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## Book review: the European public sphere and the media: Europe in crisis

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## **The European Public Sphere and the Media: Europe in Crisis**

Edited by Anna Triandafyllidou, Ruth Wodak and Michał Krzyżanowski

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By Marco Scalvini, LSE

The legitimacy of transnational and supranational systems of governance in the European Union (EU) partly depends on the degree to which the boundaries of national public spheres are expanded so as to correspond with the transnational scope of governance. The recent crisis of the EU project generated numerous theoretical discussions about the necessity of creating a stronger European Public Sphere (hereafter EPS) in order to fix the democratic deficit of the European institutions by linking the EU institutions with their citizens. This could imply an extension of the media arena itself, leading to a pan-European media system with a pan-European audience. In this context, the edited volume entitled *The European Public Sphere and the Media: Europe in Crisis* poses two crucial empirical questions regarding the potential of an EPS: Do the various nationally consolidated public spheres constitute the EPS? and to what extent can and does this EPS transgress these national public spheres? In other words, is the EPS more than the sum of its parts? (p. 19)

The book seeks to address these key questions by drawing on a longitudinal empirical perspective and by engaging with a critical discussion of the links among the media, history and politics in Europe – particularly the ways in which international crises have been debated in Europe since 1945. As the editors state in the Introduction, their aim is to investigate how a EPS was created in the national media of several countries at various critical junctures in post-war European history (p. 4). This decision to focus on the historical development of the EPS is original and unique, since several empirical studies have taken the opposite trajectory: taking the “Europeanization of national media” for granted. The volume, therefore, challenges traditional research on the EPS, based on a synchronic and quantitative analysis of specific European events (pp. 3-4) and presents a pioneering and insightful diachronic examination of different values in times of crisis (p. 6), thus offering an important critical reflection on the negotiation of Europe between the nation-states or transnationally.

The first chapter offers interesting theoretical reflections on how crises offer a mediated appeal to specific values in the public sphere (p. 16). Crises are “discursively constructed” and gain semiotic meanings, which have a function and role to make history. However this mediated construction of meanings does not relate to concepts like identity or collective memory but to struggles over values in the public sphere through the dynamics of critiques and crises (p. 32). More specifically, the authors discuss how journalism and the media construct crises by focusing on the interdependence between what Pierre Bourdieu defines as the “journalistic field” and the “field of politics.”

The second chapter, “Media, Political Communication and the European Public Sphere” draws on literature on the mediated public sphere in contemporary Europe. Research evidence underlines the gap between the idealization of a transnational public sphere and prevailing media practices and cultures that are still based on national identities. The findings show how news remains tied to the national interest in international events; moreover different empirical studies have proven how foreign news coverage has declined in many European countries. Such evidence validates the conceptual focus of the book on the

dialectical process between national and transnational media discourses rather than on a taken-for-granted, already existing transnational political and media culture (p. 48).

The second part of the volume, "Crisis Events and the Idea of Europe in Post-War Media Debates" (chapter 3) opens the empirical section of the volume, by presenting the historical context and dynamics of the case studies and by highlighting the extent to which European post-war history has been marked more by contestation and confrontation than by consensus and compromise. In six crisis eras, case studies of media discourse include a large collection of information and discuss events as reported by their national media. However, such cases reveal a historical narrative marked not only by rupture and transformation but also by continuity. In other words, this part offers an interpretative lens through which to analyze the perceived change or stability in Europe across time, revealing both the pluralities and contradictions that exist in much of contemporary research on the continent (p. 56).

Consequently, the empirical part of the book offers media discourse analyses of eight crises: the 1956 revolution in Budapest and the ensuing intervention of the Soviet Union (chapter 4); the building of the Berlin Wall in August 1961 (chapter 5); the youth revolt in Paris in May 1968 (chapter 6); the "Prague Spring" and the invasion of Czechoslovakia by the Soviet Union in August 1968 (chapter 7); the declaration of the "State of War" by the military government in Poland in 1981 (chapter 8); the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989 (chapter 9); the Second Gulf War in 2003 and the invasion of Iraq by the United States (chapter 10); and the February 2006 controversy over the publication of cartoons of the Prophet Mohammed in Denmark (chapter 11).

All case studies address a set of questions regarding definitions of Europe, the relevance of values in the constitution of the European Public Sphere and, in particular, the formation of European values in the course of media coverage. Each case study compares several countries in two or more quality newspapers with the aim of identifying emerging national, regional and transnational patterns of reporting on particular crises. In this way, each specific event analyzed is contextualized within its national and transnational socio-political setting.

