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2.1 Introduction

In political as well as scientific discussions on the integration of Europe and the further development of the European system of democratic governance, the formation of a European (political) public sphere is considered to be one of the most important challenges on the agenda. A “public sphere” related to policy-making on the European level only emerges—if at all—on an “issue by issue” basis and is usually restricted to small “expert-communities”.

Over its roughly five decades of existence, the European Union (EU) as a political body has taken over more and more decision-making competences from its member states. This concentration of powers at the level of the Union is in many respects an indispensable condition for establishing Europe as a unified socio-political area with common and equal rules, rights and standards of living. The expansion of the political competence of the EU has always been and still is accompanied by complaints about an inherent democracy deficit, since the executive branch of the EU is not directly elected by the European citizenry. As a reaction to the expansion of competences and as a means to overcome the democratic deficit and foster the legitimacy of EU decision-making, the role of the European Parliament has been successively strengthened. Thus nowadays the parliament is equipped with powers largely comparable to those held by national parliaments vis-à-vis their national executives. However, one fundamental problem of European democracy cannot easily be overcome by institutional changes, but is connected to the social and cultural persistence of the nation state. This has been coined the “communication deficit” of Europe (Meyer 1999), rooted in the lack of an active political public sphere at the European level.

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This is not only an issue in academic debates on the theoretical foundations of European democracy but has become a main focus of attention in the European institutions themselves. In its White Paper on a European Communication Strategy (Commission of the European Union 2006) the European Commission's (EC) notion of the problem is phrased as follows:

The public sphere in which political life takes place is largely a national sphere. To the extent that European issues appear on the agenda at all, they are seen by most citizens from a nation perspective. The media remain largely national, partly due to language barriers; there are few meeting places where Europeans from different Member States can get to know each other and address issues of common interest [...]. There is a sense of alienation from 'Brussels', which partly mirrors the disenchantment with politics in general. One reason for this is the inadequate development of a 'European public sphere' where the European debate can unfold.

The EC identified this as a central barrier to the development of democratic governance in Europe ("White Paper on European Governance", Commission of the European Union 2001) and has set up a plan to "stimulate a wider debate between the EU's democratic institutions and citizens" ("Plan-D for Democracy, Dialogue and Debate", Commission of the European Union 2005). A focal role in this respect has been assigned to the Internet as a means of involving the public in ongoing processes of policy-making.

Part I intends to give an overview of the debate on the need for and possibilities of developing a transnational European public sphere as an integral intermediate democratic structure between European policy-making institutions and the European constituency. For this purpose, conceptual arguments on the role of the public sphere and related concepts—citizenship and civil society—in transnational democratic governance are discussed, and empirical evidence of the state of Europeanisation of the political public sphere is provided. This discussion is set against a reflection on features of political communication on the Internet and the potential of the Internet to support the emergence of transnational forms of citizenship and transnational political publics.

2.2 The Democratic Function of the Public Sphere

What is so important about the public sphere with regard to democratic politics? The "public sphere" plays an indispensable political role for the democratic legitimisation of policies. In Habermas' (1992, 1996) concept of deliberative democracy, the public sphere functions as an intermediate level between political decision makers and a politically aware citizenry or the "demos". In this perspective, the public sphere is not an institution or organisation, nor is it a particular form of collective: "The public sphere should rather be perceived as an open field of communicative exchange. It is made up of communication flows and discourses which allow for the diffusion of intersubjective meaning and understanding" (Trenz 2008: 2). In Habermas' view, the creation of a trans-European public sphere (in addition to a European civil society and political culture) is a central functional

requirement for a democratically constituted Europe as well as for a European identity and citizenship (Habermas 2001: 18).

The public sphere is a concept with inherently normative aspects. It describes features that are necessary for a democracy to function. There must be room for public deliberation, in order to establish a link between the constituency and its representatives—i.e. to process the content of policy-making among those who will be affected by the decisions to be taken and who delegate their representatives to the decision-making bodies. Thus “public sphere” does not simply mean some form of public communication, but always implies a certain (deliberative) quality that transforms public communication into public opinion and will formation (Frazer 2007; Trenz 2008). The discourse of actively participating citizens is the backing for political decision-making in the representative system, as the citizenry (directly or via the media) provides the political institutions with ideas, interests and demands that have to be taken into consideration in the political process.

The public sphere comprises highly visual and formalised institutions such as parliaments, informal, more segmented spheres of casual communication among citizens, and citizens’ associations which make up the “civil society”. The latter can be denoted as “weak” publics, as the ongoing opinion forming is not connected with collectively binding decision-making. Parliaments are strong publics, where opinion forming is directly and legitimately channelled into binding decisions (Frazer 1992; also Fossum and Schlesinger 2007). As the legitimacy of democratic powers is rooted in the will, interests and opinions of the citizens, it is decisive for a democracy for “strong publics” to be related to, backed up by and rooted in the “weak publics” of civil societies.

Whereas historically the concept of the public sphere is closely connected with the emergence of the nation state in Europe, the public sphere nowadays is not conceived of as being one single—nationally focused—space of public communication. The public sphere as a communicative space is regarded as a “highly complexe network” including a “multitude of overlapping international, national, regional, local and subcultural arenas” (Habermas 1996: 373f.).

2.3 Democratic Governance and the Public Sphere in Europe

Brüggemann (2005: 3) discerns three notions of the European public sphere that can be found in the political as well as the scientific debate:

- (i) A European public sphere cannot flourish since there is no common language, no common media and no European civil society and identity. Thus European policy-making has to be legitimised in a different way than it is at the level of the nation state.
- (ii) A European Public sphere would imply communication in different countries about the same topic at the same time with the same frame of reference.
- (iii) The most ambitious notion regards the European public sphere as a network of Europeanised national public spheres connected by information flows,

converging political agendas and camps in debate, transnational media and transnational speakers, and a European identity and citizenship.

The idea of the EC's White Paper on Governance (Commission of the European Union 2001: 12) regarding how to provide for democratic legitimisation is as follows: "The aim should be to create a transnational "space" where citizens from different countries can discuss what they perceive as being the important challenges for the Union. This should help policy makers to stay in touch with European public opinion, and could guide them in identifying European projects which mobilise public support." This is very much in line with the Habermasian understanding of the democratic role of the public sphere. Moreover this concept very much resembles the ambitious model (point iii above) of the European public sphere. The Commission is not satisfied with national discourse arenas being Europeanised by adopting more European issues to their agendas, but does conceive of the European public sphere as a genuinely European arena of exchange of citizens across borders and with the European political bodies.

In discussions revolving around a more ambitious, deliberative concept of the public sphere, there are three aspects that are usually mentioned:

- (i) The notion of a public sphere as a communicative space of political debate and opinion forming. Such a space can be observed on different levels.
- (ii) The everyday ongoing exchange of citizens at their workplace or in their neighbourhoods and family about public affairs. For modern mass democracies this more or less "private" way of democratic opinion-forming is related to and fed by
- (iii) the mass-media public sphere, by which the opinion forming of citizens is also related to the decision-making process in political institutions of representative democracy.

The extent to which this communicative space develops or can fulfil its function as an intermediate level between the citizenry and the institutions of representative democracy is regarded as being dependent on a common identity and a feeling of solidarity and public concern among the constituency that backs up the institutions of representative democracy. The public is made up of citizens who are formally part of a political entity or community and must also subjectively regard themselves as members of a community and not merely individuals in order to engage in public interest.

A further societal aspect of the public sphere is linked to this. An active public sphere is in the need of active and participating citizens, who interact with each other and express their demands, fears and attitudes towards the political institutions and authorities. These active and organised citizens form the "civil society" that supports opinion-forming and contributes to the public sphere with public activities (events, protest) and contributions to mass-mediated public debate. An active, organised civil society is—as it were—an indispensable counterpart to

political institutions and a salient part of the public sphere in addition to the mass media.

