REMOTE, ELITIST, OR NON-EXISTENT?

THE EUROPEAN PUBLIC SPHERE IN THE DEBATES OF BRITISH POLITICAL ELITES

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Abstract

This paper looks at how British political elites discuss the European public sphere and citizens' participation within it. Drawing on 41 in-depth interviews with political elites – including politicians at national and European levels, journalists, political activists, and think-tank professionals – the paper explores interviewees' understandings of the European public sphere, and their perceptions about its vitality. Our research reveals a great deal of scepticism about the idea of a European public sphere, in part rooted in conventional British Euro-sceptic approaches, and in part fostered by a perception of the remoteness and democratic deficit of the European Union.

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Introduction

The normative idea of the public sphere has been widely accepted as a conceptualisation of the ideal role citizens should play in contemporary politics. Though a contested concept, it remains central to any theorisation of citizens' political participation.[1] Habermas (1974, 49) defined the public sphere as "a realm of our social life in which something approaching public opinion can be formed." To scholars in communication and media studies "the term often connotes the realm of media, politics, and opinion processes in a more general, descriptive way" (Dahlgren 2001, 35). Some suggest, however, that the idea of the public sphere has never been – and will never be – accomplished, and instead constitutes a useful ideal-type for conceiving the social spaces where public deliberation takes place, as well as the channels through which such deliberation reaches political representatives (e.g. Bennett and Entman 2001). Although Habermas discussed the crucial role the media ought to play for a healthy public sphere to emerge (see, for example: Habermas 1996, 373ff.), this has remained a contentious subject in academic debates. Some scholars (e.g. Hartley 1992) argue that the media constitute the public sphere in and off themselves, others believe that they could be more helpfully conceived of as a channel mediating between the public and political representatives (e.g. Baker 2007). To yet others, particular media genres (such as talk shows) constitute a mediated representation of the public sphere (e.g. Livingstone and Lunt 1994).

A further layer of complexity is added to these debates in transnational contexts, as normative conceptions of citizenship, political participation and the media have generally assumed that democratic practices are only performed at a national level (Gripsrud and Moe 2010). However, this assumption needs to be rethought at a time when states make increasing concessions of sovereignty to supranational organisations, particularly since the democratic legitimacy and accountability of those organisations are fiercely contested (Held and Koenig-Archibugi 2004).

This is especially the case for the European Union, as the ongoing process of European integration has always been accompanied by civic contestation and varying degrees of Euro-scepticism. While national ministers of member states (whose legitimacy is normally unquestioned) and democratically elected MEPs play the most prominent roles in EU politics, the politics of the Union have always been under suspicion for their (alleged) democratic deficit. In a recent lecture, Habermas has argued that:

> *The European Union owes its existence to the efforts of political elites who could count on the passive consent of their more or less indifferent populations as long as the peoples could regard the Union as also being in their economic interests all things considered. The Union legitimized itself in the eyes of the citizens primarily through its outcomes and not so much from the fact that it fulfilled the citizens' political will. […] Thus, to the present day there remains a gulf at the European level between the citizens' opinion- and will-formation, on the one hand, and the policies actually adopted to solve the pressing problems, on the other. This also explains why conceptions of the European Union and ideas of its future development have remained diffuse among the general population* (Habermas 2013).

More broadly, explanations of the democratic deficit range from the absence of a *demos*, to the weakness of the EU parliament and the lack of real elections at the EU level.[2] Scholars, politicians, and EU institutions themselves have become increasingly aware of the low levels of trust citizens show towards EU policies, as well as of the widespread political and institutional disengagement with the project of European integration. This, of course, is all the more urgent in the context of the current financial crisis and the challenges it poses to the common currency.

