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RESEARCH ARTICLE

THE MEDIATIZATION OF POLITICS *From the National to the Transnational*

Hans-Jörg Trenz

EURECO – University of Copenhagen

Asimina Michailidou

ARENA – University of Oslo

ABSTRACT: The mediatization of politics is generally explained in relation to the legitimacy requirements of the modern state and as such, it is typically confined to the national media sphere. Can we speak in any meaningful way of mediatization beyond the national? The European Union (EU), which operates under increasing legitimacy constraints and is exposed to the salience of media debates that contest its public legitimacy, is a case in point. Is the EU becoming mediatized? And what are the effects of EU mediatization? Under what conditions can the mass media become a facilitator of European integration? The issue at stake is whether the media (new and old) can have an integration function beyond the national and facilitate the building of democratic legitimacy of the European Union. We propose that the concept of mediatization offers the theoretical and analytical tools necessary to understand precisely how the interaction between the EU polity and the media unfolds and how it impacts on the process of the EU's public legitimation. First we deliver a general account of mediatization, highlighting its core definers and main points of critique that the concept has attracted. We then show how mediatization is relevant to the EU polity and propose an analytical model that can capture this process empirically.

KEYWORDS: Democracy, European Public Sphere, European Union, Legitimacy, Mediatization

CORRESPONDING AUTHORS: Hans-Jörg Trenz, email: trenz@hum.ku.dk; Asimina Michailidou, email: asimina.michailidou@arena.uio.no

1. Introduction

The European Union is, without a doubt, a new type of political order in search of public legitimacy. For decades, the EU integration project was focused on system integration and the generation of legitimacy through the efficiency of policies and governance. National governments and EU institutions worked together, largely away from the lights of media publicity, towards a common goal without facing much contestation or protest from EU citizens – that era of EU integration has successfully been dubbed the period of ‘permissive consensus’ (Hooghe and Marks 2009). But as the effectiveness and underpinning values of the chosen paths of EU integration have increasingly come under public scrutiny and occasionally intense criticism – as permissive consensus has given way to ‘constraining dissensus’ (De Wilde and Zürn 2012) – it has become clear that the complex, multi-level system of EU governance cannot enjoy public legitimation without creating inclusive and participatory mechanisms that address the various constituencies affected by its policies and changes in government structure. In short, like any other modern political system, the EU polity needs to not only seek out publicity for its actions (mediation) but also to embrace its increased visibility in and scrutiny by the public sphere. To do so requires that the EU political system relies on the mechanisms of public legitimation that the media provide.

What we propose in this paper is that the concept of *mediatization* offers the theoretical and analytical tools necessary to understand precisely how the interaction between the EU polity and the media unfolds and how it impacts on the process of the EU’s public legitimation. In the following, we first provide a brief overview of the literature on mediatization and outline the conceptual adjustments and clarifications that are necessary if mediatization is to be effectively operationalized generally and in the case of the EU more specifically. We then discuss the transition of EU politics from permissive consensus to constraining dissensus within the conceptual framework of mediatization. In the last part of the paper, we propose a public sphere model of analysis that allows us to link the processes of mediatization and democratisation in the EU and conclude with some suggestions for future research in the field.

2. Mediatization: definition, critique and clarifications

Communication theorists together with historical sociologists have always maintained an interest in the social integration function of the mass media. From an instrumental perspective, the role of the mass media as a facilitator of collective action and

as an agent of social control has often been emphasized but also strongly criticized. Depending on the theoretical perspective scholars adopt, the mass media are either seen as a neutral interest mediator facilitating the exchange between power holders and the citizens (the dominant paradigm of mass communication; e.g. Demers and Viswanath 1999) or as an instrument of power imposing a hegemonic discourse that serves the socio-political elites (the alternative/critical paradigm of mass communication; e.g. Fuchs 2011). The cultural approach strand of mass communication studies also emphasizes the unifying role of the mass media, but from a symbolic rather than instrumental perspective: mass media mirror and often also define citizens' identities and feelings of attachment to social units (Anderson 1991; Hardt 2004; McQuail 2010, 89). From the perspective of critical media studies, mass media can also be held responsible for the deterioration of the democratic function of the public sphere into a sphere of publicity (Habermas 1989), simultaneously maintaining social cohesion and alienating the public from the process of democratic decision-making (Burton 2010).

