



Content Analysis in the Research Field of Transnational Public Spheres

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1 Introduction

The public sphere is a communication arena where speakers discuss political and societal issues, positions, and arguments in order to arrive at solutions for common problems (Habermas 2006; Wessler 2018). Normative functions of the public sphere in democracies, such as monitoring and control of politics, deliberation, and public opinion formation, have been extensively debated in the fields of communication and political theory, most frequently against the backdrop of the nation-state (Christians et al. 2009; Ferree et al. 2002). Trends of globalization and global governance, however, go along with transformations of the state, the increasing involvement of transnational institutions, and major changes in media systems. They raise questions about the need, reality, and consequences of transnational public spheres (Castells 2008; Nash 2014; Volkmer 2014).

Transnational public spheres extend national borders. They emerge through the entanglement and overlap of different national communication arenas (Risse 2010; Wessler et al. 2008). Transnational public spheres are examined in sociology, political science, and communications, in relation to economy and constitutional law, and from a historical perspective. In academic discussions, *transnational* public sphere is meant as global communication or, in a narrower sense, communication related to specific geopolitical regions, most prominently, the multi-level governance system of

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the European Union (EU). Discussions on the formation of a European Public Sphere (EPS) intensified in the early 1990s and 2000s (e.g., Eder and Kantner 2000; Eilders and Voltmer 2003; Gerhards 2000; Kielmansegg 1996), after the signing of the Maastricht Treaty (1992) had shifted substantial political power from individual nation-states to the EU. What exactly constitutes transnational public spheres is, however, still controversial. Some researchers emphasize the utopian ideal of a coherent and persistent transnational public sphere that stretches beyond nation-states and would require a shared identity and an integrated media system (Grimm 1995; Schlesinger 1993). In a more pragmatic way, others focus on the transnationalization of national public spheres. Accordingly, transnationalization refers either to convergent issue publics in which the same issues are discussed simultaneously with reference to the same frames (Eder and Kantner 2000) or to the discursive integration of communicative arenas that become intertwined by interactions of public speakers across countries (Adam 2007; Koopmans and Statham 2010; Wessler et al. 2008).

In communication science, different subfields cover different dimensions of transnational public spheres. Studies on the transnationalization of *media systems* examine international media markets, international broadcasting, and the global transmission and adaption of TV formats (Chalaby 2016; Gillespie et al. 2008; Kuipers 2011; Straubhaar 2007). Research on the *actors* in transnational public spheres examine the public relation activities of international institutions (Brüggemann 2008; Scherpereel et al. 2016), civil society and social movements (Bennett and Segerberg 2012; Bourne 2018), and journalists as the key actors in the processes of transnationalization (Dupuis 2012; Heft et al. 2019; Lorenz 2017; Offerhaus 2011). While only some researchers look at the *audience side* (Hepp et al. 2016; Lingenberg 2010; Walter 2017), the lion's share of research activities deals with the *content of media communication*. Among this strand of literature, studies on foreign news or international news geography explore the monitoring function of the public sphere (Cohen 2013; Golan 2010; Shoemaker and Cohen 2006; Strunz 2014). While studies in political communication have their main focus on policy legitimation and public deliberation (Koopmans and Statham 2010; Wessler et al. 2008), research on global journalism (Berglez 2008; van Leuven and Berglez 2016; Zhang and Hellmueller 2017) or global risk and crisis communication (Cottle 2009; Schwarz et al. 2016) examine how global or transnational issues, such as global warming or international terrorism, stimulate transnational media discourses.

In sum, content analyses on transnational public spheres examine (1) to what extent and under which circumstances national mass media make supranational governance visible and (2) how they enable transnational discourses. Further, some researchers investigate (3) the quality of transnational media debates (Polownikow 2017), and others study (4) how transnational public spheres relate to the construction of transnational collective identities (Eilders and Lichtenstein 2010; Lichtenstein 2014; Risse 2010).