Most observers assume that a stronger European identity and a vibrant European public sphere would be desirable to overcome such a democratic deficit. In this sense, the application of the normative concept of the public sphere (Habermas 1992) to the European polity has been the most successful attempt at a conceptualisation of the relations between citizens, the media, and the political at the European level, and has been adopted by scholars (e.g. Kaitatzi-Whitlock 2007), EU policy-makers (e.g. Wallström 2007), and EU institutions themselves (e.g. European Commission 2006). The idea of a European public sphere has been turned into the main driving force of EU communication policies in an attempt to remedy the remoteness of the EU (see, for example: European Commission 2001) which affects the democratic legitimacy of the Union. However, these concerns have not crystallised into a more inclusive and participatory politics at the EU level. In the words of Gavin (2007, 153), the debate on the EU's democratic deficit "is idealized and abstracted and focuses more on procedures and structures than on processes."

Probably as a consequence of the multiple EU-funded research projects on the topic (see Nieminen 2009 for a non-exhaustive list), there is already a significant amount of literature analysing the existence, the constraints, and/or the conditions for a European public sphere. However, empirical research has often underplayed the deliberative aspect of the original Habermasian notion, equating the public sphere with what gets published or broadcast in (national) media.[3] As Olivier Baisnée (2007, 500) suggested: "most research suffers from being far too media-centric, tending to conflate 'the public sphere' with 'the media': more specifically, national media – even more narrowly, the press." While these equations tend to be rooted in complex operationalisations of the European public sphere[4] and are often justified on the basis of the media's role in amplifying and condensing public debate (e.g. van de Steeg 2002), they stress the informative role of the media to the detriment of more participatory understandings. Consequently, they promote a limited view of citizens' (potential) participation in European politics.

Some scholars have brought the traditional debate on the European democratic deficit a step further, raising concerns about *who* participates in EU-related political debates. Craig Calhoun (2004, n.p.), for example, characterised the (rather reduced and elitist) sectors that constitute the European public sphere (or its current embryonic form):

> *First, there is the 'official' Europe of the EU and the common affairs of its members ... It is a top-down affair in which Europe is represented to Europeans from Brussels ... Second, there is an elite discursive community that is much more active in public communication, is often multilingual (on the continent, at least), reads more and more internationally, and consists largely of leaders in business and finance, parts of higher education, the media themselves, and to some extent government ... Third, there are*

> *the widely ramifying networks of activists ... committed to many different causes from whole foods to human – and indeed animal – rights. Though most of these movements are global in their aims and to some extent their ultimate scope, Europe is overrepresented amongst their participants.*

Other researchers, however, have questioned the "heavily normative liberal point of view" (Baisnée 2007, 500), suggesting that the European public sphere will only come into existence when all EU citizens participate in it. The elite domination of EU-related debates was also revealed by a content analysis of British newspapers (Statham and Gray 2005), something which seemed significant as "cleavages concerning Europe appear to cross-cut institutional actors and civil society actors and are not based on a cleavage between elites on one side, versus civil society actors on the other" (Statham and Gray 2005, 72), particularly in the British case.

Following debates on European citizenship and European identity (e.g. Bakke 1995; Mayer and Palmowski 2004), other research (Grimm 1995; Schlesinger 1995; Schlesinger 1999; Kleinstüber 2001) has focused on concerns about the possibility of a common European public sphere without the existence of a common public due to "the deep-rooted barriers of language, culture, ethnicity, nation, and state" (Schlesinger 1999, 271). This work has suggested that something akin to an "imagined community" (Anderson 1983) is required for a vibrant public sphere to emerge. Habermas (Habermas and Derrida 2003) himself, however, implied that a common language may not be essential when he cautiously suggested that the simultaneous demonstrations against the Iraq war held on 15 February 2003 could well indicate the birth of a European public sphere. Grisprud (2007, 491), in turn, argued that transnational multilingual TV channels such as Eurosport and Euronews "have actually established *in practice* a common European public sphere, albeit multilingual and seriously limited in many ways" (emphasis in the original). However an empirical analysis of Euronews' content questioned its performance as a platform furthering the democratisation of the EU and fostering citizens' political participation (Garcia-Blanco and Cushion 2010).

