

The Emergence of a European Public Sphere. An analysis of Europe's News Website presseurop.eu

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Abstract: *This paper seeks to draw attention upon the most recent media instrument through which the European Union (and the DG Communication, in particular) seeks to contribute to the consolidation of a deliberative arena dedicated to the public debate on European subjects. We propose an examination of this media tool – presseurop.eu portal – in order to see the extent to which it is able to serve its designated purpose. We look at the structure of the portal, at its content, its functionality and at the characteristics of its audience. Our analysis starts from the theoretical discussions around the emergence of a European public sphere and the correlation with its intrinsically related concept of public sphere. Given the great amount of literature on the subject, we have chosen to briefly point out the ideas that have significantly influenced research carried out in the field. Our goal is to demonstrate how media tools used to enhance communication on Europe may affect the transmission and the reception of the content, irrespective of the theoretical stance taken towards the constitution of the European public sphere as such.*

1. The european public sphere

A. Historical starting point – the concept of public sphere

The public sphere has become a famous topic of debate in the academic world of political sciences, mass communication and sociology since the translation in English of Jürgen Habermas's book "Strukturwandel der Öffentlichkeit" (1962), known to the English speakers under the title "The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere" (1989). In Germany, the concept of *Öffentlichkeit* had been long debated before the publication of Habermas's book in 1962, whilst in the other European and international areas this concept remained rather unknown: "linguistically, the syntagm «public sphere» seems to be a recent construction, selected by a translator to find a label for a word that has been in regular use in Germany since the 18th century" (Kleinsteuber 2001, p. 96). Habermas understood that the public sphere as a dispersed, discursive network within which citizens, connected by the means of mass communication, form currents of opinion, seeking how best to solve common problems. Habermas's *Öffentlichkeit* in its initial form (which actually means openness or publicness) is an *utopia*, as it excludes strategic communication and manipulation and participants arguably reach a consensus by leaving behind their personal and group beliefs and interests (Beciu 2004). This idea has been strongly criticized since there is no individual or group who could actually give up satisfying their interests and goals, or enter a debate without bearing in mind the promotion of their ideas, beliefs and interests. Moreover, since the "consensus is not required for a public sphere to exist (rather the opposite)" (Risse 2002, p. 7), disagreements and heterogeneity seem to be the basic conditions for the development of a meaningful public sphere.

The public sphere is a multidimensional concept, as it is intimately related to other concepts and the realities they stand for. Hence, the public sphere is "the engine of democratization", "the social and communicative infrastructure of democracy" (Trenz 2005, p. 1). The freedom of publicly expressing one's opinions, ideas and beliefs, of intervening in a public debate in order to find the best solution for a collective action, of commenting on the political offers or on the actions of politicians is a basic feature of modern democracies. There is no public sphere if this freedom is not respected. Moreover, the participation of the public in such debates is close to the idea of active citizenship that scholars of democracy deeply value.

Many theoreticians endorse the idea of a communicative space situated at the centre of the debate on the public sphere (Risse 2002, Trenz 2008, Schlesinger & Fossum 2007). Defined as "a shared community of communication" (Risse 2002, p. 10) or "an open field of communicative exchange" (Trenz 2008), the public sphere is a space where citizens discuss issues of public interest (Van Desteeg 2004). Applying a systemic model of public communication to the public sphere, one may find inputs such as the communicative performance of national (or local) government, throughput – the intermediary capacities of national media organizations, and outputs as the opinions and attitudes of national publics (Trenz 2008). In addition to the alleged interest of citizens for the communication and the deliberation concerning the general

issues, the functional public space has to be populated by the media – transmitters and often modifiers of the circulating messages – and, finally, it has to reach a larger public on whose active involvement and resonance to the opinions put forward further debates and actions depend.

