaneous live broadcast of major events across the continent. But sharing an experience among television viewers across countries does not necessarily contribute to a sense of shared identity. In fact, some of the most successful pan-European broadcasts (i.e., those made available simultaneously to audiences throughout Europe) are sports competitions or the famous Eurovision Song Contest, which emphasize differences and competition among nations rather than shared values or culture. In 1959, the EBU launched the Eurovision News Exchange to allow public broadcasters to exchange footage for their television news programs. By encouraging the circulation of news content (if only in the form of images), the exchange could have contributed to a better understanding across nations, but there is no evidence that it has, even when truly multilateral stories were developed, as in the case of the European elections (Bourdon, 2007: 267).

In the 1980s, media went beyond sharing content to enter a golden age of *transnational media* (see Figure 1)—particularly in television, where this new age coincided with the advent of the “all news channels” (CNN and the copycats that followed). The possibility to launch a Europe-wide news channel was attainable and worth trying. It seemed to some as if satellites were “the ultimate tool . . . for television-engineered identity politics” (Bourdon, 2007: 271).

Following a 1980 resolution by the European parliament calling for the creation of a European radio and television broadcaster, a five-week experiment was undertaken in 1982 under the code name Eurikon, involving public-service broadcasters from Austria, Italy, the Netherlands, Germany, and the United Kingdom. The lessons learned from this prototype were not very encouraging. If anything, Eurikon demonstrated how difficult it would be to reach out and appeal to a transnational audience whose expectations were wide ranging.

Based on that experience, a fully fledged television station was nonetheless launched in 1985 under the name Europa-TV, this time involving public broadcasters from Germany, Ireland, Italy, the Netherlands, and Portugal. The content offered various formats with particular attention to avoiding national perspectives. For news segments, events in a particular country were reported upon by a journalist from another country (Theiler, 1999). But things did not work out as planned, and the station was terminated the next year after spending the entire budget that had been provisioned for its first three years. The demise of Europa-TV cannot be explained just by budgetary and political struggles. Fundamentally, the program failed to appeal to its (meager) potential audience and advertisers.

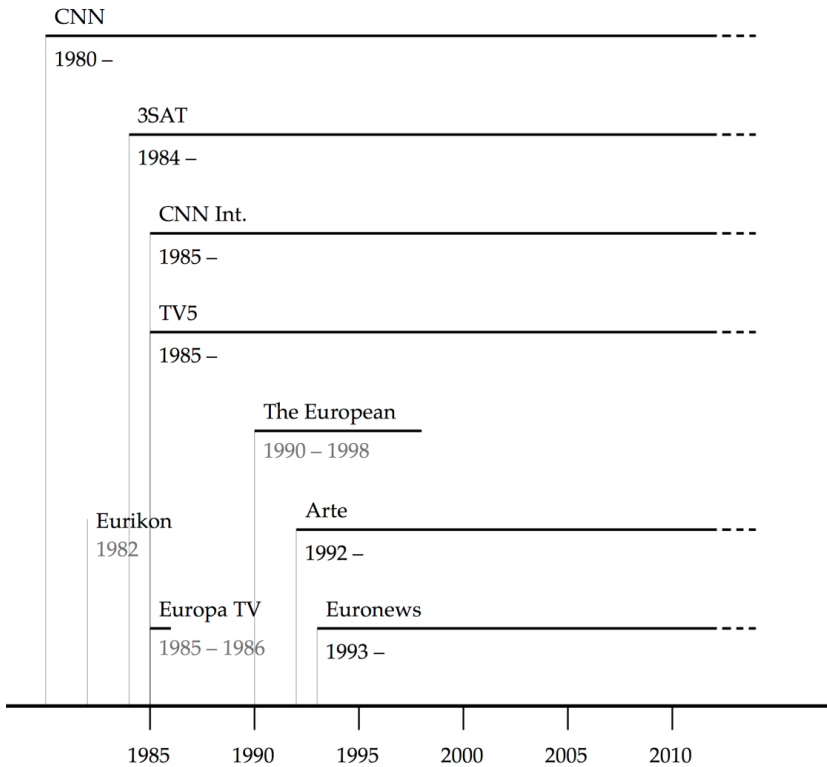
Documents produced by the European Commission at the time are telling of how the European authorities were already embarked on a hard-core techno-deterministic path. Direct broadcasting satellites were newly operational and “Pan-European satellite was *Deus ex machina*, the perfect medium to awaken and affirm dormant feelings of European consciousness and identification” (Michalis, 2007: 127). One report published in 1986 reads:

At the end of 1986 the whole European television scene will be transformed by the appearance of Europe’s first direct television satellites. . . . The choice is clear either a strengthening of exchanges within Europe and a deepening of Community cooperation to promote the identity of our continent in all its diversity, or a surrender to powerful competitors and their cultural models, be it the Americans today, or the Japanese tomorrow. (Commission of the European Communities, 1986: 3)

In a press release in November 1986 about the financial difficulties of Europa-TV, the European Commission emphasized that the experiments under way aimed at “overcoming language barriers and the difficulties that have always prevented the people of Europe from learning about each other” (Ripa Di Meana, 1986: 1). So, in essence, the advent of direct satellite broadcasting and the possibility to beam down multilingual television signals would at last help the people of Europe to better know one another, which would presumably prevent and appease tensions, concerns, and distrust among nations as a result.

Interestingly, the next significant attempt at a Europe-wide news medium was a newspaper, *The European*, launched in 1990 by one of the big press magnates of the time, Robert Maxwell. The paper failed to reach a significant audience (with a rather elitist positioning), yet it was published until 1998.

Figure 1. Transnational news media in Europe, a chronology.



Then in 1993 came Euronews, a pan-European television news channel based in Lyon, France, once again put together by a group of public broadcasters (though it later benefited from important public and private investments). Allegedly, this particular initiative was taken after European leaders felt uncomfortable with the quasi-monopoly enjoyed by CNN International, widely distributed across Europe, in covering the first Iraq War in 1991.

The model is rather simple but ambitious and innovative: It offered one video feed accompanied by five distinct audio feeds in five different languages, a model that Europa-TV had already experimented with. Euronews has managed to maintain

itself, gain footing in satellite and cable distribution in Europe and the rest of the world, and grow as more partners joined and new language versions were offered for a total of 7 and up to 13 in 2014. The longevity of Euronews is remarkable given that it was launched on grounds that were rather uncertain, not just financially but also strategically when it promised to provide a European perspective on the news, which sounded fine, but was complicated to define, let alone achieve. The choice to focus exclusively on news-related programming was both challenging (news stories are highly sensitive to cultural and political domestication), but it helped finding a format that would be accepted across Europe as television news bulletins and news media in general share many features (Heinderyckx, 1993, 2004).

Three other cases of transnational television channels are worth mentioning. The first is 3SAT (Drei-Sat), a German-language channel launched in 1984, aimed at German-speaking audiences, primarily in Germany, Austria, and Switzerland. The second is TV5 (TV cinq), launched the following year, aimed at a French-speaking audience, first in Europe (France, Belgium, Luxembourg, and Switzerland), later around the world. Both these channels target a particular language community, which, in its own way, is a strong sign that language diversity is a major impediment to pan-European media endeavors. It is worth noting, however, that nearly one in four Europeans declare that they have watched television programs in a language other than their mother tongue on several occasions in the last 12 months (European Commission, 2013a: 55). That proportion falls to less than 15% for books, newspapers, and magazines.

The third example is a bit of an oddity. Arte was launched in 1992 as a joint initiative of French and German public-service broadcasters. Bilingual, bicultural, and specialized in highbrow culture and arts, it seemed rather counterintuitive and had to overcome all sorts of difficulties, not just language-wise. For example, debates were much harder to organize than originally thought, simply because what makes a good debate is significantly different on both sides of the Rhine: In France, the expectations are for lively and heated exchanges and debaters interrupting one another, features that are seen in Germany as rude blunders. Nevertheless, Arte lives on, now with more partners.

These rare but lasting examples of transnational and for some pan-European media outlets are encouraging for those who seek to foster any sign of an emerging European public sphere. It is worth noting, however, that they are confined in two specific and rather elitist segments of the audience: the highbrow, high-culture and the financial and business news (which is not just pan-European but essentially globalized).

