THE MEDIA AS PUBLIC INTERMEDIARIES OF KNOWLEDGE IN EUROPE: FROM DELIBERATION TO DEMOCRATIC LEGITIMATION

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Introduction: challenging the new ideology of professionalism

Is democracy, as it is institutionalised in plural party competition and popular elections, still a viable form of government to deal with the complex problems of contemporary societies? Today, we witness waning confidence in the performance of core democratic institutions and their capacities to effectively implement and enforce their policies. The polarized and plural systems of interest representation that constitute our democracies are considered insufficient to build the authority, competence and expertise needed to enforce the public good. Since democratic institutions are mainly partisan, many would claim that their performance - for example through elections or parliamentary representation - needs to be balanced with the impartiality of non-elected and de-politicised bodies of experts. *Democracy*, which is government by means of opinion, becomes reliant on *expertocracy*, which is governance by means of scientific knowledge and facts-based argumentation.

In response to these challenges we observe the proliferation of a new ideology of 'professionalism' (see other contributions in this volume) arguing for the need to shelter the superior knowledge and the authority of experts from the dangers of participatory irrationalism. The epistemic knowledge that needs to be processed in complex regulatory fields such as financial and monetary policies is considered to be no longer translatable into common language or it simply does not need to

be translated, since public consent is not required for decision-making under functional constraints (the so-called TINA 'there is no alternative' effect). This has often resulted in attempts to change the opinion-based nature of democracy by grounding democratic politics exclusively in knowledge and rationality.

For some scholars, this new ideology of professionalism is seen as a further symptom of the 'crisis of democracy' or even of a 'post-democracy' discouraging the citizens from participation and nourishing their mistrust of self-referential and detached political elites (Crouch 2004). The cycle of electoral abstention and apathy of the citizens is followed by the rise of populism as a new political force that often stages itself as a popular revolt against the authority of elite representatives. Resistance against the perceived rule of 'Eurocrats' is also a main driving factor for Euroscepticism; with the latter increasingly converging across countries towards protest against the dislocation of politics (De Wilde, Michailidou and Trenz 2014). This has led to the rising popularity of a new ideology of de-professionalised participation, whereby citizens take control of political decisions, empowered through direct democratic arrangements such as referenda or through horizontal (citizen-to citizen) network arrangements instead of representative hierarchies. Such mobilizations of the formerly atomized citizens often refer to the collective (e.g. collective intelligence and crowdsourcing through digital media) assuming that the pooled inputs of the citizenry are superior (and often even diametrically opposed) to the expertise of a single agent. This results in a renewed call for a more popular form of democracy that tries to substitute established procedures of representative democracy. The collectively empowered citizenry is meant to replace the delegate but also to overcome the restricted role model of the citizen as an individual voter vis-à-vis their political representatives.

Drawing on Nadia Urbinati (2014), we take the approach here that both the ideology of professionalism and the ideology of de-professionalised participation are characterized by their disregard, if not even outright rejection, of the role of public intermediaries.

[i] The first provide an epistemic solution to the problem of how to reconcile knowledge and democracy. This is achieved through delegation of decision-making to those with necessary skills and expertise who need to be protected from the contentious logics of partisan democratic politics. Public intermediation then becomes unnecessary or even illusionary. The second provide a populist solution which gives preference to democratic participation over knowledge. Populist democracy is equally hostile towards mechanisms of public intermediation. Preference is given instead to direct and unitary forms of the 'genuine' expression of the popular will, through which the experts but also political representatives in general are often discredited. Populism, as the opposite of elitism, is thus the demand to restore democracy through a unitary expression of the collective voice of the people as the superior source of authority. With the rise of digital media, however, this aversion that both populists and technocrats have typically shown for public intermediation has taken a new turn: digital mass media simultaneously strengthen direct communication with the public and challenge the right of actors, whether expert or populist, to speak with authority. It is in light of this digital transformation of the public sphere and its impact on democracy that we reconsider the role of the media as public intermediaries of knowledge and scientific expertise.

In the remainder of our chapter, we first indicate critical junctures in the role of the media as public intermediaries in democracy, brought about by key technological advances in communication technologies (particularly the structural transformation of the public sphere in the transition from print journalism to digital journalism). Taking stock of the rich literature on democracy and mass media and drawing on extensive empirical research, we trace the development of pre-digital mass media which were based on a distinction between 'fact based' news and 'opinion based' news, thus a distinction between the media for the communication of knowledge and the media for the communication of opinion. We then discuss the effects of the internet on democracy, from the perspective of the media as producers of

political knowledge: do online media have the capacity to reconcile knowledge and opinion through innovative ways of public intermediation and enhanced participation of the public? In the second part of our chapter, we illustrate the ways in which political institutions make use of digital media to generate public knowledge (the reconciled version of mediated knowledge that is neither fact-based only nor solely opinion-based) and democratic legitimacy by discussing the case of EU institutions.