In the following, certain aspects of citizenship and civil society are first discussed with regard to their importance and relevance for developing a European public sphere, before conclusions are drawn on the prospects for a “European Public Sphere”.

2.3.1 European Citizenship

Citizenship, following the widely accepted classical definition of Marshall (1950), is an outcome of a historical struggle for civil rights in the course of which (a) equal rights and obligations before the law, (b) equal formal participation in political life, and (c) equal participation in social welfare have been established as the cornerstones of modern, Western democracies. As such, the emergence of citizenship is closely related to the emergence of the nation state. A further aspect of citizenship that is linked to the historical emergence of the nation state is the seemingly “subjective” dimension of civic-mindedness shared by the members of a political community. This kind of public spirit is based on the one hand in shared civil rights, i.e. citizenship according to the rights-based meaning mentioned above. On the other hand, it is bound up with nationally defined socio-cultural identities.

In the classical republican model, democracy is more than a process of bargaining for individual interests, but presupposes that citizens act, strive for and argue about public concerns and the common good. Thus a sense of belonging to a community and sharing a common set of values based in common traditions is necessary for a democratic community to function. “The formation of a *volonté general* is possible because citizens are equal and share common values and notions of the public interest” (Eriksen 2007: 29). There is some dispute over the extent to which a functioning democracy requires citizens to share certain values that constitute an identity, a sense of belonging and commonality, such as is held by so-called communitarian concepts of democracy. A strictly liberal concept of democracy would presuppose neither an active civil society nor a sense of public concerns on the part of citizens. A third middle position is held by deliberative concepts of democracy which do not see the need for or possibility of a shared substantial cultural identity, but regards the mutual acceptance of citizens as equal holders of rights to be a sufficient basis for rational societal deliberation on the common interest. This latter position is very much in line with arguments put forward in order to support the possibility of transnational or European citizenship.

2.3.1.1 National and Transnational Citizenship

Political integration on the basis of a cultural identity of the citizenry is without doubt an achievement of the nation state. A collective political identity which underpins the public sphere is based in common origin, heritage and language (Fossum and Schlesinger 2007: 6). Citizenship in terms of legal and political rights and duties is attributed to people on the basis of territorial and cultural (language)

grounds. The question is whether this concept of citizenship, which includes rights as well as a sense of belonging and identity, can be transferred to the transnational level. It has been argued that a pre-political fundament cannot by any means be achieved in transnational democratic systems, and transnational democracy thus cannot be conceptualised according to the model of the nation state (e.g. Grimm 2004). On the other hand it can be argued (Frazer 2007; contributions in Eder and Giesen 2003) that with globalisation and increasing migration, the foundations of national citizenship are vanishing, and national democracies need to establish a form of political and cultural identity that goes beyond national traditions and common values rooted in language and history. In the course of globalisation and migration, the legal and political aspect of citizenship will be uncoupled from cultural identity, as more and more people not born on the national territory and without any background in French, German, or Dutch culture (and language), for instance, are ascribed political rights as citizens of France, Germany, or The Netherlands. An ongoing uncoupling of rights and identities—the two major components of citizenship—can be observed (Shaw 1997; cf. Shore 2004: 34f.): “Rights increasingly assume legal uniformity and universality and are being defined at the global level. Identities, in contrast, still express particularity, and are perceived as being territorially bounded.”

If there is an ongoing dissolution of the old nation-state concept of citizenship, this does not, however, necessarily imply that transnational citizenship is emerging. If citizenship has legal and political (rights and duties) as well as cultural (values, identity) aspects, the problem is to develop European citizenship not only in terms of rights and duties but also in terms of identity and of “being European” becoming a part of subjectively felt citizenship.

2.3.1.2 EU Politics and Citizenship

The concept of European Citizenship ranks quite prominently in official EU politics. The European citizen is addressed directly in EC programmes and conceptual papers. The involvement and engagement of the European citizen—as documented in several White Papers referred to above—is regarded to be crucial for overcoming the democracy deficit and for democratic legitimisation of EU politics. A “European citizenship” has been officially introduced into the fundamentals of the EU with the Maastricht treaty (Article 8): “Citizenship of the European Union is hereby established. Every person holding the nationality of a member state shall be a citizen of the union”. Since this establishment of EU citizenship so far has not been fostered by a concise definition of the rights and duties of citizens towards the EU institutions, the citizenship chapter of the Maastricht treaty has been criticised (from left as well as right) as being an empty phrase (see Shore 2004). According to critics, EU citizenship—without content—was a formula propagated by EU bureaucracy as a kind of palliative for the undeniable democratic deficit. A feeling of belonging was propagated “to placate an alienated populace by promoting feelings of belonging to what was, and remains, a highly elitist, paternalistic and technocratic project of European construction”

(Shore 2004: 34).¹ According to Shore “there is no citizenship without a shared history and tradition”. And this can only be found in the case of the nation state. According to this position, Europe lacks what has been constitutive for the emergence of citizenship in the nation state: Europe “. . . has no effective pan-European trade unions, political parties, organised protest movements or spaces of popular resistance”. Apart from the lack of a European civil society, direct control of the institutions by citizens has also not been established: “there is no way the European citizen can ever ‘kick the scoundrels out of office’” (Shore 2004: 40).

An active civil society and a public sphere as well as structures that allow for direct legitimisation and control of the EU institutions by the European constituency are rightly regarded as forming the fundamentals of European citizenship in the sense of a European political identity. However, are there indications that core forms of these features already exist in Europe, and is it really impossible that these will further develop in the future? It is right to dismiss “European citizenship” as being an empty concept, as long as direct political rights and a vivid public sphere are not established. These are the preconditions for the emergence of a European “demos”. However, in response to the criticism that there cannot be such a thing as a European demos, it can be argued that “demos” is obviously conflated with people in the sense of a nationally, territorially based community. From many perspectives, it is now argued that European civil society and European citizenship are evolving along with the growing competence of the Union and the Union’s efforts to strengthen its legitimate foundations (Eder 2007; Trenz and Eder 2004; Giesen and Eder 2003; Fossum and Schlesinger 2007). The integration of Europe from this perspective is conceived as “. . . an experiment in building an abstract political community based on a notion of citizenship that abstracts from the ethnic component of being the citizen of a ‘demos’. The citizens of Europe become not only citizens of transnational institutions, but also of a post national community.” (Giesen and Eder 2003: 2f.) Thus citizenship in the transnational European case cannot be conceived in the same way as national citizenship (see contributions in Giesen and Eder 2003). It is neither based on common language and traditions or ethnicity, nor on a common culture, but on the consciousness of belonging to a political community with shared political values that provides for democratic rights and protects and respects the cultural diversity of the Union (see also Kantner 2006). Thus citizenship in terms of identity has to be established as a result of European politics. For the European case “identity is no longer disembedded from politics, no longer conceived as a higher order of reality than politics or something that ‘underlies’ politics. Identity becomes politics.” (Eder 2003: 238)

¹ Similar criticism has been put forward with regard to the EC’s ambitious propagation of dialogue and involvement of citizens in the field of science and technology policy. Compared to its practical political fallout in the Commission’s practice of policy-making, this has been dismissed as “rhetorics of participation” (Levidow and Marris 2001).

