

The Limits of the European Public Sphere

 blogs.lse.ac.uk/eurocrisispress/2013/11/27/the-limits-of-the-european-public-sphere/

Eurocrisis in the
Press

By [Francisco Seoane Pérez](#)

11/27/2013

The proverbial distance between European Union institutions and European citizens has been attributed by political leaders and scholars alike to a ‘communications gap’, that is, to the way EU affairs are mediated by the news media, and to the apparent lack of interest by national elites in telling their constituencies why Europe matters. In my first book, [Political communication in Europe: The cultural and structural limits of the European public sphere](#) (Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), I challenge this ‘mediation theory’ and suggest instead a cultural and systemic explanation for the distant and bureaucratic character of the European Union. Indeed, blaming the media and national politicians (suggesting a communications gap) leaves in the dark the two real deficits which prevent Europe from enjoying a vibrant public sphere: a deficit of domesticisation (Europe is always ‘out there’) and a deficit of politicisation: European politics are difficult to translate into a left vs. right scheme. As a matter of fact, politics is intentionally detached from economics – European leaders demand a ‘European economic governance’, with no concern about the sort of political orientation it should have.



Popular disengagement with the EU is a consequence of the sort of cultural community Europe is (an interdependent continent which nevertheless is not a nation) and the sort of political regime the EU is, a pseudo-confederation full of anti-publicity bias: elite-driven integration, corporatism (interest groups and associations co-govern with elected politicians and the bureaucracy) and diplomacy (which demands some degree of secrecy in order to reach consensus). Under these constraints, the European Union has become what sociologist Niklas Luhmann would call an *autopoietic* system, it is only understandable (and even lovable) by its own players, be they Eurocrats or what I call ‘the Euominati’, the large network of those who know the ropes of Europe (from farmers to academics, by way of business consultants and environmental activists).

Therefore, the problem with Europe is not one of communications. It is about the aporia of wanting a European democracy without a European nation. Interestingly, the Europe’s conundrum reveals the intimate connection between mass democracy and nationalism, and the frigid beauty of a liberal regime (highly respectful of the rule of law and the individual) but with no defined boundaries and, as a consequence, no political substance. It is the perfect world for the private, bourgeois traveler, but it will never mobilize collective passions. The EU, I suggest, proves controversial political scientist Carl Schmitt right: ‘the political’ is about identity and conflict. The EU is distant and apolitical. The EU wants to be cosmopolitan and universal, but the political world (Schmitt dixit) is a pluriverse, not a universe.

The claims suggested in my book are supported by empirical evidence, namely by interviews and observations with members of the public (and semi-public) European public sphere at three steps in the geographic scale: EU, national, and regional level. My method, known as ‘[network ethnography](#)’ allows for the squaring of the circle: studying in-depth a community of actors which is geographically spread. The method involves two steps: a selection of informants through a social network analysis, and the subsequent observation and interviewing of the relevant ‘nodes’ in such network. My informants were selected through a social network analysis of EU-related news stories in two regional newspapers (*Yorkshire Post* in the UK and *La Voz de Galicia* in Spain). These two regions were

chosen as the 'generative' case studies because they represented the two extreme poles of popular acceptance of the EU: Yorkshire is quintessentially Eurosceptic, whereas Galicia is consistently pro-EU. EU-related political actors were also interviewed at the national (Madrid and London) and supranational level (Brussels). Empirically, I offer a multi-level ethnography of the EU political sphere, which is formed by elected politicians, bureaucrats, journalists, business groups, trade unions, environmental associations, and other individuals 'in touch' with the European Union.

In conclusion, *Political communication in Europe* argues for moving the debate on the unpopularity of the EU forward. The book discards, with evidence, one of the main explanations given for the EU's distant and bureaucratic character (the communications gap), and suggests instead an explanation based upon a twin deficit of domesticisation (lack of identity) and politicisation (lack of ideological conflict, and the separation of politics from economics).

Dr Francisco Seoane Pérez is assistant professor in political communication at the University of Castilla-La Mancha (Cuenca Campus). He holds a PhD in Communications Studies from the University of Leeds, and an MA in Communication from the University of Illinois at Chicago (with a grant from the Fundación Pedro Barrié de la Maza). His research focuses on the role of journalism in liberal democracies, and on the intersection of new media and political engagement. His latest book is *Political Communication in Europe: The Cultural and Structural Limits of the European Public Sphere* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2013).

Note: This article gives the views of the author, and not the position of the Euro Crisis in the Press blog, nor of the London School of Economics.