The EU has responded to concerns about the democratic deficit and set up formal platforms for citizens' participation in EU policy-making. Despite this, it is generally the case that citizens' political participation and the European public sphere are mainly thought of in relation to the media. This implies an understanding of citizens' political participation as the product of an informed and active citizenry. Indeed, an informed and active citizenry is widely seen as one of the most basic (and desirable) elements of a well-functioning democracy (Delli Carpini and Keeter 1996; Schudson 1999), insofar as public opinion mechanisms are central to the legitimacy of democratic governments (Sartori 1987). According to this understanding of the democratic process, representatives govern with the consent of public opinion, which is freely formed in exercises of public deliberation.

The quality and meaningfulness of citizens' political deliberation has also been subject to scholarly scrutiny. Research has highlighted concerns for the quality of citizens' political knowledge (see, for example: Delli Carpini and Keeter 1996; Curran et al. 2009). There is also a growing interest in the study of citizens' informal political conversation (e.g. Eliasoph 1998; Walsh 2004; Mutz 2006; Jacobs et al. 2009), to the extent that Schudson (1997, 297) lamented the "veritable obsession" with political

conversation amongst scholars. There has been considerably less interest, however, in trying to understand how politicians are informed about the deliberations of the public sphere, and to what extent (if at all) the product of this deliberation impacts the decisions and the policies developed by political representatives.

This paper, based on a series of interviews with British political actors, focuses on how MPs, MEPs, Welsh Assembly members, political activists, journalists, and individuals affiliated with NGOs and think tanks conceive of, and perceive the European public sphere. Following the approach of other scholars (Heikkilä and Kunelius 2006; Besley and Roberts 2010), we are interested in exploring British political actors' understandings of the European public sphere and analysing the democratic implications of such understandings. These conceptions, we suggest, may contribute to constructing both the boundaries and opportunities for citizens' political participation at the EU level.

British Political Actors as a Case Study

Our study of prominent British political actors' views on the European public sphere was mainly motivated by our interest in understanding how individuals affiliated with organisations which actually shape European politics – both at the institutional and at the non-institutional level – talk about public opinion and citizens' views on policies. To investigate this, we carried out 41 semi-structured open-ended interviews. These interviews, which lasted between 40 and 90 minutes, included questions about the actors' perceptions about the process of European integration, their understanding of the European polity, their views on the European public sphere, the role the media played in their understanding of the EU and the European public sphere, and also about the actions that their organisations and they, as individuals, undertook to follow citizens' deliberations and opinions on EU policies. Most interviews were held face to face, although seven were carried out over the phone. All interviews took place between July 2008 and April 2009, and were transcribed and subsequently subjected to thematic coding (Boyatzis 1998).

We interviewed political representatives serving in the Welsh Assembly and the UK and European parliaments, on the basis of the belief of liberal democratic theory that elected representatives ought to be receptive to the deliberations of the public sphere, and should actively seek out knowledge about the concerns of the citizens they represent. We also interviewed individuals active in civil society organisations, on the understanding that they would aim to voice the opinions of different sectors of society. With the same purpose, and taking into account the growing lobbying power of think tanks in policy-making, we also interviewed individuals affiliated with think tanks related to EU politics. Finally, we carried out interviews with journalists covering EU politics, in an attempt to understand the extent to which they can act (or think they should act) as loudspeakers of the European public sphere, channelling citizens' opinions and constituting a bridge between a European public sphere and the political actors which in principle should be affected by it. Our interviewees thus represent a range of key elite actors in the public sphere, including government, civil society and media, who have an opportunity to influence public debate (e.g. McNair 2011).

Our selection of individual actors (see Table 1) was aimed at targeting the most prominent organisations participating in public debate related to the EU, as well

as at covering the widest possible range both in the right-left and Euro-sceptic-pro-EU political spectrums.