Although public communication also takes place in face-to-face encounters, such as in informal conversations in bars, train compartments etc., or institutionalized meetings of different organizations (Nanz 2007), the public sphere needs a forum, an arena that supports the public debates. In the modern society, the arena where public debates take place is provided by the media. They support public debates at the same time as they enhance them. “The media are not merely serving other actors, but as a channel of communication, forum for exchange, and medium of self observation of society” (Koopmans 2007, p. 5). It is important to bear in mind that “media professionals certainly contribute to shaping the public sphere, but to do so they have to draw on the raw material of communicative actions and events that are produced and staged by non-media actors such as politicians, interest groups, and NGO’s” (Koopmans & Erbe 2003, p. 13). Moreover, as we have mentioned earlier, media organizations are the ones that play the throughputs role in the systemic model of public communication, that offers media the chance to intermediate and comment on the public issues.

B. The European public sphere – an overview of its constitution

Trenz (2005) emphasizes the centrality of the media and underscores the fact that the literature on the concept of public sphere opens a new link between European studies and communication studies, which are considered to be vital for the advancements of research in the field. The increasing of the literature production invites researchers to explore many facets of the emerging concept of European public sphere. So far, no consensus has been reached concerning a single unanimously accepted definition of the concept. Not to mention that it seems that there are still voices that doubt the mere existence of a European public sphere! Nevertheless, the construction of a public sphere of the European Union (EU) is an acknowledged important feature for EU’s future that no one denies. Golding (2006, p. 13) notes that the European public sphere “seeks to understand the engagement or lack of it among European citizens with the political project”. Therefore, the European public sphere becomes “the prerequisite for better governance, legitimacy and citizens’ participation in the emerging European polity” (Trenz 2005, p. 5).

The lack of a European collective identity, of European interests and citizens’ participation in debates on European affairs from a European and not from a national perspective are the most cited arguments for the non-existence of a European public sphere: “The lack of a collective identity renders the prospects for a viable European public sphere rather bleak. There is no agreement on common interests; different languages and disparate national cultures make opinion formation and common action

unlikely” (Eriksen in Lauristin 2007, p. 399). Or “In the absence of transnational interest groups, parties and social movements, we are unlikely to see an emerging European public sphere in which the issues are discussed from a European rather than the various national perspectives”(Risse 2003, p. 6). Other theoreticians have noticed that “the discrepancy between Europe’s institutional development, on the one hand, and the continuing predominance of the national political space as the arena for public debates and participatory citizenship, on the other, is at the core of Europe’s democratic deficit” (Koopmans 2007, p. 183). Therefore, the emergence of the European public sphere is intimately linked to the democratic deficit of the EU. The institutional, economic and political project of the EU leaves behind citizens’ participation in EU-related matters. What seems to be the problem here? Why are not the Europeans interested in their common future as “European citizens”? Searching for a possible answer, we turn our attention to the concepts of “social imaginary”, “collective unconsciousness”¹ or “collective identity”. The French, the British, the Germans, the Romanians and so on find it hard to leave their national interest behind and fight for a European cause, because they feel mainly as being French, British and not as Europeans. They automatically relate to their closest and oldest “social imaginary” – the one of their native country –, to the national “we”, and not to the European “we”. This impediment appears to carry a lot of weight in answering question about the allegedly manageable condition of the European public sphere. As Europe is still an “external locus of decision-making” (Schlesinger 2007, p. 416) for the majority of Europeans, the duality of national and European institutions and voices may contribute to the subversion of the idea of European public sphere. Thus, the “democratic deficit” that we have mentioned above is not the sole source of concern since it is more and more visibly accompanied by what has been called a “communication deficit” (Schlesinger 2007, p. 417). Consequences of such a “communication deficit” did not take long to appear: we only recall here the well-known rejection of the European Constitution by two of the founders of the EU – France and the Netherlands, in the summer of 2005.

As far as the “collective identity” is concerned, its importance in the performance of a public sphere has been emphasized in literature: “A collective identity above the level of primary groups and a collective we-feeling are needed in order for the EU citizens to acknowledge the sacrifices imposed in the name of the European collective goods”. In order for a public sphere to function, “at a minimum, the members must recognize each other as being members of the same group” (Eriksen 2007, p. 24).

1 Associated to the most renown disciple of Sigmund Freud, C.G. Jung, the collective unconscious is made up of all the instincts of a nation and everything about them, the “primordial images”, which Jung named archetypes; archetypes include the whole mental living of humanity, which is common to all individuals, e.g. the models of mythological gods and heroes and their meanings.