Mediating public reason: the role of journalism

The tension between participation of the many and reason of the few is an old topic discussed in democratic theory (Barber 1998; Chambers 2009; Lafont 2015). Democratic legitimacy is built through the equal participation of the community of citizens in public opinion formation, but it equally relies on the efficiency of decisions taken for collective problem-solving. The problem here is that inclusion in public opinion formation does not equal rationality of argumentation. An increase in voice leads to more but not necessarily better arguments. From the perspective of democratic legitimacy, both the optimization of democratic participation and the optimization of deliberation lead to suboptimal outcomes. Enhancing democratic participation (i.e. making the community of citizens more inclusive) reduces the chances for rational argumentation, while measures to improve the conditions for rational argumentation (i.e. building competence for collective problem-solving) often have exclusive effects on the possibilities for participation of the community of citizens.

The classical solution for bringing together the inclusive principles of democratic participation and the skills required for deliberation is found in the constitutional design of representative democracy. The burden of generating democratic legitimacy rests then neither with the inclusiveness of participation nor with the rationality of deliberation but with the procedures of public intermediation, which make claims for inclusion and rationality credible and acceptable to the community of citizens. Public

intermediaries - among them political parties, civil society and the mass media - are the 'sluice' between political decision-makers and the citizens. As such, they translate the expert knowledge that informs government into public knowledge, but they also amplify the expression of public demands and concerns of the citizens.

Democratic legitimacy in complex knowledge-based societies relies on the mediating capacities and infrastructures of a public forum of opinion that are exchanged between experts, political representatives and lay citizens. To understand how such an intermediary space of public opinion formation has been historically institutionalised and is currently transformed we need to turn to the role of journalism and the news media. Modern democracy in Europe and in the US co-emerged with the institutionalisation of journalism and of the news media, which constitute a core forum of knowledge and opinion of the citizens. When Alexis de Tocqueville travelled through the US in the 1830s, he was impressed by the great number of newspapers that held local communities alive. He attributed a representative function to the newspaper that allowed democratic people who populated distant places to assemble in a kind of virtual forum and to engage in public life. Newspapers represented for him the democratic association of people who wished to join forces for a common purpose and administer their own affairs. The free press was therefore not simply the guarantee of individual freedom but also of representation of the community of democratic citizens. Much more than a central Parliamentary assembly, the plurality of newspapers became the engine of democratic life:

> To suppose that they only serve to protect freedom would be to diminish their importance: they maintain civilization. I shall not deny that in democratic countries newspapers frequently lead the citizens to launch together in very ill-digested schemes; but if there were no newspapers there would be no common activity (de Tocqueville 1840: 119).

The decline of public reason

Notwithstanding the central role ascribed early on to the media as representatives of the community of citizens, in their century-long presence, the press, radio and above all television have also been blamed for the manipulation of constituencies and the decline of the political public sphere into a sphere of mindless publicity that transforms thinking citizens into wavering masses (Dahlgren 2009; Habermas 1989). A key criticism directed at journalism of all forms has been that it decouples 'knowledge' and 'news', in the sense of abandoning truth orientation and favouring entertainment and sensationalism as values of news selection (Sparks and Tulloch 1999; Ward 2015). This criticism of the epistemic failure of journalism has on the one hand been explained by the lack of demand of the audience for fact-based news. For example, Walter Lipmann famously noted that citizens showed only little intellectual engagement and rather 'suffer from anaemia, from lack of appetite and curiosity for the human scene' (Lippman 1922: 27). On the other hand, the decline of the media's democratic intermediary role has been consistently linked with the development of capitalist markets and the dominance of commercial interests, whereby journalists predominantly serve the interests of their owners and advertisers and only secondarily concern themselves with seeking the truth and enlightenment (Habermas 1989). This has led to the progressive detachment of the world of scientific knowledge and facts and the world of manufactured news, which in turn has facilitated the rise of experts and political representatives who could hardly be held accountable by the public. Those who had access to 'unmediated' knowledge frequently also had the control over the public agenda and made use of their power to decide what was worth filtering into the public debate and what was best left out from it.