Then came the Internet and the rest of the information and communication technologies. Once again, as when satellite television came to be, techno-utopians have prophesied the advent of a better world where national barriers would be lifted, allowing free flows of information and communication that would lead to a better understanding of the other, which would make tolerance and empathy triumph over fear, hate, and ignorance. Very innovative and constructive initiatives have been undertaken. Transnational Web outlets, virtual communities, and forums have blossomed. And yet, to this day, the national public spheres are as resilient as national identities and national media, and manifestations of a true European public sphere are sporadic at best.

One specific factor hindering pan-European media is often overlooked: the extreme heterogeneity of media uses across Europe. Exposure to television, radio, newspapers, and websites, as well as trust in these different media, show extreme variations across countries, but they also vary greatly among age groups, education levels, and professions. Regional diversity is often concealed by the predominance of nation-based statistics. Even such a basic variable as heavy viewing of television newscasts shows more variation among regions than among nations (Heinderyckx, 1996). These preconditions, by themselves, largely obliterate the possibility for sustainable pan-European media, other than media targeting specific groups who would show sufficient convergence in interest, trust, language, and media use.

4. Resilient national perspectives on the news

With such a plethora of channels and means to access information, one would think that the tools that made the golden age of media-based propaganda during the Cold War would have become obsolete—absurd, in fact. And yet signs show that many national governments still believe that news media are a prime means to promote their views internationally. Public-service broadcasters were prompt to use satellite broadcasting to make an international version of their programs available beyond their borders. In 1991, 12 of these channels, national and transnational, decided to collaborate within the Bruges Group (Heinderyckx, 1996), which today gathers more than 20 partners.³

Some of these channels were strictly news channels, which seem to cultivate enduring fantasies of influence among nations struggling to matter on the international scene. An impressive number of countries have additionally set up their

3 The 12 channels were Arte, BBC TV World, RAISAT, Deutsche Welle TV, RTVE Int., TRT Int., Euronews, RTP Int., 3SAT, TV5, DUNA TV, and TVP-TV Polonia.

own ad hoc government-sponsored (not to be confused with public-service media) news channels destined to provide an *appropriate* (or rather appropriated) account of the news. The dynamics of this profusion is, in part, self-inducing: Governments regularly upset by the framing of events promoted by other nations' news outlets feel compelled to start their own operation to restore some balance.

These government-sponsored outlets are intriguing. They are not primarily aimed at an audience of expatriates or nationals traveling abroad, as evidenced by their additional efforts (and expenses) to develop different language versions or even to aim at a specific language community and/or region (e.g., U.S.-funded Alhurra, whose mission is self-described as “to provide objective, accurate, and relevant news and information to the people of the Middle East”). As recently as 2006, the French government launched its own France24, an all-news television channel offered in three languages (French, English, and Arabic).

Of course, journalists working for these outlets are professionals and, in most cases, not less concerned with ethics and objectivity than other journalists. Only in times of international tensions do things get significantly out of hand, as seen in 2014 on RT (which people suddenly remembered stood for “Russia Today”) when the coverage of the crisis in Ukraine prompted explicit pressure on journalists, resulting in at least one spectacular resignation.

Who watches these channels, and with what effect on their understanding of world events or of the views of the country controlling the channels, is extremely difficult to assess. In the absence of compelling evidence, it seems reasonable to assume that most of these state-sponsored news outlets do not have a massive effect on public opinion in their own country or abroad, despite the enduring fantasy that mass media can influence large segments of population. At best, it can, in times of crisis, provide valuable indications on the position and the framing of events promoted by the corresponding governments.

The Internet fed similar delusions when it was initially assumed that the free flow of information across national boundaries and the free and easy access to all kinds of content (and news in particular) from across the world would mechanically, organically even, make truth and understanding prevail. Yet, when browsing the Web, most users consult a limited number of sources, predominantly based on familiarity—that is, cultural and geographical proximity. In any given country, the most successful news websites are essentially online operations of leading newspapers, magazines, and radio and television stations. Despite the fact that users can just as easily consult outlets in other countries, few are interested in doing so, even if the content is in their own language.