But while scholars may disagree on the qualities of mass media effects on society and politics, there is broad consensus that in media-saturated societies – i.e. where the mass media provide the main, if not sole, infrastructure of the public sphere – the logic, news values, agenda and rhythm of information flow are embedded in and consequently define most other aspects of public and private life. In other words, most media and communication scholars agree that we now live in *mediatized societies*, whereby politics, culture, art and even personal relationships take such a shape as to fit best with the way the media works (Hjarvard 2013; Lundby 2014).

Mediatization is a relational term; it is only possible to speak of the mediatization of something. In its broadest sense, mediatization is a theory of social change and change takes place at the level of society (Couldry 2012, 134–137). The omnipresence of the media and their operational independence penetrates other societal sectors and causes them to adapt to media logic. Following this dual structural logic, 'media are at once part of the fabric of society and culture and an independent institution' (Hjarvard 2009, 106). This is not however to suggest, as several scholars do (see Krotz 2009 and 2014 for the relevant critique), that mediatization is a one-way process, whereby the media do all the influencing at the expense of other sectors of society (politics, culture or economy). Rather, because mediatization understands media 'as a technology *and* cultural form' (Krotz 2014, 145), we can expect that the way and extent to which the media are embedded in a society is in turn determined by the culture, laws, norms and socio-political institutions of said society. Media change and social change are thus locked in a continuous transformative exchange, or what Friedrich Krotz describes as a 'dialectical process' during which change in media and change in society 'take[s] place con-

tinually and simultaneously, but also in a sequence of different steps, where processes may become denser or looser' (Krotz 2014, 145). Frank Marcinkowski interprets mediatization as a functional requirement of social subsystems, which rely on the generation of publicity, defined here in the more narrow sense of visibility (Marcinkowski 2005).¹ There are, however, important differences in the degree different societal sectors rely on publicity and these correlate with their degree of inclusiveness (Marcinkowski and Steiner 2009).

With regard to politics, in particular, the mediatization thesis sustains that the 'process of political communication depends on the media infrastructure and is subject to change as the media are changing' (Kriesi 2013, 10). Under conditions of mediatization, 'media logics', and, in particular the commercial logic of the media industries in marketing public attention, increasingly become a frame of reference for the 'staging' of the political process and thus of democracy (Mazzoleni and Schultz 1999). Mediatization becomes in this sense a key notion for political legitimacy research. From this perspective, an extreme outcome of the mediatization process would then be a 'media-driven democracy', whereby the media-politics synergy is totally imbalanced in favour of, and controlled by, the media. However, mediatization itself does not imply an outcome, but only describes the process of the media-politics interrelation (Schulz 2004). This also means that mediatization does not imply an exclusive transformative power of the mass media, whereby all other factors, such as globalisation, are ignored. Rather, mediatization reflects the undeniable role of the mass media both as key facilitators of the contemporary public sphere and as key actors within it.

In analytical terms, the work that allows us to use the concept of mediatization with flexibility as regards its possible outcomes, while neatly capturing the multiple dimensions of mediatization's impact on politics, is that of Frank Marcinkowski (2014). He proposes a process-model which breaks down the mediatization of politics into *causes* (the ways in which both the media and the political system function); *extent* (structural anchoring and individual consideration of media logic); and *consequences* of mediatization for politics (tracing the impact of mediatization in changes in the processes and/or outcomes of decision making) (Marcinkowski 2014, 14). While the *extent* of mediatization of politics is concerned with the degree of adoption of the media reality of politics by institutions and individuals (first-order mediatization), the *consequences* of mediatization of politics extend to the adoption of mediatization criteria in the production of

¹ For a normatively grounded definition of publicity that links the activity of 'making visible' to the possibility of critique and reflection see Bohman 1999 and 2004, as well as the critical reconstruction of a theory of the digital public sphere in Trenz 2009.

politics (second-order mediatization) (Marcinkowski 2014, 13). Although this analytical model outlines the many dimensions of mediatization as a concept and a phenomenon, it allows for the possibility that mediatization may in fact work as an enhancement of democratic life as well as a disruption of established civil culture and democracy. Democratic politics are never just the victim of mediatization, nor only subordinated or colonized by the media. Rather, mediatization relates to the way society defines itself as an all-inclusive and integrated unity of individuals, in other words, as a political community of democracy. Notwithstanding the complexity of the relationship between mass media and politics, breaking down mediatization to a detailed matrix of effects and consequences allows for the easier and more systematic assessment of its impact on democracy at national level. But can such a concept be useful when looking at the transnational political system that is the EU?