2.3.1.3 European Citizenship in the Making?

A transnational political identity going beyond cultural identity can only be based on the appreciation and upholding of a democratic constitution and the related democratic procedures that accord equal rights to citizens. Such an appreciation allows for mutual respect of differences and cultural diversity and can be the foundation of general democratic solidarity. Thus, the feeling of belonging and responsibility is based on a joint appreciation of a constitution that guarantees the freedom of being different and living according to one's own values and following one's own objectives as long as these do not collide with the rights of other fellow citizens. This is what was denoted by Habermas as "constitutional patriotism", deriving from a set of entrenched fundamental rights and democratic procedures and functioning as a focal point for political identification and subjectively held citizenship. Thus Habermas argues strongly for a strong European constitution that accords political rights and duties to citizens as Europeans and not as citizens of a national state belonging to the EU (Habermas 2001). European citizenship is established by defining the rights of European people with regard to European Institutions (on a more formal level as well as on a more informal level of transparency and participatory openness of the policy-making process as propagated in the White Paper on Governance). There is some evidence that a core form of citizenship in this sense exists in Europe: Citizens directly observe and address the European Institutions, they approve their existence but disapprove their democratic make-up and "citizen protest directed against European governance and institutions is increasing" (Trenz and Eder 2004: 6).

In his reflection on the prospects of European citizenship, Schmitter (2003) developed a scope of "modest democratic proposals" for reforming the European polity that would be appropriate for strengthening the active role of the citizen. This includes extending civil rights to encompass new problems going beyond the classic welfare-state issues that modern democracies face. The EU is increasingly concerned with such issues as "environmental rights" or extending the political rights of all European citizens to actively take part in policy-making no matter where their place of residence is. Other suggestions concern the introduction of direct (but non-binding) referenda and to make use of electronic media to add more deliberative elements (fora) to elections. A decisive step in the direction of the former suggestion has now been achieved with the introduction of the "European Citizen's Initiative" (see Part II), while the latter suggestion is clearly related to central issues of the present report.

It can be concluded that debates on European citizenship stress that it would include citizens' rights that go beyond individual liberties and "market membership", but cannot be based on cultural membership in the ethnic sense. Therefore, a direct relation between the European institutions and its citizens, and hence active political rights, moves into the centre of debate on European citizenship. Thus, it is ultimately the establishment of a European Public Sphere that allows for as much deliberation as possible on European public concerns which would support the development of a post-national political identity and feeling of belonging to a political community. In terms of Eder's model of the dynamics of democratisation

(Trenz and Eder 2004; Eder 2007), it can be argued that the opportunity for citizens to meet as equal partners and exchange their arguments and claims initiates a process of democratisation that in turn comprises the development of a public sphere as well as of citizenship as two sides of the same coin. The concept of subjective or felt European citizenship and identity as a procedural result of the development of a democratic EU is supported by a historical view of the emergence of national citizenship. It can be learned from the development of the nation state that a public sphere as well as citizenship and civil society do not exist before governmental administrative structures, but develop in response to the emergence of decision-making bodies. In the struggle for a democratic state with democratic representation and control of decision-making bodies, the public sphere as space for people to communicate and share mutual respect as equal citizens, a civil society and also “collective identity” emerged and developed in parallel. Citizenship thus had “to be made rather than merely discovered” (Eriksen 2007: 30).

2.3.2 The Regulatory State and the European Civil Society

In the struggle to establish citizens’ rights and democratic structures, the public could historically be regarded as being represented by organisations of civil society which aimed to enforce civil rights against the state. By contrast, in established modern mass democracies, the public functions more as an audience (in a theatre) that observes the protagonists on the political stage, evaluates their performance and, in periodical elections, rates and dismisses or reinforces the political actors (Eder 2007). National publics are mainly mass-media publics. However, there are also stakeholder groups, expert communities and common interest organisations. These form an active part of the public and function, on the one hand, as intermediaries expressing the interests, demands and fears of the general public and, on the other, as an observing, monitoring, and intervening counterpart of the established political system.

The concept of the civil society has been taken up from different theoretical perspectives and thus can cover a broad range of social activities. From a communitarian perspective, the social capital institutionalised in active neighbourhoods or participation in interest groups and civic associations (from sports to culture) is regarded as an indispensable fundament of democracy by supporting the norms of reciprocity and building social trust. From other perspectives, more formalised forms of political engagement—be it in local citizens initiatives or in organised special or public interest groups focusing on environmental and social politics—are regarded as a necessary counterbalance to and backbone of representative democracy. For the international and European context too, an active civil society is regarded as forming the legitimizing foundation for “governance beyond the state” (Smismans 2006a: 4). The institutions of the democratic state, and especially parliament as the link between the citizenry and the government, need to be linked to an active civil society. Parliaments as institutions that ensure popular representation and executive accountability as “strong publics” need to be related to “weak

publics” of civil society that inform and challenge the parliament, thus supporting its responsiveness to societal problems and demands (Frazer 1992; Fossum and Schlesinger 2007). Civil society is also regarded by Habermas as being a part of the public sphere, actually an active part that transfers the needs, interests, values of the “lifeworld” of the citizens to the public sphere where private interests, demands and claims become public to be discussed and argued upon in order to make them amenable to a discourse to explore the public interest (Habermas 1996; see also Armstrong 2006).

2.3.2.1 Civil Society and the Character of EU Politics

The argument that there can be no such thing as a European public sphere is based on the notion that there are no intermediate structures of a European civil society such as a European party system, European media and social movements (Shore 2004; Grimm 2004). Moreover, it has been argued that, taking into account that the nature of policy-making on the transnational, European level is different from that on the nation-state level, what has been called the “democracy deficit” of the EU may appear to be a “false problem”. Prominent here are the positions held by Scharpf (1999) and Majone (1996). According to Majone, the EU has to be conceived of as a “regulatory state”, which means all critical “redistributive” social welfare aspects of policy-making are left with the national systems, which implies that strong structures of democratic legitimisation need not to be in place at the EU level. The legitimacy of the regulatory institutions can only be established by the efficiency and credibility of the regulatory process. Regulatory policies can be made efficiently by experts and independent organs that have to be validated in terms of the quality of outcome and have to be held accountable via commitment to a set of “fiduciary principles” (restricted mandate, obligation to give reasons and report on their action) (Majone 1996). In a similar way Scharpf (1999) holds that since there is no (and cannot be) such a thing as a European “demos”, EU policy-making has to be validated not in terms of input legitimacy (direct influence of the constituency on EU institutions, in terms of representativity and access of civil society to policy-making) but in terms of output legitimacy, i.e. to what extent the EU policy proves to serve the interests and solve the problems of the majority of European citizens. The major argument of this “revisionist position” towards the democracy deficit is that—given the European multi-level system of policy-making, with the still dominant role of the governments of the member states and existing checks and balances—there is sufficient provision for an efficient system of policy-making.

This notion is obviously not in line with the self-image of the European institutions and with their efforts and expectations regarding the development of the European democratic system, as can be read among others in the various White Papers endorsing new forms of European governance. There may be doubt as to whether Majone’s strict separation of regulatory and redistributive policies is reconcilable with the Lisbon strategy that goes beyond the “open market model” of the Union and aims at egalitarian welfare structures in the Community (Armstrong 2006). From a position stressing the deliberative elements of

democracy (Magnet [2006: 25f.](#)), it is argued that European democracy cannot be reduced to an efficient system to check and channel the arbitrary powers of the state. Instead it is also regarded as crucial for the transnational context that the legitimacy of any political body should require procedures allowing for control and participation by citizens and for decision makers to be forced to present and legitimise their policy in the public and civil society.