Television news is still today the main source of news for most European citizens, and news media still overwhelmingly cling to national, regional, and language borders. The fact that language, regulatory structures, distribution systems, national preference, and the retention of national identities by the media maintain the nation as the point of reference in structuring media markets (Heinderyckx, 2001) does not, by itself, explain the endurance of the nation-as-media-market paradigm. Audiences are endemically attached to a fair dose of domestication in their news. Not only is there a lot of interest for proximity news; viewers prefer that even world events be explained from a familiar point of view, with eyes that they can best identify with. For example, when an important event takes place in France that also interests Belgians (e.g., the results of a French presidential election), French-speaking Belgians will tend to follow the coverage of that event on Belgian media, even though they could just as easily turn to the readily available French media (particularly television that is available on all cable subscriptions) and would, presumably, offer more thorough and better-informed coverage.

As a result of (or perhaps because of) the persistence of a national perspective on all events—including international events—journalists approach their reporting with a view to satiate audiences with a national outlook on the world. This presumption is likely to affect even journalists specializing in international (and not just foreign) events. Correspondents in Brussels, most of whom are present to cover predominantly or exclusively European institutions, are not immune to the domestication of their reporting. The Brussels press corps (i.e., the various correspondents present in Brussels to cover the international institutions from the European Commission to the European Parliament and NATO) is among the largest in the world (Terzis, 2014). The European institutions (Commission, Council, Parliament, and many smaller structures) spare no effort to build an echo chamber to explain what they try to achieve and how it benefits Europe and Europeans. Journalists are still today an essential link in any effort to reach the bulk of European citizens. But that link proves to be difficult to capitalize on. Under the pressure of their editors (who generally find European institutions to lack newsworthiness), and following their internalized propensity to domestication, foreign correspondents in Brussels are more like an army of picky gatekeepers looking for a national edge to European affairs. As a result, national political leaders often have a free ride to “blame it on Brussels” and “blame it on the other nations,” thus defeating the very essence of the worldview developed and promoted by the European institutions.

5. Europe of the Regions

None of this is likely to facilitate a significant media-driven European public sphere. Efforts to maintain and nourish national public spheres by means of news media must be seen not just as interfering with attempts to a pan-European sphere. They must also be seen in the context of a strong resurgence of regional identities and claims. Catalonia, Scotland, Corsica, Basque country, Flanders, even Bavaria and Brittany, among others, see the revival or the blooming of claims of cultural and political specificity, distinct identity, and even institutional autonomy.

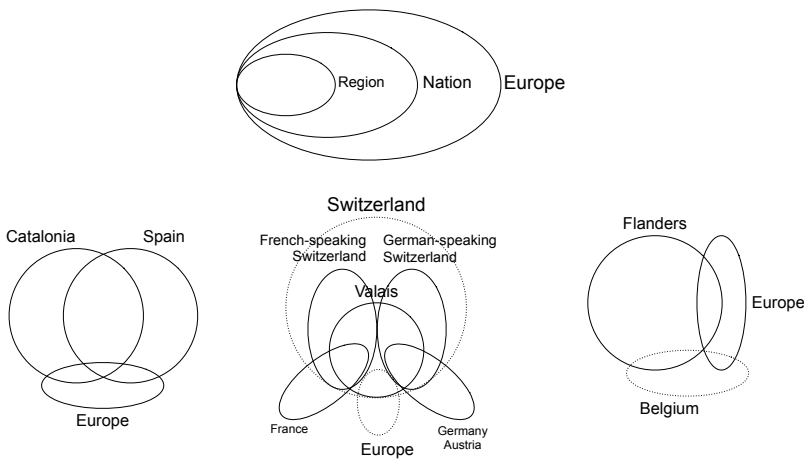
In many of these regions, citizens are engaged in both the public sphere of their region and the distinct public sphere of their country. Likewise, they are exposed to news media from their region and news media from their country. Yet the articulation between the regional and the national can take different forms that deviate considerably from the intuitive linear scheme of concentric circles (see Figure 2).

In Catalonia (in northeast Spain), a large portion of the population speaks Catalan and standard Spanish (Castilian) and can watch Catalan television (e.g., TV3) and read Catalan newspapers (e.g., *El Periódico*). Meanwhile, the same people will watch national, Spanish television (e.g., TVE or Telecinco) and read national newspapers (e.g., *ABC* or *El País*). One could choose to exclude oneself from one or the other of these public spheres and sets of media outlets, but chances are that a large portion of the population will enjoy cross-exposure to these intersecting, overlapping spheres. When it comes to any number of contentious issues between the national and the regional (e.g., autonomy, regional exceptions, taxes, and transfers of wealth), these public spheres will compete and will convey diverging or even conflicting messages. The optimist will see this as feeding a healthy democratic debate; the pessimist will see the potential for polarization driving public opinion toward the extremes.