Table 1: Selected Organisations*

Political parties	NGOs	Think-tanks	Print media
Labour (5)	No Borders (5)	Federal Trust (3)	*Daily Telegraph* (1)
Conservative (5)	Freedom Association (5)	Centre for European Reform (2)	*The Guardian* (1)
Plaid Cymru (5)	Anti-Poverty Network (4)	Bruges Group (4)	*Sunday Times* (1)

*In brackets, the number of interviewees from each organisation

The diversity of the sample obviously had an impact upon the interview process. The traditional difficulties researchers face when interviewing members of the political elite (see Lilleker 2003; Morris 2009) proved particularly relevant since the topic under discussion is such a divisive one in the British political context. Britain is conventionally seen as a strongly Euro-sceptic national culture (e.g. Gifford 2008). Nonetheless, British elites tend to be essentially pragmatic regarding the Union, and support its policies if there are clear benefits for the UK. Debates about the nature of the model(s) of European polity or about EU policies have little place in British politics, as the debate is focused on the more fundamental question of whether Britain should be part of the EU in the first place. EU membership represents a major cleavage in British politics, revealing deep divisions amongst the public, political elites, and political leaders themselves (Budge et al. 2007, 166). These debates are often dominated by polarised positions advanced by political parties such as the UK Independence Party (a single-issue party advocating UK's independence from the EU), think tanks such as the Bruges Group (another anti-EU single-issue organisation), and campaigns such as Better Off Out (of the EU, obviously). In fact, the mere existence of high-profile single-issue organisations (UKIP came out second in the 2009 European parliament election, obtaining more votes than the Labour Party itself, for example) is a clear sign of the anti-EU feeling that is so prominent in British public debate.

The interviews often entailed dealing with professional interviewees who are well trained in tactics to avoid difficult questions, get their message across (e.g. Ball 1994; Batteson and Ball 1995), and sugar-coat or exaggerate their claims (Berry 2002). Interviewing journalists presented its own unique challenges, as journalists have traditionally felt uneasy with academic explorations of their profession (Lewis 2009). Despite these methodological difficulties, our methodological approach enabled us to access discourses about citizens' political participation in EU politics verbalised by political actors working in organisations related to the EU. If anything, we believe that our findings probably magnify the efforts of our interviewees when it comes to keeping healthy ties with citizens and collectives in defining their organisation's positions on specific EU policies.

British Political Actors and the European Public Sphere

Generally speaking, prominent British political organisations are hesitant to embrace the integration of the UK into a federal European polity. This is also the

case for the organisations we analysed. Even in the case of pro-EU individuals and organisations, the possibility of further European integration is frequently perceived as a potential attack on British sovereignty, and as an opportunity for other countries to gain control over policies affecting British citizens. The EU is often framed in public discourses as a remote, non-transparent, unaccountable Leviathan lacking the consent of the public that should legitimise institutions aspiring to be democratic. The media also play a part there: in addition to the anti-EU discourses voiced by the outlets owned by Rupert Murdoch (Jones et al. 2006), the *Mail* and the *Telegraph* also largely advance anti-EU positions. The main media outlets usually taking a pro-EU position are *The Independent*, *The Guardian*, and *The Economist*.

The British debate on the European Union has been shaped by the importance of concerns about the "technocracy" of the Union (Featherstone 1994). Issues around the loss of national sovereignty have been far more salient in Britain than in other large EU nations such as Germany and France. As the anti-European tabloid *The Sun* warned its readers, "Britain is drifting ever closer towards being swallowed up by a European superstate" meaning the "end of our nation" (cited in Walters and Haahr 2005, 86). This reflects a widespread discourse which largely constructs the EU as Britain's other, "coding it as a regime of bureaucratic domination and anti-citizenship" (Walters and Haahr 2005, 86).

The prominence of such claims was made evident as most of our interviewees conveyed discourses on the perceived "democratic deficit" and the "EU superstate." Even the most pro-European actors found grounds for concern, reflecting the generally Euro-sceptic nature of British political discourse. Probably as a consequence of the British questioning of the EU, the debate about the desirability of fostering, enabling or contributing to a European public sphere is not on the agenda of public debate in the UK. The organisations we studied, therefore, do not have official opinions on that particular question, although their members take particular views when asked about the European public sphere.

The idea of the democratic deficit was at the root of the most prevalent conceptions of the European public sphere. According to these understandings, the European public sphere could be conceived either as an elitist space where EU politicians meet, or as a discursive construct excluding rank and file citizens from political deliberation at the EU level. Some examples, from different sides of the political spectrum and the pro-EU / anti-EU divide:

> There's certainly an elite in Brussels who seem to be operating almost in a sphere that most of us cannot penetrate, and they are disconnected from the main populaces of all countries, and not just this one (The Freedom Association, Interviewee 2).