2.3.2.2 New Forms of Governance

There are actually some indications that a European civil society is evolving. In the mid-1990s the European Economic and Social Committee (EESC) already stated that a “civil dialogue” with civic organisations and groups going beyond the social partners represented in the EESC was indispensable if the effectiveness and legitimacy of policy-making at the European level was to be improved (Smismans [2006a](#)). Similar ideas have been taken up in the White Paper on European Governance and in the White Paper on a European Communication Policy. In the latter, the weak nature of a European public sphere is explicitly addressed as a central problem of the EU, and arguments are made for more “dialogue” and “decentralisation” in EU policy-making. In order to “close the gap” between the EU institutions and the disenchanted publics of the member states, a “partnership approach” is argued for including “. . . other EU institutions and bodies; the national regional and local authorities in the member states; European political parties, civil society” (Commission of the European Union [2006: 2](#))

In propagating new transparent and accountable forms of governance, the EU institutions clearly refer to civil society in Europe, thus implicitly stating that a European civil society exists. Thus, the “multi-level model” of governance involving different (territorial) layers of decision-making and governmental authorities is now enriched by the inclusion of public and private actors across Europe. Governance is no longer regarded as a hierarchical relationship between decision makers and the addressees of regulation, but is seen as “network governance” in which the authorities employ a network of civil society actors (experts, stakeholders, NGOs, companies) in policy-making in different fields at the executive level of the EC (social, environmental, consumer and S&T policy, see contributions in Smismans [2006b](#)).

This is in line with arguments against approaches that regard the EU as having no need for any backing by an active European civil society. Cohen and Sabel ([1997](#)) argue that the very nature of the fields of regulatory activities of the EU such as environmental policy and consumer protection affords close cooperation with a broad range of epistemic communities. The diversity of local or sectoral contexts is such that they cannot be tackled without making use of the knowledge of the different political, economic and societal actors affected. A “directly deliberative polyarchy” that includes authorities as well as societal groups from different regional and social contexts is indispensable for successful regulation. Thus “output legitimacy” of EU decision making—i.e. high quality decisions taken and regulations implemented—necessarily requires “input legitimacy”—i.e. as much involvement as possible of those affected in policy formulation. In other words,

new forms of democratic involvement are needed precisely because EU policy-making is different from that of the nation state.

As stated above, the European Commission committed itself to a high degree to foster public engagement in EU policy making processes. Following a first programmatic turn to new and open forms of governance laid out in the White Paper on Governance (Commission of the European Union 2001) after the Irish “no” to the treaty of Nice (2001), the EC in 2005 as an answer to the rejection of the constitutional treaty in French and Dutch referenda started to actively fund and set up citizen participation and public consultation activities with its “Plan D for Democracy Dialogue and Debate” (Commission of the European Union 2005). This was explicitly meant to strengthen the development of the European Public Sphere (see Yang 2013). Between 2001 and 2010 a number of 23 transnational citizen consultation projects (involving participants from three European countries at least) supported by the European Commission have been conducted, with face to face meetings as well as online discussions, on specific issues such as the social and political implications of brain research as well as on more general issues such as the European constitution and the future of Europe (Yang 2013: 25f.). The six transnational “Deliberative Citizens Involvement Projects” (DCIP) covered by the Plan D programme involved approximately 40,000 people, the online project “Speak up Europe” alone involved 300,000 users in discussions on European politics (Yang 2013: 27).

An evaluation of these DCIPs with regard to their deliberative quality as well as impact has been undertaken by contributions in Kies and Nanz (2013a). The case studies presented support the notion that DCIPs have a “. . . potential to ameliorate the legitimacy of the EU and to promote a more substantial EU citizenship” (Kies and Nanz 2013b: 10). The interactive aspect of deliberation is held to be a feature that can support the experience of European citizenship. Thus, formats applied by the EU, such as “Your voice in Europe”, which allow citizens to send comments to policy makers individually but provide no space for deliberation and interaction among citizens on the issues dealt with are held to be sub-optimal in this respect (Smith 2013: 209). In the EC’s approaches to citizen participation there appears to be a tendency—mainly due to the lack of common language—to reduce the role of citizens to just posting statements or commenting on statements by policy makers rather than engaging in a European citizens’ debate and jointly working out policy options to be forwarded to policy makers.

Most disappointing according to the authors was the lack of any follow up activities and of visible impact of the deliberative experiments on policy making (Smith 2013: 215; Kies et al. 2013: 74f.). Friedrich (2013: 44ff.) discussing EU governance innovations attests a strong bias to expert involvement. The approaches for dialogue with Civil Society Organisations (CSOs) failed to realise their potential to strengthen the ties between EU authorities and the European civil society and to support the construction of a European demos due to a lack of commitment and its “discretionary” patterns of participation. It is concluded that as long as a regulated integration of DCIPs in EU policy making process is not provided for and as long as DCIPs are mainly held on broad topics such as the social and

economic future of Europe rather than on concrete challenges and problems of decision making, there is a danger that they are increasingly perceived as being rather a promotional instrument than serious attempts to engage the European citizenry in EU policy making (Kies and Nanz 2013b: 11f.).

2.3.3 The European Public Sphere: A Space for Deliberation?

A functioning public sphere consists of an active civil society and citizen participation in politics as well as public exchange on all relevant perspectives in media debate. From the arguments given above, it must be concluded that the extent to which these features of deliberative democracy have been achieved at the level of the EU or whether they are achievable at all is a matter of debate. For the EU to develop, EU institutions obviously deem it necessary to foster features of an active deliberative democracy by opening up the process of policy-making to society. Bringing the institutions of the EU closer to the European citizen is regarded as a necessary feature of strategies for strengthening the emergence of a European public space for political deliberation. As shown above, there are hints that such a space is about to emerge, together with its concomitant features such as European citizenship and a European civil society. In the following we briefly present some insights into the actual state of a European public sphere in terms of a transnational space of political communication as revealed by media research and then sum up the future prospects of a Europeanisation of the public sphere.

2.3.3.1 The Current State of a European Space for Political Communication

So far, European citizenship is only just beginning to develop in terms of active engagement in European affairs. The turnout at European elections is significantly lower than for national elections. Media coverage of European issues has been growing as the relevance of European policy on national policy-making has increased. However, policy debates and opinion forming as reflected in the media are still nationally focused (Brüggemann et al. 2006; see also Wessler et al. 2008). In other words: there are several national public spheres taking up European issues, but there is no widely used cross- or transnational European media system covering European issues, and the separate national public spheres (as e.g. reflected in mass media) are only weakly related to each other.

Systematic empirical research on the role of the media in the formation of a European public sphere has been growing since the 1990s, but is still in its infancy (for an overview, see Bärenreuter et al. 2009). One basic problem of empirical research is the definition of indicators for a functioning public sphere, i.e. to translate ambitious assumptions of democratic theory into research design. In communication and media research there are basically two approaches to measuring the European public sphere (Risse 2003). One approach is to measure how often terms such as “Europe”, “European Commission”, or “European institutions” are mentioned in media reporting. Generally the level at which European items are

taken up compared with national items is rather low (Gerhards 2000). However, a slow increase in mentioning “Europe” has been reported over the past decades. Another approach is to measure media coverage of European issues (e.g. EU enlargement). These studies show simultaneous reporting about European issues in the media of the member states at a comparable level of intensity. It has been regarded as an indicator for an existing proto-European public sphere that European subjects are framed in the same way in the various national media, leading to the same interpretative schemes. There is also evidence of a growing importance of European issues in public debates in the member states. However, generally the level of media coverage of European issues is significantly lower than that of national political issues, and there is almost no interrelatedness of political debates as covered by the media of member states. In media research, the lack of a common European media space is considered to be rooted in socio-cultural factors (languages, cultural identities), institutional factors (lack of transparency of the European policy-making process, lack of opportunities for citizens to participate) and media-specific factors (fragmentation of media, national fixation of journalism) (Latzer and Sauerwein 2006).

The results of research on media coverage of European issues are often contradictory and difficult to interpret; this fact, according to Neidhardt (2006: 46ff.), reflects a methodological problem of research in defining to what extent e.g. a newspaper article has to deal with a European issue, or to what extent a European actor plays a role in the article to categorise it as “European”. Results also depend on the type of articles covered in media studies, whether this includes all articles in the political part of a newspaper, or only commentaries etc. Thus it cannot come as any surprise when one study, for instance, shows European commentary articles to account for a share of 5.6 % of German quality newspapers in the period 1994–1998 (Eilders and Voltmer 2003), while another study of two German newspapers which includes all articles revealed 44 % and 55.3 % of articles, respectively, with a European reference for the year 2000 (Trenz 2004).