Switzerland is not a member of the European Union, not even of the European Economic Area, and this is consistent with the public opinion as established by national referendums. The configuration of public and media spheres in Switzerland is quite peculiar. The media landscape is shaped by the four national languages (German, French, Italian, and Romansh), and the largest subnational administrative units are the 26 cantons that enjoy a fair level of autonomy and are necessarily their own public sphere, with periods of intense political debates around the times of referendums. Because of the language diversity, there is no true national media sphere, but instead at least four distinct language-based media spheres whose reach cuts across the national and the cantonal levels. Media from Germany, Austria,

France, and Italy maintain significant audiences in different parts of the country, resulting in a particularly intricate arrangement of public spheres and media spheres. As an example, the Canton of Valais has two official languages and, as a result, is entangled between the French-speaking and German-speaking media and public spheres, with incursions from French- and German-language foreign media, while being part of many embryonic European public spheres, though feeling strongly about not being part of Europe in its most institutional forms.

Figure 2. Entangled media and public spheres



The case of Flanders (the Dutch-speaking region in the north of Belgium) is completely different insofar as there are no true national media in Belgium (as in Switzerland), but in this case, there is much more of a fit between regions and language use. As a result, the Flemish media play the role, for people living in Flanders, of what would be called national media elsewhere. This is a source of confusion because the two levels (regional and national) are not conflated, but one is substituting for the other. And in any case, there is not the concentric dual-level media sphere (regional, national) that can be found in other national contexts.

Many people in Flanders might enjoy sufficient command of French to be able to use French-speaking media, yet audience measurements show that this is rather marginal. Exposure to media of the other language community is not so much perceived as exposure to another set of Belgian media but as an incursion into the media sphere of the other community in a near-foreign-media experience. The absence of national media is often mentioned as an aggravating factor for the persistent tensions between Flanders and Wallonia (the French-speaking region constituting the southern part of Belgium). The situation is further complicated by an intriguing

asymmetry with regard to the success of media from bordering countries. Although viewing of television channels from the Netherlands is only marginal in Flanders, television stations from France account for nearly a third of the total market of television viewing in francophone Belgium, adding a layer of complexity to the media sphere there. This fundamental discrepancy between the two main media markets of Belgium is evidence that a shared language might be a necessary, but obviously is not a sufficient, condition for cross-border media undertakings.

In Belgium, observers often note that each community is ill informed about the other. Elections, even federal, are organized in such a way that elected representatives are accountable only to their own electorate in their own region in their own public sphere.

The situation in Belgium is an interesting model to examine how the absence of a media-enhanced public sphere maintains a distance with, and a weak understanding of, “the others,” thus affecting the coherence and perceived legitimacy of the larger overarching political structure. News media-centrism, however, must be avoided, particularly in an age when new forms of media outlets (digital media predominantly) are reconfiguring the ways by which people form their opinions about the world and nurture their political consciousness. Yet whether the state of the news media is the sign or one of the determinants of the state of the public sphere, it is hard to deny that the two notions are closely knit.

6. Toward porous, interconnected public spheres

The resilience of the national public sphere (and of the regional public spheres in contexts where regions claim near-national status) is undeniable, even if there are signs that they tend each, separately, to become more European (Risse-Kappen, 2014). Its weakening in favor of any kind of supranational public sphere is not just delayed and overdue; it appears to be stalled, ill founded, and elusive. Accepting the idea that mass media, including news media, are still a major component of contemporary public spheres; that they shape, consolidate, and invigorate them; and given the absence of any transnational, pan-European media outlet reaching a significant segment of the whole European population is recognizing that the advent of a large-scale, inclusive European public sphere is not just slow forming. It is not on the European horizon. It is not, in the end, the mere natural by-product of European integration that was once thought to simply, organically emerge as a sign of maturity of the European project and of some form of social-cultural-political convergence among the peoples of Europe. Neither is it a reality that can be enhanced, let alone created by sheer political will and force-fed by media development.