The way in which Western representative democracies became consolidated rendered these deficits in the public mediation of knowledge generally accepted. For large parts of the public, there was little reason to contest the way scientific knowledge was used for capitalist production as long as its products (like better medicine, cars for all, cheap energy or telecommunication) were accessible and part

of every-day consumption. Political legitimacy was built through economic growth and the general rise

of living standards that was tangible for a population which still had a first-hand experience of deprivation

earlier to 1945 (and in many parts of Western Europe also in much later years). Western democracies

thus became stable by building relatively high levels of trust in political representatives and in the output-

oriented performance of the political system. Under these conditions, participatory forms of democratic

will-formation came to be seen as redundant or even as dangerous, because they were perceived as

unlikely to meet the demands of self-regulatory capitalist economy. Especially the founding of the

European Communities contributed to the stabilisation of this system of free market exchange among

productive economic forces, setting up an administrative apparatus that was mainly geared to contribute

to output political legitimacy [cross-reference other chapters in this volume if relevant], but not requiring

any form of democratic accountability. As a consequence, *government by the people* has become

increasingly supplanted by g*overnance by the experts* (Chambers 2009).

New opportunities for public intermediation: from offline to online

Three major developments since the early 1970s have the potential to break this stalemate in the

intermediation of knowledge and democracy: The first is the ever-increasing demand for knowledge to

be produced, distributed and used in many of the professional fields of production of the expanding

capitalist markets. The building of knowledge societies has led to a general renewal of democratic

practices, which is largely communication-driven, i.e. relies on the mass media as infrastructures of

public knowledge translation and of reaching out to the citizens (Norris 2004). The second major

development is the crisis of performance of the growth-oriented capitalist economies which goes hand

in hand with the crisis of legitimacy of Parliamentary Western democracies (Crouch 2004).

Technological determinism and extreme rationalisation in the organisation of social life have become

increasingly questioned to such an extent that younger generations are opting for alternative life styles, emancipating themselves from authoritarian state structures. Enlightened citizens demand higher education and mistrust at the same time political parties and established structures of political representations. The appropriation of knowledge by the citizens has been one of the major driving forces for the rise of social movements which have established new forms of public accountability (like citizen forums, consultations or public deliberations) (della Porta 2012). In the European political setting, for instance, the anti-austerity movement gives evidence of a new political force that reintroduces political choice in economic governance and pleads for the regulation of markets against the default choices imposed by neo-liberalism (Ancelovici 2015; Winlow et al. 2015).

The third major development that transformed Western representative democracies is what can be called without much exaggeration a media revolution. For Manuel Castells, the knowledge society is identifiable first and foremost as a huge communication network; it is not distinguished by the central role attributed to knowledge (which in a way was always central to human societies) but by its fast diffusion and broad application facilitated by digital communication technologies (Castells 2005: 4). Traditional mass media were held accountable for the accelerated information and knowledge diffusion, but this way of communication was mainly one-directional allowing established representatives to reach out to a mass audience as a passive receiver. Digital media technologies broke with this century-long practice of one-directional mass communication by facilitating horizontal public exchanges among members of the audience, as well as by increasing the rate of vertical communication, between transmitters and recipients of public messages. The passive receivers of media content have been redefined as users of knowledge and information, whose choice and interpretation matter or who are even empowered as producers of news, breaking the monopoly of journalists as content providers and key public intermediaries.

Knowledge society can in this sense be said to unfold at three levels: firstly, at the macro-societal level the demands for enhanced knowledge as the motor of production and as a facilitator of economic growth; secondly, at the meso-societal level the political emancipation of the citizens and their horizontal associations and networks that challenged traditional hierarchical structures of political representation; and, thirdly, at the micro-societal level the individual patterns of communication and socialisation through new interactive media formats and the turn from passive consumption to active interpretation of media content. The media revolution is thus seen as a driving force not only in the sense of fundamentally changing individual behaviour of media consumption but having also major political and structural impact, e.g. the New Economy or the new politics of civil society (Cammaerts, Mattoni and McCurdy 2013; Chadwick and Howard 2009). In the early days of this media critical juncture, digital communications and the technologies that underpinned them were expected to help to rebalance the demand and supply side of knowledge production, distribution and application. Central to the early internet ideologues' approach was the notion that knowledge is a good that ought to be used and not consumed (Electronic Frontier Foundation 2015 [John Perry Barlow]). Netizens were supposed to be attentive, inventive and interactive and, as such, fundamentally opposed to the pre-digital stereotype of the apathetic citizen lulled by mindless television entertainment. However, the way in which such rebalancing of media knowledge production and application is achieved depends on the availability of new communication technologies and their appropriation by internet users-citizens (netizens). There is a correlation between the enhancement of the knowledge society and the enhancement of new forms of participatory democratic politics, as both rely on digital media technologies and their potential to turn passive consumers into active citizens and media audiences into critical publics.