A common vision and a shared mission seem to be a basic condition for a European public space to genuinely emerge.

At this point, the most part of the literature dedicated to the European public sphere deals with the concept of “the weak public sphere” (Machill, Beiler & Fischer 2006). Three models of a European public sphere have managed so far to gain sympathy among theoreticians: **a)** the development of a common European-wide public sphere, **b)** the Europeanization of national public spheres and **c)** a consequence of the segmentation of transnational spheres of European publics (Kopper & Leppik 2006). The first model urges the need for a common media system, a common language and the reception of European media by people in all member states of the EU. This seems to be rather unlikely, as one can not truly consider the prospects of a common language, even though English is considered to be the unofficial *lingua franca* of the communication within the EU. Moreover, the history of a common media system and the issue of the reception of European media by people in all member states of the EU have shown us that it is hard to make this happen. Here are some examples from the past: in the ‘80s, the European Community’s media policy was born, first with a debate in Parliament about the necessity for a European TV-channel; in 1986, four public service broadcasters from Germany, the Netherlands, Ireland and Italy jointly established the Europe TV channel (Kleinsteuber 2001). However, this whole project of a European broadcasting system ended after a short period because of lack of funding. Transmission was limited to satellites and programming was still experimental when the initiative broke down completely. Following this initiative, special thematic channels, more or less commercially, went on air and specialized in the transmission of news (Euronews 1993) and sports (Eurosport 1989). Television channels such as Arte, TV5, 3SAT, and BBC World are other examples of efforts to transcend national (and in the case of Arte also linguistic) boundaries in the European media system. Furthermore, a number of newspapers with a European reach were founded such as the now defunct *European*, or the European editions of *The Financial Times* and the *International Herald Tribune*.

The second model focuses on the coverage of European topics and the actions of EU’s decision-makers in national public spheres and their evaluation from a European and not from a national perspective (Kopper & Leppik 2006, Kunelius & Sparks 2001). Some authors have noted that the development of the European public sphere can only take the form of the Europeanisation of the national public spheres (Bruggemann 2005, p. 2). The media play a fundamental role in such a Europeanised national public spheres, as “according to the citizens themselves, their knowledge of the EU is derived largely from the mass media (television and radio)” (Kunelius & Sparks 2001, p. 9). It depends on the media and the *speakers* if the European issues are commented from a national or a European perspective. In order for a European public sphere to evolve, national media have to transform themselves into the European mechanisms of public debates, and they have to focus on European issues, rather than national ones. Or,

at least, they have to “use similar criteria of relevance and similar forms of reference across national public spheres when discussing European issues” (Risse 2003, p. 3).

The third way of consolidating a European public sphere presupposes the overlapping of public sphere as a result of the rise of transnational political communication. Put it differently, as a consequence of the increasing role of political communication within the EU, political issues have increased their chances to fall under public scrutiny, thus increasing the communicative and deliberative activity in the national public spheres.

Judging from the over-growing interest in the field and from the declarations of the EU’s officials (not only those working in the DG Communication), the Union needs to encourage the creation of a European public sphere. In such a public arena, the EU’s institutions and the European interest groups should act as *speakers* who address the (European) public (the citizens of the EU member states) from a European perspective. The entire communication process should be facilitated by the media. This could help defining “a collective European identity in the process of arguing and debating the common European fate” (Risse 2003, p. 8), and could reach the public and drive it into participating to the debates on European issues. The active participation of speakers, the media and the audience are compulsory for the existence of a European public sphere, as it is impossible to construct a public sphere top-down (Bruggemann 2005). The construction of a European public sphere is an evolving process. We should bear in mind that “whatever the European public sphere in its concrete manifestations might look like, it will never really exist as an ideal public sphere” (Kunelius & Sparks 2001, p. 12).