Therefore, waiting for a European public sphere to strengthen and buttress the European Union and take it to the next level of integration is risking to stall the European project altogether. The increasing presence of openly Euro-skeptics among the elected members of the European Parliament is a reminder that European integration is not necessarily an irresistible process that can progress only in one direction, albeit at varying speed. It could slow to a stop and even, to some extent, revert to a looser form of integration. Making a European public sphere the necessary condition to achieve European integration exposes the very idea of an integrated political union as a mere utopian and groundless chimera confined to policy papers and political rhetoric.

The budding of transnational public spheres (in business and highbrow cultural circles, among activists, in relation to humanitarian causes, etc.) must be nursed and amplified as much as possible, but with the aim to consolidate these essential cores of transnational political, social, or cultural consciousness; not to fantasize about how they could one day be magnified and replicated across larger portions of society.

A supplementary strategy could be to rely more on what could be called *porous, interconnected public spheres*. Going back to the early strategies of the European institutions, it is still reasonable and legitimate to improve the way Europeans get to know and understand one another. Not in hope that this will lead them to realize that they have so much in common that they would be driven to a postnationalist European state of mind, but with the more modest, realistic goal to diffuse antagonism, enable and facilitate empathy across a broad cultural, social, and political spectrum, Europe-wide. This strategy is not about finding the largest common denominator (by trying to interest everyone, one usually ends up deterring most) but about revealing and, where suitable, promoting differences and diversity as a natural and desirable part of a shared Europe.

This is reminiscent of how Brüggemann (2010) defines a transnational public sphere: “a space of communication which is comprised of a set of national public spheres connected by communication flows” (p. 7). The porosity implies that national and regional public spheres can move away from the self-centered, centripetal dynamics that often lead a nation or region to turn its back to others, by fear or disdain. The interconnectedness requires organized processes and structures to deliberately reach out to other media spheres in an effort to bridge the two by means of coverage of news from that other sphere that does not stigmatize or highlight differences, but instead shows realities that may seem disparate, but that will provide clues and examples of life, values, and emotions, and, ultimately, induce empathy and understanding.

Mechanisms of that nature already exist, though in rudimentary but promising forms. Public broadcasters have invaluable experience in this area. Not only have they been at the helm of the most daring, even if sometimes doomed, attempts at crossing the borders of national media markets; they have managed to maintain, among them, a collaborative work culture that offers considerable potential. The Eurovision News Exchange organized by the European Broadcasting Union since 1962 is an emblematic example. Although it is essentially a structure designed to provide partners with quality television footage of major events across Europe at a low cost, it represents a rare example of interconnection among public and media spheres across Europe (and beyond). The same structure, or another structure following a similar model, could be used to more systematically provide different perspectives on the same topic, and not just feed the “international news” segments of television newscasts. Instead of being a source on major events abroad, it could organize the exchange of material related to broader issues with high human interest and rooted in what would otherwise be seen as local news. If, for example, the financial crisis in one country is leading to schools being closed or restaurants going out of business, showing this reality by the example in other countries, enhanced by life stories and testimonies from actors and witnesses, would likely be of interest to a large audience and create empathy, because they, too, send their children to school and enjoy going to restaurants.

Creating more porosity among the irreducible national and regional public spheres could enhance mutual understanding not from a top-down attempt to relativize cultural differences but from a repeated experience of differences and similarities related to shared realities. And this should not be restricted to public-service television. Newspapers from different regions or countries have occasionally proven that they can undertake joint editorial projects with comparable aims. These initiatives are, however, isolated and short-lived and tend to involve flagship newspapers within the rather elitist “quality papers.” The fact that the potential seems confined to public media and quality papers raises concern about the possibility for this interconnected, porous public sphere to be inclusive and not restricted to the upper segment of the socioeconomic spectrum of the European population. But it is also a reminder that such an approach must necessarily be associated with high journalistic standards. The portrayal of “the other” can too easily turn into caricatures, oversimplifications, and stereotyping. More than technology and infrastructure, news production of such nature requires time and human resources, both of which are unfortunately in short supply in newsrooms across Europe.

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