3. From the politicization to the mediatization of European integration

We propose that the EU political system is mediatized in the sense that its legitimating capacities are not uniquely dependent on the efficiency of policy outcomes, nor on the quality of arguments brought forward by political parties in the competition for vote. We are confronted with a consolidated and constitutionalized political system *sui generis* that needs to sustain its public legitimacy through principles of democratic representation and inclusive mechanisms of citizens' empowerment and participation. The representative claim of democratic politics relies on the generation of publicity to be able to affirm its claim for all-inclusiveness (Saward 2010). The mediatization of the EU system of governance is in this sense first and foremost to be seen as a condition for the facilitation of democratic politics (Trenz 2008). The more the EU system of governance operates through rules of democracy, the more it relies on publicity-generating mechanisms provided by the media. Mediatization of the EU takes place wherever the EU and its institutions rely on the news media as part of their own operations. This includes not only instances when the EU institutions succeed in engaging the media, but also all the failed attempts to get the media on board in their publicity efforts; as well as the instances when the intention to engage the media is expressed (fulfilling the public's expectation for transparency) but never really pursued. A key challenge for the EU is to ground their publicity efforts (i.e. their attempts to go public) also in a form of democratic publicity that empowers the collective will through informed opinion-making of the citizens.

As regards the former, i.e. demands generated within the EU political system for publicity, there is no doubt that media communications are today an integral part of the functioning of EU institutions. All EU institutions invest in public relations. The European Commission, for instance, has set up a very resourceful Directorate-General to reach out to the media. The PR and information policies of the European Commission have been accurately described as a multi-level game for public attention (Brüggemann 2008; 2010). The Commission needs to balance its interaction with journalists at two levels: Brussels based EU correspondents at the supranational level and national and local media at the member state level. In particular the Commission has given priority to the promotion of the decentralization of media and communication policies. For this purpose, it has tried through its national representations to establish regular contacts with national and regional journalists. Decentralized media communication is coordinated in partial autonomy by the press offices of the national representations of the Commission in the capitals of the member states and their regional branch offices. In the UK, for instance, the London Representation's Press Office serves all British media, as well as international media based in London. The press team of the Commission's Representation is available to 'assist' and to 'brief' journalists, but responsiveness is restricted. The Commission's Representation website is also used as a tool to reach out and to prevent misinformation of UK citizens who are exposed to British media coverage of the EU. A curious example of these pedagogical efforts of the Commission is the 'no-nonsense guide to UK citizens' to what the EU delivers (The European Commission Representation in the United Kingdom 2014). It is designed as a tool to help UK citizens to learn about the benefits of EU membership, presupposing that they might know too little or being misguided, including a 'media lies' and a Euromyths section.

The encounter between political institutions and media institutions is organized here in a traditional hierarchical way, rather than interactive or even responsive manner: The Commission's press office selects relevant topics and expects fair and accurate coverage by the journalists. The Commission's public relations efforts focus on replacing the news values applied by the mass media with the epistemic values and public good orientations of the political system. In a form of educational advertisement, the drama and personalization of the mass media is rejected and inaccurate news stories are corrected.

There is, however, no straightforward way for the EU to simply respond to the media, due to several well-known structural barriers: there is no media reference system, only national media with diverging agendas. There is also no unified audience that pays attention. There is what has been labelled a demoi-cracy of several fragmented constituencies: territorial, sectoral or simply irregular bystanders (Cheneval and Schim-

melfennig 2013; Nicolaidis 2004). We are thus presented with the following paradox: At the level of decision-making elites, the EU operates, or tries to operate, on the principles of 'enlightened government' or 'reflexive governance' (e.g. Eriksen 2007) – that is governance which is informed by and reflects upon plural perspectives, that 'mediates' diverse points of view. Yet, at the level of citizens, this polity only has limited possibilities to achieve the same reflexivity, because its access to and presence in the public sphere is subject to the mediating limitations of the national media spheres.