It is also important to take into account that for many fields of policy-making (and indeed probably those most relevant for the general public) there is no or only secondary competence of the EU and they consequently remain just national subjects of observation (such as health care, pensions, taxation, etc.). Thus it does not make much sense to look for “Europe” in articles about subjects where the EU is only marginally involved. The EU-funded “Europub” project on the coverage of European issues in newspapers in six European countries,² which took the European relevance of policy-making fields into account, clearly showed that the salience of European politics in the mass media follows differences in policy-making competences (Pfetsch 2004; Koopmans and Statham 2010). The study found that in fields where policy-making competences mainly lay in Brussels in all countries and all newspapers covered (except Great Britain), Europe plays a major role (Pfetsch 2004). Whereas according to this study there are indications of a

² France, Germany, Italy, Netherlands, Spain, Switzerland, United Kingdom.

Europeanisation of mass media reporting, it also found indications of a dominance of the executive branch of policy-making on costs of the “strong” and “weak publics” in media coverage of European politics. Whereas in the national reports a balanced appearance of executive, legislative and civil society representatives as active protagonists was found, in reports on European policy-making the EC is by far the most active protagonist while the European Parliament and civil society organisations are far less visible as political actors (Koopmans 2007). Thus media coverage of European issues reflects the European democratic deficit and the at best embryonic state of European civil society. Nevertheless, when it comes to describing the quantitative relevance of Europe in the national media, it appears to be an appropriate conclusion that Europe plays a minor role in the overall stream of news and opinions forwarded in the media, but that in those fields where EU policy and regulation are salient, the media coverage of “Europe” and European issues is big enough to dismiss the thesis of a marginal role of European politics in national publics (Neidhardt 2006: 51).

2.3.3.2 A European Public Sphere in the Making?

In academic discussions, it is widely agreed that the public sphere cannot be conceived of as being one common general communicative space. On the contrary, besides a general overarching public sphere that is open to any citizen (and mainly based on mass media communication), there are segmented publics that evolve around policy networks dealing with particular issues and problems to which particular communities relate. As the overview given above shows, there is no agreement on whether both types of public spheres (general and issue-related) exist at a European level. The Europeanisation of state functions, a discursive construction of the EU as well as a Europeanisation of political agency is ongoing, but these processes have “... indeed not yet found an appropriate correlate or foundation in European society” (Zimmermann and Favell 2010: 507f.). Those who expect the EU to evolve by strengthening the deliberative dimension of policy-making, however, anticipate that in the course of this process a multi-layered structure consisting of European issue-related, national and overarching general public spheres will necessarily emerge. While an overarching general public sphere may remain latent for a longer period, one can perceive many strands of development that indicate the development of European publics. There are media which regard themselves as European mass media and which continuously report on European issues; some of these having editions in more than one European language (Financial Times, ARTE, Deutsche Welle, Le Monde Diplomatique). There are NGOs such as Attac or Greenpeace who host Internet pages in several European languages and are involved in European policy debates. And there are also traits of trans-European general public debates (such as the Haider debate, the debate about the Iraq war) which can be regarded as indications of an existing (albeit ephemeral) European public sphere (Eriksen 2007). A recent study (Eurosphere 2013) conceptualised the European public sphere as a conflictive space where the “vertical, pro-European, elite dominated trans-European public sphere”, which is constituted by the EU-institutions’ policies of European integration, comes into a relationship of

conflict and contestation with existing national and regional public spaces. The study's results suggest that this mode of Europeanisation of the public sphere is an existing reality (Sicakkan 2013: 2). The study comprised interviews and media analysis on the EU's integration policies in 16 European countries and found that EU policies to a clearly discernible extent managed to link national constituencies with the EU. This vertical European public sphere is dominated by an elitist and expert discourse of democratisation, inclusion and Europeanisation. The reaction against this discourse however has transformed national publics into "horizontal trans-European publics" (Sicakkan 2013: 68). Thus the criticism against the Europeanisation itself—as it were—is "Europeanised".

Besides a general public sphere that must be regarded as being at best in the making, it is argued that important existing elements of a European public sphere are transnational "segmented publics" that emanate from the policy networks of the EU. Such networks grow around the different regulatory activities of the EU, partly as a result of the EC's efforts to involve as much European knowledge as possible in policy formulation. As these segmented publics are organised around certain issues and problems and as they attract certain "epistemic communities", they have to be regarded as elite or expert publics. Nevertheless they have a function for the general public as well (Eriksen 2007: 33f.). In a similar vein also protest movements challenging European regulatory policies may contribute to the formation of transnational European public spheres. In a study on the role of the green movement in European politics it could be shown that for issues such as Genetically Modified Organisms or the climate change debate lobbying activities and campaigning of environmental organisations (such as Greenpeace or Friends of the Earth)—despite of their often restricted influence on EU policies—can lead to the emergence of "new green public spheres at all territorial levels" (van der Heijden 2010: 197), which could be regarded as being a case of formation of European "epistemic communities" from below.

The existing networks of policy-making on which the EC regularly draws can be seen as the core of a European public sphere. Trenz and Eder (2004) on the one hand observe a strong coupling of institutional and non-institutional actors through networks that have gained importance in the EU system of governance. On the other hand, they hold that this process of networking governance is increasingly taking place before a growing audience in Europe. Governance is not restricted to networks of European and national policy-making bodies, civil society organisations and expert communities, but those involved in these networks have to legitimise themselves with regard to and have to produce resonance in a wider European audience in order to gain public support for their demands and claims. Thus a central requirement for a public sphere can be assumed as being achieved: "The theoretical concept of the public sphere refers precisely to this basic insight: it includes not only those who take an active part in the debate but always presupposes that communication resonates among others who constitute a public for this communication" (Trenz and Eder 2004: 9).

Moreover, the increasing roles of policy networks at the EU level is held to be part of a self-constituting dynamic of the development of a European public sphere

via mediatised public spheres, in which the governing elites are driven to account for themselves and the public demands greater accountability of its ruler (Trenz and Eder 2004; Eder 2007; Fossum and Schlesinger 2007). With the dynamics of the segmented publics and with the EU actively addressing the democracy deficit in the course of its increasing competences, a process of societal learning is initialised among institutional actors and actors involved in the governance network of the EU (expert communities, NGOs). This is not restricted to learning and adopting by the different elites active in EU policy-making, but goes beyond that by including the European public at large. Once policy-making in the EU is regarded as needing public legitimisation, policy-making will take place in front of an audience, and the elites thus have to take into account the expectations of this audience. At the same time, by addressing the (albeit) virtual European public and the European citizen—be it in terms of PR campaigns (as in the context of the convention) or by setting up public spaces for debate on the future of Europe—the EU institutions help to constitute this public or audience. No matter to which degree the debates about transparency, openness, dialogue and participation are purely rhetorical, “What counts is that [European] institutions take the logic of public sphere into account as the medium of public will formation” (Trenz and Eder 2004). This, so to speak, will trigger expectations on the part of the citizens and the civil society which again will have to be taken into account by the institutional actors.

In a similar vein it is argued that the need for more coordination between member states, which results from restrictions on national decision-making capacity, requires more legitimisation of EU policy by means of a European public sphere, an active civil society, a European constitution, and a shared political culture. This points towards a further democratisation of the European polity (Habermas 2001; cf. Armstrong 2006: 50f.) with the European institutions organised according to the classical parliamentary system. This means an executive installed and controlled by parliament, and parliament elected by the citizens with only few interfering powers on the part of national authorities such as the Council of Ministers. If citizens feel that they can select and dismiss political leaders, it is more likely for a European public sphere to emerge, as was historically the case of the nation state. This development would change the EU from a community to a federalist state, and the role of the Commission from a mediator between national and transnational interests to a democratically limited power in its own right (Magnet 2006: 35).