2. Communicating Europe – media as facilitators of public debate

A. Consolidating the (emergent) European public sphere

In spite of the flourishing literature on the topic, the rationale behind the emergence of (a) European public sphere(s) as well as the structure of such a public space for deliberation on European *issues* are still subject to hot debate among theoreticians. As we have already shown, opinions there is hardly an unanimously agreed solution that explains the need for a European public space for debate and its role in the consolidation of a European identity (whether we consider this identity in terms of citizenship, territory, democratic processes etc.). A “collective” European identity once defined and strengthened through active participation in a viable deliberative arena would supply the European Union with the legitimacy (Koopmans & Erbe 2003) that it continuously seeks. The variety of views regarding the construction of a European public sphere leads to the lack of consensus concerning its creation. (Kopper & Leppik 2006); we have seen that three different, although not necessarily mutually exclusive, models of European public sphere(s) are discussed in the literature and the majority of research work in the field is carried out premised on one or more of these models.

Irrespective of the model adopted, one expects to find in all instances an emphasis on the same actors who share the responsibility for the consolidation of the public space

open to debate. The public sphere is determined by the interaction of three categories of actors: the *speakers* or those who try to mobilize the adherence of other participants to their ideas; decision-makers, public “voices” or European officials usually populate this category. Another important category of actors participating in the creation and crystallization of the public sphere is the media that act as facilitators of the public debates in society. Media coverage is crucial both to the diffusion of information and to the increase of the level of participation in the public debate. Although broadcasting has been the favorite medium so far, the rules of communication in the contemporary globalised world have urged the media to adapt to the tools of Web 2.0. In this paper, we propose an analysis of one of the most recent instruments of communication launched in order to help intensify the democratic process of deliberation within the European public sphere. At the same time, this instrument is supposed to contribute to the development and consolidation of a European public sphere. We refer here to the newly created *presseurop.eu* portal – an online platform where news on the EU and its 27 member states are disseminated worldwide. In the following pages of this paper, we examine several matters regarding the functionality of this portal in terms of its content, its structure, and its audience. We try to see how such a portal may succeed in reinforcing the European public space and in promoting the debate within it. In order to do this, we focus our efforts to the following questions: Which are the European topics (in news, editorials etc.) put forward by the articles published on *presseurop.eu*? Does this content reach its target?

B. Presseurop.eu – a “European” news website

Let us start first by providing some information on the creation of such a website. *Presseurop.eu* was launched in May 2009 as part of an ambitious plan of the DG Communication to promote EU’s initiatives and actions inside and outside its borders. The news portal is one step in the EU’s drive to promote a European public sphere in which matters of public interest for Europe to be discussed. This undertaking costs the EU almost 3 million Euros every year, but as the European Commissioner for Communication, Margot Wallström said, the site “will broaden, enrich and expand coverage of European affairs” (EUobserver, May 26, 2009) provided it remains editorially independent.

The mission of the portal is clearly stated in the editorial charter: *Presseurop.eu* is “Europe’s first multilingual general news portal”. We shall come back to the multilingual attribute of the website, since this seems to be not necessarily an advantage of the portal, but rather a factor that makes it hard for the audience to actually debate upon the issues comprised by the website. The portal is managed by four press holdings from France, Italy, Poland and Portugal; these companies apparently guarantee “complete editorial freedom” and also an unrestricted policy of topic selection. Finally, the overall objective of the website is to offer a “balanced (but not exhaustive) coverage of European news”; it is worth mentioning that the news

is to be drawn from national press available in the member states. With the help of input from the national life of the EU 27, *Presseurop.eu* “aims to create a new public space for debate”.