Consider, for example, the case of EU presidencies and the way they promote their work through the media spheres. While national governments remain the main interlocutors for citizens to be informed about the EU, their investments in EU communication policies are modest and mainly restricted to moments of focused attention like EU referendums or the EU presidency. In particular EU presidencies need to be promoted. EU presidencies create specific identities based on good intentions, values and ideas linked to European integration. This requires careful planning and governments invest in strategic management of public relations. For that purpose, governments often hire top PR firms to guarantee that their ideas are diffused worldwide and the success of their presidency is made visible to foreign media.

In the case of the Danish presidency of 2012, for instance, publicity seeking efforts were coordinated by a special task force within the Foreign Ministry which took long preparations over one year (Danish Presidency of the Council of the European Union 2012). Core activities included the establishment of a visual identity of the Danish Presidency, the launch of a website and the reach of different target audiences (foreign journalists and citizens). Public communication of the presidency fulfilled a double purpose: It sought interaction with journalists about the goals and achievements of the Danish Presidency and it sought to place particular contents that were considered of relevance for foreign publics. The lines between advertisement and information were often blurred: apart from some sort of general factual knowledge about the EU, the visitors of the site were mainly informed about tourism in Denmark or elements of national pride (like Danish design, Danish movies and Danish Christmas donuts).

Danish pastries aside, the Danish presidency developed demands for media attention and expectations in media performance and also invested in communication policies to meet these demands. The decisive difference of EU mediatization lies, however, in the modes of supply of media services, the responsiveness of the media and also the impact of public attention and acceptance. The Danish government sought the attention of Danish and non-Danish publics alike, but did not rely on the support of the latter nor was directly exposed to their responses. Foreign media also interact differently with national governments: the foreign correspondent is a guest journalist, who is not

primarily interested in the control of the Danish government but rather guided by more specific rules of politeness and fairness. Foreign correspondents are also less investigative and more willing to adopt ready-made contents that are delivered by national government (Hannerz 2004).

Online social media have seemingly presented the EU institutions with a way out of this paradoxical situation whereby EU politics become increasingly mediatized but lack access to the mediating capacities of national media. Online media, and particularly social media, are *perceived* as powerful drivers of political change and treated as such by political actors and civil society activists alike. Especially social media allow European institutions to address citizens directly and thus to sidestep the 'distortion' that EU news is subjected to when filtered through national news media. Hence, we can observe an increasing number of EU and national political actors who not only maintain Twitter and Facebook accounts but take to the social media arena to make 'breaking-news' statements or address political opponents. It is not uncommon for these social media exchanges to subsequently become the focus of mainstream news reporting and/or of part of the official discussion agenda in national parliaments (Bekkers, Beunders, Edwards and Moody 2011; Meadows 2011).

If we were to classify EU institutions in two crude categories, a) directly accountable (the European Parliament [EP]) and b) indirectly accountable (European Council) or technocratic (European Commission, Court of Auditors, Court of Justice, European Central Bank [ECB]), then this divide also appears to be reflected in the institutions' preferences for different social media. The more 'elite' sphere of Twitter is used by all seven EU institutions; the Commission and ECB accounts are far more popular than the Twitter account of the EP (193,000, 114,000 and 37,400 Twitter followers respectively).

More than any other EU institution, the European Parliament seems to have grasped the potential to reach out to its constituency through social media networks. The European Parliament Facebook profile can be considered as a pioneer of this endeavour to meet the demand of public attention through online media and social networking media (Tarta 2013). Among the EU institutions the EP is by far the most popular on Facebook: three years after its launch, the official EP Facebook page is now (March 2014) 'liked' by 1,292,545 Facebook members. To put this in context, consider that of the 28 EU national parliaments, only five – the UK Parliament, the Estonian Parliament (Riigikogu), the French Senate (Sénat), the Croatian parliament (Hrvatski sabor), and the Romanian Chamber of Deputies (Parlamentul României Camera Deputaţilor) – have a Facebook page, and they are 'liked' by 55,674 readers collectively. At EU level, the European Commission and the European Council are the only other EU institutions with Facebook pages and are collectively 'liked' by 329,328 readers. In either case, EU insti-

tutional sites are successfully utilizing social media to create publicity and generate debate on issues and events of common EU relevance.