Thus the future of a European public sphere must be conceived of as dependent on the further development of the European institutions and the character of the European community (Fossum and Schlesinger 2007: 12ff.). If the EU develops alongside extended regulatory competences alone—as the “regulatory state” in Majones’ (1996) terms—what might develop (apart from the existing different national publics) are issue-related transnational epistemic expert communities that are orientated towards the different regulatory issues or fields with which EU bureaucracy is concerned. These will be “European” in character, but quite restricted and exclusive in scope. Fossum and Schlesinger (2007) hold this perspective of a “European public sphere” to have little obvious capacity to challenge the

Union's democratic shortcomings or to generate an overarching public sphere. Another perspective opens up with the development of a "federal EU". This can be conceived as a prolongation of the current attempts to foster the constitutional fundament of the EU as a rights-based post-national state. This would imply a more significant role of public opinion in informing, influencing and controlling the performance of the EU institutions, as well as a further strengthening of the role of the European Parliament. This model of Europe relies on strengthening political integration by establishing democratic structures and procedures that provide for equal rights and mutual respect of cultural differences and identities as the core of a European identity in terms of "constitutional patriotism" (Habermas). What can subsequently be expected to develop is not a unique public sphere as in the case of the national state, but an overlapping set of "public spheres" alongside institutional, territorial and issue-orientated dimensions that will be overarched by a general European public sphere.

It is unlikely that Europe will develop into a unitary demos or people that form the societal basis of a general public sphere. There will always be a plurality of publics, and arenas and also national media publics resonating to each other on European issues. If we take this as the prospective future of the European polity, we can say today that there will be a multitude of different "epistemic communities" dealing with European policy issues. This multitude of "publics" will have to legitimise themselves in national public spheres which thus become more and more Europeanised in terms of the contents they process. Apart from that, segmented publics will have a strong need to relate themselves to a general European public of informed European citizens and legitimise themselves with regard to emerging European civil society organisations. More generally, it must be regarded as a decisive compensation for the European system of overlapping publics and for the "enormous institutional complexity and diversity at the national and regional level" to make use of governance practices "aimed at amplifying the role and scope of public deliberation and the critical scrutiny of decision makers" (Fossum and Schlesinger 2007: 16).

2.4 The Internet as a Public Sphere

2.4.1 The Internet as a Platform for Political Deliberation

Research on the use of the Internet as a platform for political communication (for an overview, see Grunwald et al. 2006) includes studies on the design, use and discursive quality of political dialogue formats (Internet fora, chatrooms) as organised by political institutions. Other studies explore how different political actors (public authorities as well as societal groups) use the Internet as a channel of political promotion and campaigning or explore Internet coverage of political issues as compared with mass media. Although the majority of these studies are dedicated to restricted questions of the quality of websites offered and specific political issues or events, some tentative conclusions with regard to the Internet's potential to

contribute to public political discourse can be drawn: the Internet will not be a substitute for the public sphere made up by mass media, but is now and will in the future increasingly be used as a means of political information and communication (see also Rasmussen 2008). Many functions of the political public sphere will be influenced by the Internet (opinion forming, deliberation, agenda setting) and the relevance of political online communities will grow. Although participation in online debates and public consultations, for instance, is rather low in relative terms, these formats are important for binding decision-making to the opinion forming and demands of well-informed and attentive citizens.

There appears to be evidence that the Internet allows the deliberative elements of democracy to be fostered by lowering the barriers between the communicative space of representative institutions and civil society. The Internet permits communicative spaces to be organised, where citizens and civil society groups discuss and forward their opinions on ongoing policy-making processes directly to governmental bodies. The Internet is being widely used for communication between politics and the public, and routines have developed at various points. There is programmatic consensus that the Internet could play an important role in strengthening representative democracy (for an overview Grunwald et al. 2006).

As the Internet offers two-way communication, from the very start it has been the focus of researchers exploring opportunities for deliberative processes supported by the net. Online discussions organised by civil society organisations and governmental agencies have been object of research on the discursive quality of debates as well as on types of users and the effects on public policy-making. The results so far are somewhat ambivalent. While specific sites and experiments have been shown to foster deliberation, "... the social context of the Internet's development and use is driving online politics towards pluralist interest group competition and individualist participation" (Dahlberg 2007: 51). Whereas some studies indicate dominance of partisan communication and a conflictive style of Internet discussions, others show that the discursive quality of debates in Internet fora is quite high, the latter obviously being the case for platforms provided and moderated by governmental agencies. However, online discussion platforms offered by political institutions often lack a visible link to (and impact on) established decision-making processes (Grunwald et al. 2006).

In the past few years there has been an increase in activities that involve e-participation and online discussion at the international and the EU level, too. European institutions are making use of the Internet by setting up fora or dialogue options addressed to the European citizens, such as the commission's website "On the future of Europe", which is intended to stimulate European discourse on the institutional reform of Europe and the European constitution.³ Other examples are online platforms for public consultations on European legislative matters.⁴ These approaches can be regarded as attempts to support the growth of a European public

³ http://ec.europa.eu/debate-future-europe/index_en.htm [accessed September 7, 2015].

⁴ <http://ec.europa.eu/yourvoice/> [accessed September 7, 2015].

sphere by involving citizens in the preparatory phase of decision-making. So far, however, little is known about the actual reach and possible achievements of the implementation of political dialogue via the Internet. It is also amazing that—in contrast to discussions on the European constitution—the European Parliament is only addressed marginally in debates on democratic governance and the use of the Internet at the European level.

Research has been carried out to assess the structure and quality of debates or consultations organised by the EU. The studies available so far merely concentrate on the deliberative quality of online debates. A study on the character of online debates on the platform “Your voice in Europe”, which was provided by the EC in the context of the debate about the European constitution, covered postings in open online debates from 2001 to 2004 as well as online consultations that were carried out in the context of the platform (Winkler et al. 2006). As regards online debates, the study supports the expectation that online debates allow for a rational, interactive and fair exchange of political perspectives and arguments. The debates, however, were dominated by a relatively small group of well-versed discussants. As regards online consultations, interviews with participants revealed that the participants can mainly be characterized as experts in the respective field of consultation (which is in line with the EC’s expectations). The content of the contributions was ranked as high quality. Much in line with findings of other studies on political online debates or consultations organised by public authorities, the study found that the participants complained about a lack of transparency regarding the uptake of recommendations by the EC, i.e. the impact of recommendations on the policy-making process. A study, which included the citizens’ online debates that were organised by the EU webpage “Futurum” (2001–2004) in the context of the European convention and the preparation of the European constitution, also underlines the deliberative rational and open character of the debates (although some deviations from the strong discursive model of rational debate were found) (Albrecht 2010). Thus it can well be concluded that there is evidence “... that digital forums of various sorts have the capacity to mediate engagement and critical discussion about issues of common public interest” (Rasmussen 2013: 98).

2.4.2 The Internet and the Transnational Public Sphere

Research has provided some insight into the deliberative quality of online political debate and the appropriateness of using online discussions for fostering the responsiveness of political institutions towards their constituencies. However, empirical research on the extent to which the Internet has transformed the public sphere is scarce, and thus it is difficult to provide indicators for the potential of the Internet to support the development of a European public sphere. What can be provided here are arguments and observations that support the notion of the Internet as a means of establishing a public space for political communication that goes beyond the boundaries of national publics. The notion of deliberative democracy must be complemented by the concept of civic cultures when it comes to

appreciating the democratic potential and relevance of the Internet (Dahlgren 2005: 155). The Internet is then conceived of as a medium that might promote the development of issue-related transnational communities which again may build up values and identities that can be regarded as the cores of transnational citizenship.