> There is a Brussels bubble, and one of the dangers within the European project is that opinions within the Brussels bubble are becoming so distant from the views of ordinary people (The Freedom Association, Interviewee 5).

> It [the European public sphere] exists … I think it excludes most people (Plaid Cymru, Interviewee 2).

> The EU seems to be something for some leaders meeting in Brussels, and deciding a couple of things without consulting (Anti-Poverty Network, Interviewee 1).

The apparently institutionalised idea of the "Brussels bubble" is at the root of the doubts that most of our interviewees showed towards EU institutions. A clear majority of our interviewees blamed EU institutions for the lack of a European public sphere or, alternatively, for the elitism of the European public sphere. In principle, such a sphere should be independent from all political power and emerging from civil society itself, as a social space where citizens could meet to discuss matters of public interest and regulate the authority of political institutions and of those exercising political power. Clearly, such a vision is at odds with interviewees' experiences on the ground.

Considering the prominence of discourses around the "democratic deficit," the "EU technocracy" and the "lack of accountability" in British Euro-sceptic discourses, it could be assumed that any attempt at widening citizens' political participation in the EU polity would be welcomed. However, this was not always the case. For example, some interviewees from Euro-sceptic organisations like the Freedom Association and the Bruges Group argued that the emergence of a European public sphere should be actively resisted, so that a European polity would never be effectively constituted: "I'd say [there is] no [European public sphere], and any efforts to create one should be discouraged ... Don't try to create an alternative set of European identity with its EU flag, its EU anthem when people don't particularly want it" (The Freedom Association, Interviewee 1)

A prominent Bruges Group member, in turn, suggested that the idea of widening the scope of political participation at the EU level clashed with what they saw as the very founding principle of the EU:

> People talk about the EU having a democratic deficit, but that's the whole point of the EU. It is to stop ordinary people making their decisions through a democratic system and to make things happen by a more or less self-appointed apparently enlightened elite. That's the whole point. Decisions are taken behind closed doors, not through the democratic system … No, the EU can't be democratised that way, because the only point of the EU is to be anti-democratic. You don't establish an anti-democratic organisation and then make it democratic (Bruges Group, Interviewee 1).

This analysis, though coming from a very different political vantage point, is similar to the position of Habermas (2013) discussed above; reflecting a critique of the democratic deficit in EU politics as rooted in the founding institutional logic. Other interviewees blamed poor media coverage of EU issues as responsible for citizens' lack of engagement with EU politics: "I think one major problem is the media. In Britain it has increased our antipathy towards anything European and I think that translates in terms of the way people feel about other European people" (Plaid Cymru, Interviewee 3).

The political elitism of the EU was not always seen as a problematic attribute. In fact, some pro-EU Conservative interviewees promoted a more formal understanding of the public sphere as the business of politicians, rather than of citizens. This conception could well be a transposition of widespread interpretations of the British unwritten constitution, assigning "deliberation to the politicians, rather than to the public" (Conover et al. 2002, 25). These conceptions either equated the European public sphere with the EU Council of Ministers (Conservative Party, Interviewee 1), or held that a European public sphere consisting of EU representatives indeed existed but was unsuccessful due to insufficient resources:

> I think that we are very well served here by the EU representatives, but I think they are under-resourced. It is difficult for them really because the more they do the better it will be to understand what the European Union does … It should be organised with better resources and trained officials. The reason is that all communication should be able to remove misguided prejudice … I think that it's a question of finance for the EU representatives so as to be able [to] have a beneficial influence and correct some of the scare stories in the media and understand that the whole EU is about people and advancement, not about regulation (Conservative Party, Interviewee 5).