The Facebook profiles of the European Parliament and the other EU institutions are built by professional communication managers with the aim to encourage encounters among citizens from different member states to socialise through interactive online media, to exchange opinions and to chat with each other. At the same time, the medium is used to place information, which is expected to be entertaining and playful but of relevance for the citizens. Users should have fun but also be informed. The public takes here the role of a fan group and is fed with selected topics by a political organization. The fan is also free to comment on the cues and contents provided by the institution. The obvious risk inherent in these forms of social network communication is the potential loss of ownership and control of the EU institutions over their own communication inputs. Public relations in the traditional sense are not applicable in the world of political communication facilitated by the new social networking media. The media enterprise and its specific functional logic disappear in this kind of interactive environment. As a media platform, Facebook is simply expected to function, to allow unlimited access for its users and to safeguard their privacy against publicity where or when it is called for. Facebook is in this sense not more than the technical facilitator for creating publicity and voice.

It becomes clear from the above that mediatization is not simply imposed upon the political system of the EU from the outside, but the EU political system creates its own specific demands for mediatization from the inside. Nevertheless, legitimacy is mainly shaped through the news media frames of political processes and events and through visibility filters that news media apply on competing arguments and justifications put forward by government or by oppositional parties. There is, in short, no EU polity legitimation without the news media.

The question, then, to ask is how the media (new and old) can re-establish at European level the link between social order and democratic legitimacy that has thus far characterized the national public sphere. This question is inextricably linked to the mirroring effect of the news media sphere: The function of the mass media – following a dictum of Niklas Luhmann (1996) – is to facilitate the self-observation of society (Luhmann 1996). News media are firmly established as the observatory of society, of its unity and of its frictions. But through mass mediated communication, society primarily observes itself as national society. Can news media, then, be the catalyst for the self-observation of a European society? Do news media bring to the fore the unity and coherence that underlie the social bonds of the Europeans? Our proposal is that EU mediatization research should start off from this discrepancy between increased demands

for media attention generated within the EU political system and limited supply of publicity by the predominantly national media organizations involved.

There are, however, two further developments that are at play and that need to be taken into account when trying to assess the integrative function of news media for the case of the EU. The first is linked to the decoupling of political integration from democracy. The political integration of the Europe of states has been advanced at a higher speed than the social and cultural integration of the Europe of citizens. While political authority has gradually shifted from the national to the supranational level, there is no corresponding community of communicating citizens that could back such a process. Public opinion remains fragmented and bound to national public spheres.

The second challenge is linked to the increasing autonomy of the media spheres and their modes of production and distribution that are increasingly decoupled from nationally confined social and political spaces. Many critical media scholars are concerned by a possible correlation between the disintegration of society and the disintegration of formerly unitary systems of mass media communication. With the rise of the new media, the nationally defined community is fragmented again into different user communities and such differentiated media use is seen as one of the driving forces of social disintegration (Keen 2012). Today's media are seen to be creating an environment of turbulence and volatility, or as the British media scholar Brian McNair (2006) puts it, a new 'cultural chaos' that has replaced the ordered and controlled flows of communication within traditional public spheres (McNair 2006).

How can we then systematically map the process of mediatization taking place in the EU polity and classify its manifestations and components in an empirical manner? While there are various models of analysis currently developed by mediatization scholars that capture the different dimensions of the mediatization process (indicatively Strömbäck and Esser 2014; Asp 2014), what is missing is the analytical link between mediatization and democratization in a transnational context. This is where the field of public sphere research can contribute to our understanding of the mediatization mechanism of EU politics.

4. The public sphere: Linking mediatization and democratisation in the EU²

European public sphere research shares some central assumptions of mediatization research outlined above and helps us to capture the legitimacy impact of media visibility, which political actors and institutions strive for by subduing to media logics. In all its different variants, European public sphere research is underpinned by the assumption that there is an interrelation between media and EU politics that shapes the general representation of the EU system of governance and the possibilities for its public legitimation (Fossum and Schlesinger 2007; Trenz 2008). Mediatization is at the heart of research on the EU system of governance, whether investigating processes of political communication that involve EU-level actors and citizens directly,³ or conducting large-scale quantitative or qualitative comparative media content analysis to measure media performance in covering EU issues and debates (Kriesi, Lavenex, Esser, Matthes, Bühlmann and Bochsler 2013; Meyer 2009; Michailidou and Trenz 2010; Trenz 2006; 2008).