2 Research Designs

The vast majority of content analyses on transnational public spheres have a comparative research design that establishes a relative benchmark for the evaluation of the degree or quality of transnationalization (e.g., Hepp et al. 2016; Tobler 2010; Wessler et al. 2008). Frequent levels of comparison are countries, media formats, and issues. A few studies compare media coverage of international and national issues (Gerhards 2000; Polownikow 2017).

With regards to sampling, research concentrates on the politically and economically strong Western states of Germany, France, and Great Britain at the expense of gaining knowledge about many smaller countries (with the important exception of the Netherlands). As for Central and Eastern European countries, comparative studies frequently focus on Poland. Especially in the early years of research on EPS, the primary research objects in content analyses were printed quality newspapers and magazines that are likely to cover EU and foreign issues and that are easily accessible. Since then, there has been an increasing number of studies dealing with online outlets and social media (Barisione and Michailidou 2017; Hänska and Bauchowitz 2019; Hepp et al. 2016; Schwarzenegger 2017), tabloids (Kleinen-von Königslöw 2012), regional newspapers (Lohner 2011; Vettors 2007), TV news (de Vreese 2005; Kevin 2003; Peter and de Vreese 2004), or political talk shows (Lichtenstein and Polownikow 2015). A minority of studies aims to compare different media formats (Hepp et al. 2016; Kevin 2003; Saurwein et al. 2006). Some triangulate content analysis with qualitative observations, interviews, or focus group discussions (Hepp et al. 2012; Shoemaker and Cohen 2006). Other combine content analysis with media effect studies based on survey data and experimental research designs (Brosius et al. 2019, 2020; de Vreese et al. 2008; Schuck and de Vreese 2006; Vliegenthart et al. 2008). Content analyses that analyze the media *as actors* in the formation of transnational public spheres examine opinion pieces in the media (Eilders and Voltmer 2003; Pfetsch et al. 2008; Wessler et al. 2008).

Even though transnationalization must be understood as a process, few studies include a time perspective in their research design (e.g., Eilders and Voltmer 2003; Gerhards 2000; Ivanova 2017; Koopmans and Statham 2010; Wessler et al. 2008). Instead, many studies examine discourses on conflict or crisis events such as Brexit (Bijmans et al. 2018; Krzyżanowski 2019), the Euro crisis (Galpin 2017; Heft 2016; Nienstedt et al. 2015; Risse 2015) or other mostly *political* events. This is despite the fact that sports or pop cultural media events, such as the Eurovision Song Contest or the European Football Championship, also serve as catalysts for transnational communication. Methodologically, quantitative frame analysis (e.g., Grundmann et al. 2000; Statham and Trenz 2013; Tobler 2010; van de Steeg 2006) can be differentiated from qualitative discourse analyses (Galpin 2017; Krzyżanowski 2019; Triandafyllidou et al. 2009). This is also true for research on European identity in transnational public spheres (for more on quantitative work, see Baeva 2014; Lichtenstein 2014, 2016; for qualitative examples,

see Díez Medrano 2003; Lönnedonker 2018; Seidendorf 2007). Few studies on transnational public spheres conduct automatic coding (Brosius et al. 2019, 2020; Ivanova 2017).

3 Main Constructs

Meta-analyses and reviews of content analyses on transnational public spheres in general and on the EPS in particular (Adam 2015; de Vreese 2007; Machill et al. 2006; Pfetsch and Heft 2015) reveal that a plurality of constructs is examined. Research activities can be summarized along two dimensions (Koopmans and Erbe 2004): vertical and horizontal transnationalization. Whereas the former refers to the monitoring of supranational governance, the latter deals with cross-border communication. In research on both dimensions, frequent coding units are newspaper articles and anchored news. Studies on horizontal transnationalization, which are interested in discursive interactions, also code on the level of frame or claims in media pieces that can be attributed to a specific speaker. Despite an extensive body of research articles and differences in the methodological designs, existing studies on transnational public spheres can be summarized regarding several main constructs and results:

1. *Visibility of supranational governance*: Since the 1992 Maastricht Treaty, media in EU countries have shown a substantial increase of references to EU issues, **actors**, and **institutions**. References to the UN and other international institutions, in contrast, have been largely stable over time (Eilders and Voltmer 2003; Gerhards 2000; Hepp et al. 2016; Wessler et al. 2008). Trenz (2004) found that vertical transnationalization of public spheres goes along with a domestication of EU issues; this is because many media pieces do not place their main focus on EU issues, but instead make side references to the EU in discussions of national issues. In addition, the extent of vertical transnationalization differs strongly between countries, situational contexts, media, and policy fields. Countries with a long tradition as EU members, a high degree of political integration, and a rather EU-skeptical population rank particularly high (Pfetsch et al. 2008; Wessler et al. 2008). Key political events, elite conflicts, and EU summits lead to a cyclical visibility of EU governance (Boomgaarden et al. 2010; Lucht 2010; Statham and Trenz 2013). Regarding media differences, quality newspapers are most open for EU issues. In addition, the EU gains visibility in the coverage of European integration, economic, and monetary policies where it has far more decision-making authority compared to education and pension policies (Koopmans 2015; Koopmans et al. 2010; Polownikow 2017; Trenz 2004). Finally, the media focus on the output side of EU politics rather than on the early stages of policymaking (Wessler et al. 2008). As a consequence, EU executive politicians are far more visible compared to parliamentary and party actors or European civil society organizations (Koopmans 2007, 2015). In contrast to this,

Walter (2017) demonstrates that EU governance becomes visible in media content by frequent references to EU citizens.

2. *News geography and attention*: Studies on foreign news and the horizontal transnationalization of public spheres analyze the visibility of foreign countries and their representatives in the media (Cohen 2013; Golan 2010; Shoemaker and Cohen 2006; Strunz 2014; Wessler et al. 2008). They stress country characteristics (e.g., political and economic power), events-specific qualities (e.g., crisis or conflict), and geographic and cultural closeness between countries as important predictors for media attention (see also Fengler et al. 2018). Within the EU, Germany, France, Italy, and Great Britain accumulate media attention, even though the Euro crisis caused an increase of media attention toward crisis countries' economies (Post and Vollbracht 2013). Regarding other countries, EU membership does not enhance international visibility (Hepp et al. 2016; Kalantzi 2004; Wessler et al. 2008). Similar to the vertical dimension, horizontal transnationalization ranks higher in policy fields in which the EU has strong competencies (Koopmans et al. 2010; Polownikow 2017).
3. *Framing of transnational issues*: A series of studies compares the framing of European conflict events in different countries. For the "Haider case" and the debate about the integration of the right-wing party FPÖ in the Austrian government, van de Steeg (2006) found references to similar values across countries indicating a convergence of discourses. Other researchers analyzed conflicts *between* countries (Grundmann et al. 2000; Nienstedt et al. 2015; Tobler 2010). They found that national media outlets frame transnational conflicts through national lenses. The dominance of national perspectives in transnational communication is also revealed in studies on frames spread by international or public diplomacy broadcasters such as Al Jazeera, CNN, or RT (formerly Russia Today) on TV and YouTube channels (Haigh and Bruce 2017; Lichtenstein and Koerth 2020).
4. *Discursive interactions*: Claim analyses examine strategic speech acts by which a public speaker directs, for instance, a thematic demand or decision to another actor (Adam 2007; Koopmans and Statham 2010; Polownikow 2017). Since top-down interactions from the EU to the national level are scarce, national actors are the main contributors in discourses. Most claims directed to the EU stem from governmental politicians, while voices from parliament and civil society are less frequent. Similarly, cross-border interactions between countries are basically one-sided with domestic speakers as the main contributors (Adam 2007; Koopmans 2007). Although citizens' participation is stronger in online discussions on journalistic websites, weblogs, and Facebook, the content of claims still follows a national perspective (Michailidou and Trenz 2010) and users resist engaging in horizontal communication (Hepp et al. 2016). To some extent, this is different in the more elite centrist communication on Twitter. The analyzes of EU-related hashtags revealed cross-border interactions on Twitter by studying users' location information and their retweeting, quoting, replying, and addressing of users from other countries (Hänska and Bauchowitz 2019).