In the Conclusion, the editors highlight how the case studies revealed a highly diversified set of "national" conceptualizations of Europe (p. 261). In most of the events prior to 1989, the East-West logic that transformed Europe had only a "geopolitical conceptualization" (p. 61) that symbolized the entire global space and includes many non-European actors such as the US and the Soviet Union. Therefore, according to the authors, it was easier for the media to perceive most of the events as rooted in the Cold War divisions rather than in an autonomous political European space. As consequence, in coverage of those periods, the media became a "national filter of perception of Europe" (p. 262).

Findings, however, revealed that, despite the redefinition of the EU as an institutional actor after the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989, media coverage did not demonstrate significant changes in the conceptualization of Europe. The perception of Europe as a continent of dissonance and dissent was further confirmed by the coverage of the Iraq War in 2003 (p. 263), where European countries were divided on the issue of invasion - either condemning the invasion or joining the "coalition of the willing."

The authors of the individual chapters emphasize the ways in which values in the European Public Sphere are selected and interpreted through national filters, thereby resulting in the lack of any definition of Europe in "ethnic and value-oriented" terms (p .

265). However, two case studies can be considered as exceptions. The first one is the Poland crisis of 1981 (chapter 8), when Europe was invoked as an intermediary actor between East and West and as a regional/global key player, which acted as a peace-keeping force, thus linking Europe to values of peace.

The second exception is the cartoons affair in 2006, when a common transnational discursive space became visible in the media as a consequence of an emerging division between Europe and Islam. Analysis of press material from the crisis, unprecedented in the history of European media, demonstrated a convergence towards a common set of European values and a homogenous representation of European cultural unity and, in this sense, represents a “reference to an ethical responsibility of Europe” (p. 267). The European press, it was shown, largely agreed on the necessity to defend the freedom of opinion but, at the same time, certain media (especially in the UK and the Netherlands) raised questions concerning the risk of misrepresenting Muslims in opposition to Europe (p. 258). Therefore, during the crisis over the Mohammed cartoons, the European media witnessed a link between “Europe” and “values” through “the introduction of value-based and ethically charged conceptions of Europe” (p. 266).

To conclude, the volume uses a detailed and competent analysis of media discourse to explore the implications of current trends in communication and culture for the construction and maintenance of a European Public Sphere. The book, at the same time, highlights how traditional boundaries separating the public spheres of nation states are not dissolving so easily under the influence of transnational and global communication media. It, therefore, rightly identifies the question of what kind of communicative space can emerge at the European level as its core research question –in the sense of how the European Public Sphere is able to create interfaces both with national public spheres and with European institutions. Indeed, after the initial rejection of the European Constitution in 2005 by the voters of France and the Netherlands, it became very clear how the lack of a real European Public Sphere made consensus and progress on economic, political and cultural union more difficult to achieve.

However, two criticisms can be posed. Firstly, valuable as the focus on the role of the press may be in illuminating questions about the European Public Sphere, the book does not offer an account of other media, such as magazines, which generally host opinions and editorials of non-national intellectuals; yet, magazines such as *The Economist*, *Le Monde Diplomatique*, *Der Spiegel* or *L'Espresso*, are more sensitive to attempts to construct a forum for common European debate across national borders than national media appear to be.

Secondly, although the emphasis on the West-East axis is justified, given its role in shaping the values of the contemporary European project, it must be remembered that the North-South axis has also been a large part of the debate on the construction of Europe. Almost all of the case studies presented are based on crises in the former Eastern Europe, but none of them is related to other geopolitical conflicts in the European region, such as the repercussions of the Israeli-Palestine conflict, the crisis of refugees from the war in Lebanon, the coup d'état in Greece or Portugal, or the 1972 terrorist attack during the Munich Olympic Games. Most of all, I was dissatisfied with the absence of a case study of the wars in the former Yugoslavia (Croatia, Bosnia, Kosovo), Europe's deadliest conflicts since World War II and perhaps the most evident failure of the Europe Union, marked by the lack of leadership by its institutions.

Finally, although the volume is an attractive interdisciplinary project, it seems weak in explaining the crystallization of national identities and values in the contemporary European Public Sphere. The conclusions do not elaborate on an understanding of the relations between national identities, on one hand, and historical European national diversity, on the other, and the implications of these phenomena for the realization of the European Public Sphere.

However, unlike other studies, this book is unique in identifying a complex pattern emerging in the segmented European Public Sphere, which is due to its longitudinal methodology. Indeed, while the European Union has expanded in the past decades, shared values and collective identification have languished and the media have played a specific role in the “common values deficit” that characterizes the European project. In this respect, the book is a most remarkable attempt to develop research on the reasons for and the consequences of this trend. Certainly the creation of the European Public Sphere could define transnational collective identities in public discourse by, for example, referring to Europe as a problem-solving community or a community of shared values. At the same time, the prominent national media, which are one of the particularities of this process of the construction of an EPS, have to incorporate political actors, views and arguments from other European countries into national public discourses by resetting their national filters.