EU democracy from a mediatization perspective is understood as a dynamic communicative process which takes place in the public sphere, filtered and shaped by the media environment. In a series of previous publications, we have addressed this complex relationship of political institutions, media, citizens and formal settings of democratic participation and representation under the label of *mediatized EU democracy* (Michailidou and Trenz 2010; 2013). Going beyond the more confined agenda of European public sphere research and its assessment of the normative credentials of EU governance in the interplay with national or European media, the mediatization research agenda opens a different perspective on EU democratic legitimacy as being essentially shaped by media actions and interactions. In this sense, the mediatized EU democracy needs to be understood not only in terms of the media salience and news coverage of EU representative politics but more broadly, in terms of the general transformation of representative politics and its impact on the generation of political legitimacy of the EU.

In order to understand the legitimacy impact of media communication on European integration, we need to look beyond the instrumental use of the media by political actors/institutions or political parties and develop a more encompassing approach to

² This section of our article draws on our work on the online public sphere and European integration (Michailidou, de Wilde and Trenz 2014).

³ This includes the promise of more participatory forms of democracy or the potential of so-called strong, deliberative publics and procedures of EU decision-making (Bohman 2007; Eriksen and Fossum 2002).

capture the instances where media structures and practices influence the EU political system. We can approach not only the downsides but also the promise for a media-tized EU democracy (see also Trenz 2008). We can expect that the EU becomes a case of mediatization to the extent that it defines itself as a political entity that is also in need of public legitimacy. There is thus a relationship between mediatization and the deficits of democratic legitimation in the context of political integration in Europe. The more the EU system of governance confronts public demands and expectations of democracy, the more it relies on the generation of publicity for its internal functioning. To the extent that mediatization is imposed upon the political system of the EU from the outside, there is a growing demand to engage with media from within the EU system of governance. The legitimacy requirement of EU policy-making and the publicity seeking efforts of EU political actors and institutions are thus closely interlinked.

There is however no linear relationship between the politicization and the mediatization of the EU (Meyer 2009). The degrees of media attention and the levels of political contestation of the EU might vary, and, in fact, often diverge (Trenz et al. 2009). This discrepancy between the degree of public contestation and media salience can be explained by the mediating and mediatizing roles of journalists who filter messages sent out by the political system in a selective way and can be more or less inclined to amplify partisan contestation or to pay attention to popular voice and resistance. In a seminal article, Claes H. de Vreese (2007) concluded that the visibility and framing of EU politics remains the domain of mainstream national journalism. EU news is mainly generated by professional journalists and amplified through central media organizations operating within a national context. Even in the case of events with a 'genuine' EU focus, such as the EP election campaign or the Eurocrisis, news reporting and, subsequently, public contestation, show low patterns of Europeanization and remain embedded within the context of mediated national politics (Michailidou et al. 2014). Internet-era or not, EU political communication is thus inextricably linked to the traditional national public spheres of the member states.

The key question here is whether we can find any evidence that this variation of media focus and frames affects the politicization of the EU's legitimacy and if so, in what ways (what would be classified as 'first-order mediatization' of the EU's politicization under Marcinkowski's mediatization model). We do not presume that the process of mediatization necessarily results in negative developments for democratic systems. Rather, drawing on Krotz's approach of mediatization as a meta-process that impacts on but is also shaped by social, cultural and political processes, we argue for a more open-ended understanding of the effects that mediatization may have on democracy. Specifically, we contend that mediatization can also have a positive effect on democrat-

ic processes. To this end, we propose that in order to understand the interplay between mediatization and democratization, a public sphere model of analysis is a useful addition to the array of mediatization models already available. A public sphere approach allows us to expand the scope of mediatization so as to consider the generation of political legitimacy at the throughput level of the public sphere, which is measured in the ways the mass media:

a) generate visibility and focus public attention (publicization): This does not only concern the availability of information in the public domain – a key prerequisite of democratic development. The quality of information is also crucial: the ‘publicness’ of the raw material of information that is daily produced in the political process does not necessarily make this information accessible; or to paraphrase Coleman and Ross (2010), mediation can make information public, but cannot necessarily guarantee the quality of such information (Coleman and Ross 2010: 27–28), although it certainly contributes to and enhances the political ‘spectacle’ which is often intensified by the media during election periods (Couldry, Hepp and Krotz 2010). It is the role of news media to turn political information into accessible and understandable news, i.e. to select, frame and analyse the political process in a format that enables the wider audience to follow the political process.