Two concerns arise from such understandings of the public sphere. The first has to do with the function of the public sphere itself. Placed at the core of institutional politics, the public sphere loses its civic, deliberative nature, as well as its purpose of monitoring political institutions and discussing matters of public interest. This understanding of the European public sphere hijacks its normative duty of holding politicians and political institutions to account on the basis of public opinion, assimilating the public sphere with the basic institutional checks-and-balances system operating in European politics. "The second reason for concern is the idea of "communicating the EU better," which could be viewed as a veiled justification for institutional PR and spin, legitimising a stream of information flowing from political actors to the citizenry so that citizens can just express support or consent, rather than fostering substantial deliberation and participation. Such an understanding suggests that the citizenry should be governed from the top down, rather than taking the role of a political community whose voice(s) political actors should aim at articulating and representing.

Other Voices, Other Platforms

The British political actors we interviewed believe that the main barriers to a European public sphere are the lack of pan-European media and the linguistic diversity of the EU. Thus, some anti-EU interviewees think that the lack of a lingua franca renders the European public sphere an impossible achievement. As one interviewee stated: "No, there's not [any hope for a European public sphere to emerge] because not everybody speaks English or German or French" (Bruges Group, Interviewee 2). However, those who are more optimistic about the process of European integration believe that this could be solved by improving the linguistic abilities of the population. While it is obvious that improved language skills may facilitate cultural exchange and political deliberation amongst citizens belonging to different linguistic communities, a social space for discussing matters of public interest does not necessarily emerge as soon as there is a common language. A vibrant public sphere requires social practices enabling deliberation, channels of communication establishing common grounds for debate, and links between different social groups and political representatives and institutions (for a discussion, see Eliasoph 1998, 10ff.).

In this sense, some interviewees saw the lack of pan-European media as a fundamental constraint for the full development of a European public sphere:

> We don't have a single European newspaper, one newspaper that every European can read, no TV channel which is common for Europe. You cannot create a state called Europe because there is no demos … If someone is trying to construct a united Europe there

> should at least be a European News service informing all Europeans about the things happening in Europe. (Conservative Party, Interviewee 3).

Interviewees advancing such positions suggested that the growth and multiplication of pan-European media could contribute to the birth of the public sphere at the EU level.

The interviewees' focus on institutions highlights the conceptual need to link the European public sphere with tangible, real world counterparts. There were, however, alternative conceptions of the European public sphere, incorporating widespread utopian understandings of the internet as an empowering and emancipatory tool (see Livingstone 2005):

> I think that there are lots of possibilities: the internet, blogs. I don't think this is the kind of top-down kind of thing (The Daily Telegraph, Interviewee 1)

> The new technologies that are being developed so that people could communicate online have helped the communication space significantly … I think there should be more opportunities but I can't guess how it should be organised (Labour Party, Interviewee 1).

In any case, and despite the difficulties in imagining how the European public sphere should be organised, interviewees from almost all organisations believed in the desirability of a more participatory politics at the EU level:

> It would be a fantastic thing to happen, to have that common area of debate … Absolutely. I don't know how it should be organised, but I'm all for it (No Borders, Interviewee 2)

> I think that it would be good to have something in place so that EU citizens could discuss the EU and the future of the EU in their own ... So I think there is a need for something separate that will help to facilitate those discussions (Conservative Party, Interviewee 2).

Regardless of widespread reservations about the practice of the European public sphere, then, the normative ideal of citizens' active participation in public deliberation is a significant thread in discourses of actors across the political spectrum. The presence of such discourses signals the fact that weariness about the possibility of a European public sphere among UK actors is based on culturally and geographically specific experiences and debates, rather than on an underlying mistrust of mechanisms of the public sphere itself.

Conclusion

Our paper has suggested that despite the scholarly resonance of the idea of the European public sphere, political actors are largely sceptical about its actual existence. Across the political spectrum, our interviewees shared key views about systemic problems in the project of creating a European public sphere. They cited the isolation of EU political elites (the so-called "Brussels bubble") and EU political institutions; the short-sightedness of national news media, and the lack of pan-European perspectives in the news; or the absence of virtual or physical platforms/spaces where citizens can gather to deliberate were often mentioned as potential explanations for the lack of a more deliberative politics at the EU level.