So far, we have briefly introduced the website and the reason for which it was launched. We now turn our attention to its structure. The portal comprises 6 major thematic sections (each with several subsections): politics, society, economy, science and the environment, culture and ideas, the last main theme being Europe and the world. Articles are organized along these categories. There is also the editorial, which may refer to a subject pertaining to any of the above-mentioned themes or may address a particular issue brought to prominence by recent events or transformations taking place in Europe or outside it. The website also includes a section called “Briefings” where readers can find articles related to a specific topic. At the time this article is written, the briefings sections include the following general topics: “Copenhagen, summit for the planet”, “the Lisbon Treaty”, “1989, 20 years on”, “European elections 2009”, “Europe and the Iranian crisis”, “Balkans – the path to Brussels”, and “Europe and the crisis”. The structure of the website provides the reader with a quite clear idea about the content of the articles published. The legitimate question is this: which are the European topics presented on the website? A radical version of this inquiry would be: are there any such European topics? First, we have to mention that the newsworthiness and the European “quality” of the news available on the website are assumed by the 10 journalists who permanently update the information on the website. Since the articles published are in fact re-published after being included in several national newspapers, only minor or no intervention is possible. Therefore, the quality of a topic as being “European” is decided at a national level, and then it is included in a selection of articles, all depicting socio-economic events and political turns, decisions, situations, cultural facts that may be of a general “European” public interest. This manner of displaying the news and, consequently, of organizing content may prove to be rather an impediment to the development of a genuine public space for debate than a force driving consistent discussions on subjects of public interest. The problem of determining the European dimension of the events covered by the press constitutes one of the most frequently listed obstacles in the literature. The issue is far from minor; it is not an easy endeavor to define a distinct content that should contain reference only to “European matters” or “European affairs”. This content should not only reflect the EU’s officials’ and decision-makers’ arguments, but also the “voices” of the European citizens as diverse and inconsistent as they may be. Such a reality would confer solid grounds to the idea of a European general interest, bringing consistency to a European public sphere. A plain European content would allow the people actively involved in the public debate to support European topics that relate to the “«real world» of actors and communities” and that promote “various modes of understanding the European dimension of the social world” (Beciu 2007).

Having said that, let us now turn to the topics published by the analyzed portal. If we are to consider only the topics of the section “Briefings”, we discover that three

out of seven topics listed could be described as having to do *directly* with the EU, namely the Lisbon Treaty, Balkans – the path to Brussels and, to a lesser extent, Europe and the crisis. The economic crisis has affected differently the member states, and although the EU as a whole has suffered an economic slow down, the measures taken to fight the crisis have been applied separately by each state. There is no such European plan to fight the economic crisis, whereas presumably every member state has been cautious with respect to the crisis. Furthermore, topics such as Copenhagen, summit for the planet or Europe and the Iranian crisis are not strictly European; they refer to global challenges or issues that cannot be answered entirely by deliberation within the European public space. Finally, other topics refer to contingent matters as the celebration of 20 years from the fall of the Berlin Wall and the fall of communism or to 2009 European elections. One might be surprised that we do not consider the elections for the European Parliament as an issue worthy to be called “European”. The topic is of interest, elections of any kind are likely to attract interest in any democratic society. But it is not the elections *per se* that are “European”, but the subjects/ problems tackled by candidates in election campaigns for the European Parliament. Needless to say, the elections for the European Parliament are organized in each member state, which clearly makes it impossible to discuss the performance or the prospects of each candidate. More recently, the website brings to the public’s attention the hearings in the European Parliament of the designated European commissioners. In an editorial on this topic, the author comments on the performance of the proposed commissioners in front of the members of the European Parliament. Although bearing a certain degree of interest among the Europeans interested in the organization and function of EU institutions, the subject is “less European” than the content of the hearings or the solutions put forth by candidates.

The remarks that we have made here support the view that the emergence and the consolidation of a European public sphere where European matters are subject to deliberation is a more difficult undertaking than it might appear at first sight. In addition to that, the lack of pure or strict European topics seems to suggest that in order to construct such a public sphere the best solution at hand is the overlapping of national public spheres or, to use the established terminology in the literature, “the Europeanization of national public spheres” (Brüggemann 2005, Kopper & Leppik 2006, Schlesinger & Fossum 2007). Some authors consider that this is the only workable solution to build up a European public sphere (Brüggemann 2005), whereas others advocate the “emergence of a supranational European public sphere constituted by the interaction among European-level institutions and collective actors around European themes, ideally accompanied by (and creating the basis for) the development of European-wide mass media” (Koopmans & Erbe 2003, p. 6). If we are to promote the model of a European public sphere as an overlap of national public spheres, we have to take into account its impact upon the way in which media facilitate public deliberation within these national public spaces. The easiest way to measure

this impact is to observe the transformations taking place in the national media as a consequence of adding a European dimension to the current media practices, e.g. introduction of new columns in newspapers such as “European affairs”, of new TV formats to address such issues etc, the introduction of new Europe-related topics in the public agenda, the creation of blogs and forums on European topics etc.