b) include plural voice (participation): the normative assumptions here are that the media should facilitate a public sphere accessible by all, not only for observation (audience function) but also for active contribution of opinions. The notion of accessibility in this sense is linked to the openness that ought to characterize a democratic public space. We expect a news media sphere, either offline or online, to be open to all, as in the opposite case ‘democratic citizenship becomes a pious aspiration rather than a predictable commitment’ (Coleman and Ross 2010, 24). At the same time, a democratic public space gives the right to all to transmit and to receive (Williams 1961, 117–21). On the one hand, participation is determined to a large extent by the media’s structure, content format and organizational agenda and decisions. On the other hand, journalists directly affect the dynamics of public political debate through their choices concerning the actors and views they put forward in their coverage and/or analysis of the political process. In other words, it is not sufficient for news media to provide the infrastructure that enables participation, they also need to make their content relevant to all by providing ‘room for all voices’ in media spaces and even encouraging ‘various forms of active citizenship’ (Coleman and Ross 2010, 26 and 29–30). Closely linked to this aspect of participation is the following third function of the media:

c) provide critique and compete over the definition of value of politics and institutional arrangements (public opinion formation). Public opinion formation, or the ena-

bling of informed opinion-making can be understood as the spectrum of opinions expressed and the justifications delivered in the media are the horizon for interpreting politics and thus become decisive for public opinion formation and for perceptions of political legitimacy (Schneider, Nullmeier and Hurrelmann 2007). Through public debate, participants and audiences formulate their views on contested issues and they are also exposed to opposing views and arguments. One important function of news media is therefore to hold public debate in a dynamic state. New arguments are brought in all the time and actors might shift between different justificatory logics and change their opinions on an existing situation or a political issue. How public opinion is shaped depends on the form of participation (i.e. the dynamic aspects of public debates) but also the quantity and quality of news and its salience – publicization.

Taken together, the enactment of these three functions unifies the media public sphere as the place where all affected citizens have a possibility to participate and be exposed to the relevant arguments as a basis for collective will-formation based on shared values. This public sphere approach thus offers a model for the analysis of the link between mediatization and democratization, as follows: news media have a transformative capacity on both political institutions and the audience in so far as that they a) focus public attention on the political process of the EU, b) activate the audience to comment and voice their concerns with EU politics, and c) evaluate the legitimacy of the EU political system through a process of informed opinion making. Mediatization as measured through the performance of news media across these three dimensions occurs either as an enhancement of democratic life (the democracy enhancing potential of the media) or as a disruption of established civil culture and democracy (the democracy ‘dumbing down’ impact of the media). Below, we discuss these three components in light of our own empirical research on the interplay between online news media and EU politics before conclude with some pointers for future directions of EU mediatization research.

5. News media and democratic publicity in the EU

Our work on the online European public sphere confirms that while the role of the media as a secondary definer of current events remains crucial, the list of public ‘interpreters’ of EU politics is becoming more plural, so that we can no longer be certain that the cultural dynamics of EU public contestation are driven by a strong alliance between the primary definers (state and power holders) and journalists (Michailidou et al. 2014). The diversification of the media landscape allows for a pluralization of interpre-

tations and a new competition among these primary definers of EU politics for the precious attention of news audiences. Nevertheless, there is an ever-growing tendency for concentration both in terms of media ownership and audience attention. Analysis of media ownership patterns in several EU countries points to a handful of families and conglomerates controlling several of the online and offline news media in one or more EU countries (Michailidou et al. 2014). News frames, newsworthiness criteria and reporting style of EU events remain firmly grounded to the national political sphere, with journalists making only infrequent attempts to present EU news from a foreign perspective or to address new audiences. Our findings support previous scholarly knowledge about the Europeanization of offline news spheres (Koopmans and Statham 2010; Liebert and Trenz 2008; Wessler, Peters, Brüggemann, Kleinen-von Königslöw and Sifft 2008): nationally 'confined' news reporting survives online too. Not surprisingly then, politicians from the national political arenas are also the most visible actors in online news-making. Readers are thus primarily motivated to express concerns about the state of democracy in their countries and to a lesser extent in Europe.