Despite the obvious fact that political communication even in the global media space “Internet” is still a national event to a high degree (Zimmermann et al. 2004), it can be argued that although the public sphere developed historically in the context of the formation of nation states, it is evolving nowadays into a transnational area of communication that refers to a global media economy. Potentially, the Internet gives everyone instant access to information and enables virtually anyone to publish to a global community of Internet users. This fact makes the development of a political public sphere as a global communication space beyond and across the borders of the nation state at least conceivable (Trenz 2008: 2). In the transnational sector, developments are emerging which justify speaking of the Internet’s potential to support transnational democratic structures of will formation.

In media research there is some evidence of a dissolution of the national public spheres, by individualisation, a retreat of the citizen from the public to the private and in particular by a fragmentation of the mass media landscape: do audiences of different TV channels or newspapers with different focal subjects really share the same public sphere? There are hints that one basic pillar of public opinion formation—a world of shared news and shared topics to be discussed at the same time within the same frame of reference—is shrinking (Trenz 2008). Similar problems are also discussed with regard to the Internet. The Internet opens up opportunities to actively intervene in debates and publish as well as gaining instant access to any information provided by Internet users. On the other hand, having the opportunity to publish does not automatically imply that your voice will be heard in the public sphere (Keohane and Nye 1998; Lindner 2007: 58ff.). The Internet is a scattered and segmented galaxy of communication and information. The segmentation of the public in separate spaces for particular groups and communities may even be increased by the Internet and its user communities. Thus the character of the Internet as a political public sphere is twofold. It is a sphere of exchange and discourse that can be used for political communication; it is, however, also a sphere of segmentation, specialisation and dissolution of a common sphere of communication (Grunwald et al. 2006).

The segmented, issue-related publics that come into being via the Internet, however, are at least partly free from the constraints of national boundaries but rather constituted transnationally. This is supported by the political effects of globalisation. With the emergence of the “network society” as a result of globalisation and new media (Castells 1996, 2001), the function of the nation state with its territorially bounded legislative and executive power changes. The national government must operate increasingly as a partner in a transnational network of other national governments and international political authorities. Manuel Castells regards the new media as preparing the ground for a new form of global or cosmopolitan mode of politics. Networks facilitated by new media go

beyond national borders. It is arguably the EU which for him is the prototype of the new “network state”. The EU is a network connected by different nodes—EU institutions, national governments and agencies, as well as civil society (Schlesinger 2007: 74).

A consequence is a “gradual deterritorialisation of the public sphere”: national public spheres open up towards other national publics and overarching, transnational issue-related publics emerge (Tomlinson 1999; Winter 2010). As far as these publics are focused on (international) political issues, it can be said that they mainly consist of well-educated elites with above-average communicative skills. The internationalisation of NGOs is a case in point. Global political issues and in particular global environmental issues are taken up by global networks of activists such as Friends of the Earth (www.foei.org) who organise protests, exchange views and documents, publish studies and statements, and take part in international negotiations. The Internet is thus widely regarded as supporting such societal groups and organised interests that regard themselves as being in opposition to mainstream politics: “...the Internet’s interactivity and reach assists politically diverse and geographically dispersed counter publics in finding shared points of identity and forming counter-public networks and coalitions...” (Dahlberg 2007: 56). The transnational publics that emerge around global political issues are thus partly driven by a “global civil society” of citizen organisations. The protest against the second Gulf war is regarded as having been the first event where an Internet-based globalised public sphere and a global civil society took shape (Kaldor 2003). The growing international virtual public spaces of communication can give rise to issue-related virtual communities that by constantly exchanging views, experiencing common interests, and establishing shared schemes of perception support a kind of cosmopolitan culture or global citizenship that coexists with local or national cultural and political identities. Moreover, the Internet makes it easy for individuals to be part of several different communities at the same time, which allows for transparency among different communities and is expected to lower the opportunities for fixed ideologies to persist (Bennet 2003; Winter 2010). Research on international Internet platforms of civil society organisations has found indications of what the authors call “unbounded citizenship” being supported by this type of transnational communities. Citizenship is no longer defined alongside national or regional identities alone, but increasingly alongside transnationally shared political interests and concerns (such as ecological citizenship, or net citizenship), which, however, tend to be of ephemeral character since they are not backed by codified citizen rights and duties (Cammaerts and van Audenhove 2005).

Thus there are indications that (a) the Internet supports a transnational space for political communication, (b) it is an interactive and organisational means of establishing an emerging global civil society, and (c) diverse forms of transnational political identities might emerge from issue-related political communities. Bohman (2004, 2007) in his work on the perspectives of a transnational democracy therefore holds the Internet to be the key technology for global political communication. For the public sphere to function as a space for rational discourse, it is indispensable that communication be addressed to and potentially attended by an indefinite

audience. To guarantee open ended, non-exclusive communication that virtually allows for the inclusion of almost any potential argument and position, the space of communication has to be “published”, i.e. opened up to any possibly affected or interested speaker. This was provided for historically by writing and printing, which provided for a one-to-many mode of communication (speakers to an indefinite audience). This was expanded later on by electronic mass media. The Internet must be considered within this continuity of technologically mediated public communication. The general principle of a rational public sphere which is its openness to an indefinite audience has been made reality on a global level via the Internet. In comparison to the mass media, the web radically lowers the costs for an individual speaker to address a large audience. To adopt the role of a speaker you do not necessarily have to pass the bottle neck of mass media criteria of publicity. Thus the opportunities for dialogue increase and a “many-to-many” type of communication emerges.

However, beyond that, the problem of “publicness”, the extension of communication in space and time is solved in a new way by the Internet. Cautiously optimistic, Bohman regards the Internet as “perhaps” signalling the “emergence of a public sphere that is not subject to the specific linguistic, cultural and spatial limitations of the bounded national public spheres that have up to now supported representative democratic institutions” (Bohman 2004: 135). This feature of the Internet makes it a technology for a new transnational democracy. While there are reasons to speak of a “decline in the national public sphere” with a passive audience, and with an active role restricted to a few actors on the stage who struggle to keep the audience’s support (e.g. Eder 2007), Bohman regards the Internet as a technology on the verge of the national public sphere’s decline and a kind of birth helper for the emerging transnational public sphere. The ability of the Internet to contribute to the establishment of a transnational public sphere depends, however, on how the Internet is shaped by its users, powerful providers and regulatory authorities. The Internet must be used democratically: there must be motivation as well as institutional provisions for an equal and open discourse, i.e. forms of communication that are committed to discursive norms or, better, that are suitable for promoting the pervasiveness of these norms in public communication.

Internet postings address an indefinite audience in a purely aggregative sense. It cannot be determined to whom the argument is addressed and who can actually be expected to respond. As a consequence, the commitment to a public interest, which is embedded in citizenship and an active civil society, cannot be taken as pre-existing in transnational spaces of Internet communication. For Bohman, networks that are transnational (or global) in scope need the support of a transnational civil society to become transnational publics. Thus some common culture, some shared sense of citizenship is indispensable for building up a (transnational) public sphere. Bohman regards this as being a feature that emerges from interaction through dialogue itself. Using the interactive features of the Internet, people address each other in a normative attitude in which all may propose and incur mutual obligation. This—as potentially realised in Internet-mediated communication—is exactly the basis for citizenship: “To have the standing to make claims and incur

obligations within an institutional framework is to have a political identity.” (Bohman 2004: 153).