Since the problem of determining which topics qualify as European and which not is far from being satisfactorily solved, we limit our observations to the fact that the European news website examined does not seem to clearly distinguish between European and non-European matters when it comes to promoting debate topics. Let us admit that the idea behind the portal is to create a *pot-pourri* of press articles which have been initially disseminated in various national newspapers and magazines across the EU. At this point, the main problem of the analyzed media instrument is that whilst gathering the information it loses sight of the reason for which it has been created in the first place: that of enhancing the public debate on European topics.

The other dimension of this communication instrument that we discuss in this paper concerns the audience of the website and the way in which the information available on the portal reaches its designated target – EU’s citizens. In fact, we try to shed some light on the reception of the content and on the notion that the users of the website automatically contribute to the unfolding of public debates. For the purpose of this paper, we shall only discuss two of the impediments in the proper reception of the content available on the website. We start by noticing that the website allows comments, a measure which, in principle, is meant to increase public participation. This facility is the only way in which the public could immediately react to the content displayed. However, if such comments should foster public debate, a question arises – to what extent can they accomplish this as long as they are submitted in several different languages (10 languages, to be precise)? Let us now return to the issue of the multilingual Europe of the 27, a problematic matter that we have shortly introduced at the beginning of this section. It is largely acknowledged that one of the greatest challenges to the creation of a genuine European public sphere is the very multilingual nature of the Union. Often seen as a minor issue, the multilingual feature of the EU is certainly a matter of substance in what concerns the promotion of public debate on European topics. There is no doubt that “EU’s actually existing cultural complexity is far-reaching” (Schlesinger 2007, p. 418), and that this complexity has considerable influence on defining a European identity. EU’s cultural and linguistic diversity makes the communication and deliberation processes difficult, given the 23 official languages of the EU and the diverse historical, religious or socio-economic landscapes of its member states. We admit that it is a very demanding requirement that every media acting as facilitator of a European public debate should take into consideration the linguistic diversity of the speakers and actors involved. *Presseurop.eu* has tried to cross the language barrier by translating the selected press articles into 10 official languages of the EU. The attempt is praiseworthy, but at the same time it is almost

impossible to believe that public debate over specific issues of general interest can be done in 10 languages! This might suggest that Habermas's idea to consider "English a second first language" (Goode 2005) could be conducive to a greater intensification of public debate and to a more solid deliberation over matters that concern Europe and its citizens. One may rightly argue that since we have decided to consider the European public sphere as a sum of national public spaces, we might let aside the problem of the language of communication. We can always translate the content discussed or could rely on the explanation of those who comment. However soft and easy-to-take this approach may appear, we cannot abandon entirely the premises for the crystallization of a supranational, self-contained epistemic community (Fossum & Schlesinger 2007) which would favor the creation a European public debate arena.

Another obstacle that may alter the reception of the information provided by the portal is intrinsically linked to the structure of the instrument used to communicate. The reception of any content available on a news website cannot be measured unless data on the Internet usage and the distribution of these users is taken into account. In spite of the concern shown for the facilitation of interaction in the public space and the dissemination of the content in several languages, Internet access across EU member states is unequally distributed. In a recent survey on the Information and Communication Technologies usage in households and individuals in the 27 member states, overall data shows that one in two European uses the Internet daily (Eurostat, 2009). This may be an encouraging finding, yet if we look deeper at the results of the survey by country, we notice the difference between access shares registered in countries like Germany, the Netherlands, Austria or the United Kingdom compared with Bulgaria, Greece and Romania. According to the data gathered by Eurostat, 90% of the households in the Netherlands, 86% in Sweden and 79% in Germany have Internet access, whereas only 30% of the households in Bulgaria and 38% in Romania and Greece have a least one Internet connection. As for the distribution of the daily users in the member states, the discrepancies between the countries in the Western Europe and those of the Eastern Europe are even deeper. In the Netherlands, 73% of people aged 16-74 have declared to use the Internet on average daily or almost every day, 73% in Sweden, 60% in the United Kingdom and 55% in Germany. The lowest usage of the Internet by individuals has been registered in Bulgaria (31%), Greece (27%) and Romania (19%). The data released by Eurostat in December 2009 does not include information on the reason for which the interviewees used Internet, except ordering and the purchase of goods and services. Even if we lack such information, we can assume that a significant part of the people interviewed have not used the Internet for public debate over European affairs. If this proves to be a reasonable assumption, then the percentage of people using the Internet for expressing their opinion with respect to European issues and for deliberation over such topics would be lower than the percentage of people using the Internet. Compared to the data shown above, we can easily speculate that the gap between the distributions of public participation