5. *Quality of transnationalization*: A minority of studies examines the quality of transnational public spheres (Engelmann 2009; Lohner 2011; Polownikow 2017). Quality is measured by analyzing 1) the plurality of issues or arguments and speakers, 2) the balance of issues and positions, 3) rationality regarding the share of justifications and evidence for positions, and 4) civility (Polownikow 2017). Whereas inclusiveness becomes manifest in media content more for arguments than for public speakers, the shares of justifications for positions, political balance, and civility differ between issues, countries, and media formats. Compared to coverage on national issues, Polownikow (2017) found a lower degree of rationality and more interpretation in transnational discourses.
6. **Identity**: The normative function of public spheres for community building and solidarity leads researchers to examine expressions and constructions of transnational identity in media discourses. Some studies examine expressions of identification with a transnational community as one dimension of transnational public spheres (Hepp et al. 2016; Tobler 2010; Tréfás 2010; Wessler et al. 2008). Identification is coded for different national and transnational communities by the indicators of explicit “we” references as well as collective names such as “the Europeans”. Over time and compared to identification with the nation state, identification with the EU stagnates at a low level in EU countries’ media. Transatlantic or Western “we”-references decrease. Internal EU conflicts, however, stimulate identification and go along with policy claims in the name of Europe (Tobler 2010; Tréfás 2010). Other researchers examine the framing of European integration (Díez Medrano and Gray 2010; Pfetsch et al. 2008) or the framing and evaluation of European identity in media content. Despite strong differences in the framing of the EU between countries and contexts, they found predominantly positive evaluations of the EU in all analyzed countries (Lichtenstein 2014, 2016). During the Euro crisis, however, European identity became more politicized, and identification turned into ambivalence (Lichtenstein and Eilders 2019).

4 Desiderata

Content analyses on transnational public spheres have provided data indicating that developments over time, structural restrictions, and contextual circumstances influence flows of communication. In sum, transnational public spheres are in flux, context sensitive, and multi-segmented. Even though transnational discourses emerge and are triggered by conflicts, countries and media formats are important fault lines that structure transnational communication.

Further research activities need, on the one hand, to update data on the EPS. Since comparative major projects on the EPS have been conducted in the 2000s, most acquired data are related to communication in the European Union before the recent major disruptions of the financial crisis, the Euro debt crisis, the migration crisis, and Brexit.

On the other hand, content analyses on transnational public spheres should go beyond EPS and strengthen research on transnational public spheres in the Arab region, Asia, or Africa and even compare between regions. Data collection should focus less extensively on printed newspapers and must consider online media in the first place. This can include EU-skeptical blogs as well as interactions on social network sites and the coverage of international issues on YouTube outlets. In addition, research should have a stronger focus on frames contributed by international broadcasters, such as RT, and their role for transnational discourses. Content analyses should also be triangulated with effect and reception studies to examine how transnational debates affect citizens' attitudes. Finally, further research should go beyond descriptive analyses and aim to explain processes of transnationalization. Regarding EPS, it should be examined why and under what conditions EU-skeptical voices contribute to a stimulating politicization of EU issues or to polarized discourses and renationalization.

Relevant Variables in DOCA—Database of Variables for Content Analysis

Institutional references: <https://doi.org/10.34778/2zj>

Speakers: <https://doi.org/10.34778/2zk>

EU identity frame: <https://doi.org/10.34778/2zi>

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