Nevertheless, the borders of the community that online news readers purport to represent and the underpinning values of said community vary widely and are strongly contested by fellow readers. What our findings firmly confirm – in line also with previous research – is that readers' comments are an independent genre, partly detached from the journalistic text source but at the same time following similar frames used in political news-making that have a strong appeal to the more traditional, non-commenting members of the news audience. The new genre of news-commenting becomes one of the arenas for mass self-communication (Castells 2009), which is more emotional and more passionate than the original content provided by the journalist, but not necessarily more biased as readers often display the pleasure of dispute, draw attention through provocation and challenge the dominant frames and interpretations. From an audience perspective, the new genre of news-commenting becomes an important reference point for news consumption. News readers can – and do – check, some more systematically than others, the opinions of other readers with regard to the coverage of political events. Postings about controversial issues on mainstream news sites become a stage that galvanizes readers' interest in a particular topic. Besides the high entertainment value that reading other people's comments has, it also requires more active and interpretative tasks: the audience (those readers who do not contribute their own comments) evaluates arguments in a similar way as the online contestants do. They decide about the winners and losers in the debates and thus actively filter and select opinions. In normative terms, readers-commentators constitute a vocal

public, which engages in opinion-making, making its voice a part of the interpretation of news and the formation of news audiences.

6. Conclusion

The mediatization of politics is usually described in relation to legitimacy requirements and constraints of national political actors and institutions. As we have argued in this article, mediatization research should however not be confined to the national media sphere but can be usefully applied to expand our understanding of the transformation of international politics and the increasing legitimacy constraints under which international political organizations operate. In the particular case of the EU, processes of mediatization are interlinked with demands for the democratization of EU politics, which through the mirror of the media are increasingly facing the constraining dissensus and skepticism of large parts of the EU population. To fully grasp this legitimacy impact, we contend that the concept of mediatization should not only be used in the narrow sense to analyze the impact of media on the operational modes of the EU political system, but, in more general terms, to capture the transformation of the public sphere and the changing conditions for the generation of political legitimacy both at national and at European level. The mediatization research agenda highlights the intrinsic link between the visibility filters of the media and democracy, as it confronts us with the critical standards of democratic publicity and public justification as ingredients of political legitimacy.

In particular, we can capture the link between mediatization and democratization by looking at the opportunities for top-down and bottom-up formation of public opinion that the public sphere offers. Through mediatized democracy, the EU has a chance to correct its 'elitist bias' and to foster Europeanization also at the level of mass communication. Filtered through the media sphere, EU representative politics will be more emotional and less rational, but also more popular and less elitist (Chambers 2009). Mediatized representative politics is not necessarily geared towards overcoming the gap between EU representatives and the citizens, but it certainly turns it more salient, tangible and applicable. The role of the audience-EU citizenry is fast becoming an important element of what we describe as mediatized democracy, because it adds a layer to the legitimacy claims under which political actors and institutions operate, whether they directly respond to it or not. As such, the role of the audience as a 'public interpreter' of EU politics merits special attention in future research.

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AUTHORS INFORMATION:

Asimina Michailidou is a political communications scholar who researches at ARENA, Centre for European Studies, University of Oslo, Norway. She holds a PhD in political communication from the University of Loughborough, UK. Central to her work is the role of online media in the EU's public communication strategies, crises, European elections and Euroscepticism. Among her most recent publications are the monographs 'The Internet and European Integration' (Barbara Budrich, 2014) and 'Contesting Europe' (ECPR Press, 2013), both co-authored with H.J. Trezn and P. de Wilde. Her research also appears in the *European Journal of Political Research*; the *Journal of European Public Policy*; the *Politics of Prejudice Journal*; *Journalism Practice*; *European Journal of Communication Research*; and the *Journal of Contemporary European Research*.

Hans-Jörg Trezn is Vice-Chair of the Center for Modern European Studies and professor of European media culture at the Department of Media, Cognition and Communication, University of Copenhagen.