in different EU's member states is wider than most people probably believe and that in countries like Bulgaria, Greece and Romania we can hardly speak of a genuine public debate over European topics. Thus, as suitable to communication in the global era of instant transmission of the information as it may be, the success of the news website launched by the EU in facilitating public debate over European issues depends largely on the reception of the content available by the readers. Given the significant differences in the rates of Internet access across EU's member states, the crystallization of a "pool" of citizens involved in public deliberation is a very complex goal. Therefore, the idea of using the portal as a driving force of the public participation within the EU appears to be far from its original purpose.

To conclude, we notice the scarce employment of comments by the portal's readers; during its seven-month existence, few of the articles published on the portal have been commented upon. It is true that the same articles in their original place of online publication have received intensive attention from the readers, judging from the list of comments. However, it is the selection and the publication of a certain articles on European topics made by the portal *presseurop.eu* that should generate comments from the readers. Otherwise, the publication of the website is less justifiable if the articles exist independently of their re-publication on a website that aims to facilitate and intensify public debate over specific issues.

The reception of the content transmitted through the website is a very important matter that should be taken into consideration when further initiatives regarding the increase of public participation in the EU are released. Access to the media instrument designated to facilitate the deliberation matters, but this aspect may greatly impact upon the type of actors involved in the public debate. The classical distinction between "strong" and "weak" publics (Fossum & Schlesinger 2007) may be enriched by the segmentation of publics based on the choice of the media instrument. Since we are not concerned in this paper with a comprehensive analysis of the "inhabitants" of a European public sphere (Koopmans 2007), we shall leave the issue of public segmentation to other analyses in the field.

3. Conclusion

The debate over the most suitable solution to foster the establishment of a European public sphere and to facilitate its enforcement as a space where democratic processes take place is far from reaching a consensus. This will generate a lot of work in the field, which will keep many people from the academic world of sociology, communication studies, or political sciences very busy. In this paper, we have not aspired to solve the matter for them; we have tried to point out that the debate may be more complex than it has been thought of so far. The evolution of the ideas regarding the modeling of a European public sphere stirs the diversification of the media practices, tools and techniques used to facilitate the public participation and deliberation. Thus, our paper has been focused on the examination of the recently launched EU's news website called

presseurop.eu. We have shown that, at this time, the portal faces two major obstacles that have to be overcome if the website *really* aims to achieve its original goal, that of providing a public arena for debate over European matters. The two impediments that we have identified refer to the content displayed and likely reception by the public. Provided these issues and other related ones are taken into account and solutions to solve them are sought, the portal increases its chances to truly become Europe's news portal and an easily accessible space for public debate. Otherwise, it runs the risk of becoming just another means contributing to EU institutional rhetoric and doing badly at diminishing the "communication deficit". Is the emergence of the European public sphere delayed because it lacks the means? – if so, the creation of Europe's news portal – and its wise guidance towards fulfilling this communication purpose may prove useful. Still, there are some more fundamental questions that relate to the underlying causes of this communication deficit and the difficulties in the emergence of a European Public Space. Let us remember the insightful statement made by President of the EU Commission, José Manuel Barroso: "Europe will above all be judged on results" ("Communication from the Commission to the European Council. A European Recovery Plan", 2008, p. 2). In our view, one of the difficulties pertaining to the "communication deficit" and the public sphere may not be of a communication nature; rather, it may have to do equally with the major problems that the EU as a supra-national structure has sought to solve and with the results obtained in this endeavor.

We end up on a more relaxed tone and tell the reader about a complaint made by a Romanian journalist specialized in the coverage of EU issues: it allegedly took the journalists accredited to the EU four weeks to learn how to navigate the mammoth portal *europa.eu*. Let us hope that this timeframe will not be needed for EU citizens to understand what *presseurop.eu* is and what it stands for.

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