If this is the case, then with reference to the discussion of the perspectives of a European citizenship as an effect of a democratisation of European policy-making we can conclude that using the Internet as a platform of political exchange would set into practice an “obligation constituting element of dialogue” (Bohman) that might support European citizenship. In line with the expectations of the European public as being multi-layered and comprising diverse issue-related communicative spaces, Bohman expects the Internet-based global public sphere not “...to mirror the cultural unity and spatial congruence of the national public sphere; as a public of publics, it permits a decentred public sphere with many different levels” (Bohman 2004: 139). The new forms of computer communication support a new sort of “distributive” rather than a unified public sphere which is defined by boundaries of the nation state or by language. Transnational democracy and thus a polycentric, post-territorial community will not work according to a single cooperative scheme as the nation state, but might require more fluid structures. Transnational institutions are adequately democratic if they permit access to influence “distributively, across various domains and levels, rather than merely aggregatively in the summative public sphere of citizens as a whole” (Bohman 2004: 148).

Thus in the transnational context, diverse Internet-based direct forms of deliberative influence are more appropriate than a mass-mediated general public, given the scattered structure of authorities, institutions and publics involved. And for this the EU functions precisely as a role model in Bohman’s course of argument: for the EU “we have to abandon the assumption that there is a unified public sphere connected to a single set of state-like authority structures that seem to impose uniform policies over its entire territory” (Bohman 2004: 149). He regards the EC’s “open method of coordination” (see also Armstrong 2006; Smismans 2006a) as being a prototype of such a polycentric cooperation of publics and authorities. Nevertheless, an overarching sphere, a public of the diverse national, issue, and committee-related communities is needed that provides for interchange and translation between various linguistic and cultural boundaries. For Bohman, it is the Internet that can provide such a new “public of the publics” which can “create precisely the appropriate feedback relation between disaggregated publics and such a polycentric decision making process” (Bohman 2004: 150).

2.5 Concluding Remarks

Both the European public sphere and the Internet as a global space for political deliberation must be regarded as social structures or institutions in the making. The Internet as a global media of many-to-many communication is a vast space of commercial, business, leisure and other communicative activities, compared to which the exchange of political information and political deliberation must be regarded as marginal. The European public sphere so far consists of rather specialised issue-related communities of experts and a European civil society,

and an overarching space of exchange among European citizens at best comes into ephemeral existence on such rare occasions as the debate on the European constitution. A European public sphere as a mass-mediated space of political communication exists only as far as European political issues are taken up by national mass media.

Nevertheless, our review of debates on the prospects of European politics and the role of a European public sphere reveals that there are some indications for an ongoing Europeanisation of national media publics and that some of the features of Internet communication can be regarded as supporting the development of a transnational civic culture as well as a transnational civil society, and might meet the needs of the dispersed, multi-layered and issue-related structures of policy-making at the European level. A European public sphere will be different from what is known in the national context. If Europe is going to further develop its democratic structures, means and media are needed to foster the necessary cultural and societal fundaments of European democracy—European citizenship and an active European civil society. In this respect, the mass media will have a role to play as the “classical” space of public opinion forming in modern democracies. It appears, however, that the mass media system in the near future will struggle to evolve to a transnational European level. Civil society organisations are about to develop their international (and European) networks by making use of Internet communication. European institutions make use of the Internet in order to underpin the democratic legitimacy of policy-making by organising public consultations and by offering platforms for dialogue with citizens. So far these activities are quite restricted in their reach. Specialised communities that organise themselves through alignment with European political issues and make use of participation channels offered via the Internet have to find a link to the “well informed European citizen”.

Different formats of political participation via or supported by electronic media have been and still are about to be applied on the local, the national as well as on the European level (see Part II). It appears that these new pathways of political communication among citizens as well as between policy making institutions and their constituencies have the potential to strengthen those elements that have been identified in this chapter as being essential corner stones of a European public sphere: a European space of political communication and deliberation, a European civil society and European citizenship. Whether this strengthening and supportive function can be achieved is, however, highly dependent upon the way e-participation is connected to the established processes of political will formation and decision making.

The Internet can help to generate a European public sphere of transnational communication although the issues discussed on the Web show a strong specialisation. This specialisation goes hand in hand with a fragmented rather than a uniform and broadly informed audience. However, this fragmented audience is a transnational audience nonetheless. It can be said that the issue related publics emerging on or supported by the Internet in many respects can be regarded as elements of an emerging European public opinion. In this respect there is—as it was put by Sandra González Bailón at the STOA workshop on e-participation—a

“European public sphere hidden under the cacophony of online conversations” (González Bailón 2011). The diverse specialised public opinions that constitute themselves on the Internet in different ways and are initiated by different actors, however, have to be linked and re-connected to the official political processes within the European institutions. Such a linkage can be established again via means of Internet based participation. There are many examples of how the Internet can be used to enhance participation in political processes, including e-consultations, e-petitions, e-deliberation and in special domains such as budgeting and urban planning (see Part II). The examples include top-down initiatives to enhance participation as well as bottom-up approaches, where citizens are mobilised and can organise their interests over the Internet. It must, however, be ensured that bottom-up initiated e-participation can enter the space of actual political decision making. The linkage of bottom-up and top-down initiatives is an important aspect for improving the connectivity of e-participation to the democratic system of policy making.

The integration of e-participation in the policy making process as a means of informing policy making could help to support the ongoing formation of a European civil society. Civil society organisations extensively use the Internet for internal communication and organisation as well as for raising public interest and campaigning. There are also examples that demonstrate that this form of civil society politics can develop into transnational methods of exchange and political communication. In this respect, civil society organisations contribute to the formation of partial public spheres, which are vital for participation. It will be decisive to what extent European institutions are willing and able to be responsive to these ongoing activities. This would imply actively opening up e-participation and e-consultation processes as are being set up by European institutions beyond (scientific) expert communities by actively inviting civil society organisations (not only those represented in Brussels but also on the national level) to contribute with their views and arguments. As it has been put in a volume on “The new politics of European civil society”, it is not a question of whether a European civil society exists as a sphere distinct from national and global civil society. The question is rather “how a ‘politics of European civil society’ can be initiated and institutionally anchored within the political spaces that have been opened up—or also withheld—by the European Union” (Liebert and Trenz 2011: 6). E-participation as a means of improving responsiveness to civil society can be regarded as an element of a “politics of European civil society”. A European civil society evolves partly as an effect of European institutions opening up agenda setting and policy formulation for citizens and civil society organisations in Europe.

As has been argued in this chapter, a European public sphere includes and requires an active citizenry endowed with political rights as well as with a sense of belonging and identity which motivates engagement and political concern. European citizenship cannot be based in common language and traditions but only in a sense of belonging to a political community with shared values and rights. E-participation as such, when related to relevant policy making processes on the level of European institutions, would constitute a new element of European

citizenship beyond the right to vote. It provides an additional democratic form of European citizenship which—if successfully established—could also help to foster European citizenship in its subjective or cultural meaning. However, this would imply organising e-participation in a way that is accessible, transparent and meaningful to the European citizenry. It must be clear where there are opportunities for citizens to raise their voice and at the same time it must be clear in which way and to what end e-participation spaces are related to the very core of policy making. From what is known from e-participation exercises at all levels, participants do not expect to rule out or bypass the representative democratic structures. On the other hand it is also obvious that a lack of responsiveness by political institutions to formats of online participation leads to disappointment on the participants' side which, in the long run, would be detrimental to any process of developing feelings of citizenship.

A last insight from research on e-participation that is relevant in this context is that e-participation works best when connected to real world formats of political activity and communication. In this respect the European Citizen Initiative (ECI) provides a unique opportunity to foster the elements of an emerging European public sphere. The ECI introduces a new element of (formal) European citizenship beyond the right to vote, it provides a new Pan-European form of meaningful political engagement of civil society organisations. And as far as a platform for online deliberation on issues taken up by ECIs is provided, a new element of targeted European political communication and European opinion forming can be implemented as a focal point for national and local Internet based political deliberation formats. The ECI is not only about a certain number of signatures that is needed and the authenticity of which has to be verified, it should also be regarded as a platform for debate and will formation that stands out from other (non-committal) fora as it relates deliberation to the process of policy formulation.

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