As a consequence of these perceived systemic problems, most of our interviewees argued that the European public sphere either does not exist, or that it is an elite space which only includes policy-making actors and/or other privileged

groups or individuals, and has little relevance to the lives of ordinary British and European citizens. The lack of an authentic, bottom-up European public sphere was sometimes presented as a matter-of-fact reality, while some interviewees saw it as a problematic indicator of the democratic deficit of the EU.

Unlike the journalists interviewed by Heikkilä and Kunelius (2006), the British political actors and journalists we interviewed perceived the idea of the European public sphere as intangible and abstract: nobody really knows what it should look like or how to participate in it. Even politicians were at a loss as to where and how to look for a hypothetical European public sphere, and would probably not know how to recognise it if they came across it. The 41 interviewees referred to the European public sphere in the third person, as if they did not belong to, relate to, or were affected by it. This view is perhaps accentuated by the generalised perception of remoteness of the EU centres of political decision-making.

Overall, then, in the British context the notion of the European public sphere as a viable space for citizen participation remains problematic, rather than taken for granted as an empirical reality and/or normative ideal. As such, this concept, which has such currency within academic debates, appears to have limited relevance to the experience and discourses of the actors associated with it. The widespread scepticism about the existence of a European public sphere coincides with a broader concern about the lack of opportunities for meaningful citizen participation in European politics, even among those very actors who are supposed to enable such participation. It resonates with broader Euro-sceptic discourses circulating in British society, and highlights the persistent dominance of the national. Nonetheless, our paper also demonstrates that the idea of the European public sphere does have a conceptual use for our interviewees: It provided them with a forceful vocabulary for articulating the limitations of a utopian ideal which exists in forceful tension with their actual experience of political life.

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Notes:

1. Feminist, communitarian, and radical democratic theorists have been amongst the main contributors to the debate about the concept of the public sphere (for a good discussion, see Thompson 1995, 69-75; or Calhoun 1992). Even Habermas (1992) joined the debate himself. While feminists have called for a more gender-inclusive public sphere (see, for example: Fraser 1992), radical democrats reject the concept, as it necessarily seeks political consensus ("For a radical and plural democracy, the belief that a final resolution of conflicts is eventually possible, even if envisaged as an asymptotic approach to the regulative ideal of a free and unconstrained communication, as in Habermas, far from providing the necessary horizon of the democratic project, is something that puts it at risk" Mouffe 1993, 8). Taylor's (1995) communitarian approach addresses the essentialism of the idea of a single public sphere, suggesting that there is a

multiplicity of public spheres within Western societies. These public spheres, nested within bigger ones, often conflict with each other. This position challenges both the unity of the public sphere (as there can be more than one public sphere), its scope (as nested public spheres can be thematically focused), and its boundaries (as nested public spheres do not need to conform to the boundaries of the nation state – in fact, they can even be transnational). A similar approach can be found in the critical work of Gitlin (1998).

2. Weiler et al. (1995) gathered different arguments supporting the idea of a democratic deficit in the EU that were commonly found in the media, in academic works, or heard from citizens, politicians, and practitioners. A more recent academic discussion on the democratic deficit of the EU can be found in Follesdal and Hix (2006).

3. Most of these studies deal with EU key events – such as elections to the European parliament (Kevin 2001; de Vreese et al. 2006), the introduction of the Euro (de Vreese et al. 2001), or heads of government summits (Semetko and Valkenburg 2000). Research on day-to-day European politics is more scarce, consisting basically of Norris' (2000) secondary analysis of Euromedia data, and the results of a content analysis of TV news from five European countries mixing routine days with peak EU events (Peter and de Vreese 2004; Peter et al. 2003).

4. According to van de Steeg (2002), the European public sphere emerges when the same topics are simultaneously discussed in the national media of different European countries with a similar frame of relevance (van de Steeg 2002). A number of empirically-based works followed this perspective, analysing the media coverage of EU enlargement (van de Steeg 2002) and the Haider debate (van de Steeg et al. 2003; van de Steeg 2006). Trenz (2004), in turn, analysed national media coverage on European issues (mostly related to EU institutions), and concluded that the concomitance of topics and the similar frame national papers use when dealing with EU issues could be "sufficient proof for proclaiming the existence of a European public sphere" (Trenz 2004, 313).

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