Digital media as public intermediators

The changing role that is attributed to the public and the way citizens-audiences perform in democracy lead us to a challenge that lies at the heart of media research, namely the need to develop indicators that can measure the degree that audiences became emancipated as active receivers, interpreters and co-producers of knowledge. While this new potential for audience emancipation seems uncontroversial, the actual performance of such audiences is heavily debated. One way to approach emancipated audiences is to revive the notion of publics in democracy which were envisaged by John Dewey (1927) almost a century ago, first and foremost as agents of normative critique. The public is conceived here as a method of holding government accountable. Democratic legitimacy, according to him, is neither generated through efficiency of government facilitated by experts nor through counting heads or aggregating majorities over minorities. Democracy compels participants to make use of discussion, consultation and persuasion. Applied to the production of knowledge, the public is a method to turn expert knowledge into public knowledge. As such, its relationship towards experts is not substitutive but critical. This notion of the critical public was famously held against Lippman's sober conclusion that government needs to be rescued from the irrationality of the public (Lippmann 1927). Contrary to Lippman's approach, Dewey argued instead that the knowledge needed for decision-making cannot be provided exclusively by experts and decoupled from public deliberation because 'the world has suffered more from leaders and authorities than from the masses' (Dewey 1927: 208). Publics are needed in democracy for problem formulation, which is meant to inform governments and experts and at the same time to hold them publically accountable. Expert knowledge therefore remains private knowledge as long as the methods of open and inclusive debate do not transform it into public knowledge. The initiation of public opinion and will formation processes are in this sense not just desirable, they are indispensable for any democratic project. According to Dewey, the same method of public debate also applies to majority rule in democracy, which is always more than the simple aggregation of votes (as the liberals want to have

it): 'the mean by which majority comes to be a majority is the more important thing: antecedent debates, modification of views to meet the opinions of minorities, the relative satisfaction given the latter by the fact that is has had a chance and that next time it may be successful in becoming a majority (Dewey 1927: 110). While this insistence on public deliberation is still the strongest argument against the exclusiveness of epistemic government (see also Chambers 2009; Urbinati 2014), the new media technologies have opened a large-scale societal experiment to put these assumptions to an empirical test: If democratic politics in the Deweyan sense are essentially about improving the methods and conditions of debate, we as media scholars can contribute to pointing out the requirements that the media as public sphere infrastructures need to meet in order to facilitate the conditions for public debate an exercise.

For the Dewey scenario to materialise, digital media technologies would need to replicate the ancient conditions of democracy by functioning basically as meeting places where a number of people with shared interests could unite and constitute self-governing communities. Reversing the conditions of mass communication, the online media would enhance the democratic quality of the political process through the distribution of a wide range of information; the deployment of new participatory formats; and the ability to constitute multiple publics and engage them in critical discourse. Indeed, from this Dewyan perspective, there has been not only ample optimism but also encouraging evidence regarding the democracy-enhancing potential of the internet as an inclusive space for the exchange of information and the facilitation of new modes of public speech and civil action (Castells 2015; Dahlgren 2009 Papacharissi 2008; Margolis and Moreno-Riaño 2013). Digital citizens (netizens) 'make' information and actively participate in social networks and online forums (Bruns 2013). Online media are seen as having the potential to diminish the power of corporate media to 'manipulate' mass audiences. Citizens or participatory journalists - whether those committing 'random acts of journalism' or the bloggers with no formal journalist training - feel that there is a strong need for providing an alternative or opposition

to mainstream media news coverage (Frölich, Quiring and Engesser 2012; Lasica 2003). Similarly, there is a specific ideological meaning of sharing, along with 'liking' that becomes the imperative norm of social media as an open and transparent place for connecting persons and information (van Dijk 2013).

Although scholars have been predicting the rapid, if not imminent, demise of professional journalism since the dawn of the digital era (Gitlin 1998; Hirst 2011; McChesney 2012), there is an increasing body of evidence to suggest that on the one hand journalists are largely surviving in the digital reality of news media production without losing their professional values (Siapera and Veglis 2012), and on the other hand news media organizations and journalists are finding innovative ways to make digital news production profitable and sustainable in the long run (Schlesinger and Doyle 2015; Valcke, Sükösd and Picard 2015). At the same time, there seems to be little variation in the understanding of journalism's normative role and professional values between digital and traditional journalists themselves (Ward 2015). Nevertheless, as the boundaries between public and privately owned digital news media become blurrier and new formats of media content and ownership emerge, it is very much clear that professional journalism will not be relinquishing its role as mediator of the political public sphere anytime soon. Digital communication technologies have also found application in the facilitation of stronger democratic systems (e-voting, digitally-enhanced transparency of state institutions; see, for example, Kersting 2012).

Applied to the formation of online publics, Dewey's pragmatic approach puts emphasis on the development of capacities of individual media users and the degree to which they are empowered as knowledgeable and educated citizens. In line with Dewey's assumption that the members of the public strive for personal autonomy, the digital media revolution has a huge emancipatory potential for the individual in relation to the representative institutions of government (Fuchs 2014). This goes hand in hand with the promotion of new forms of active citizenship which involve the media user in critical interaction with government (Dahlberg and Siapera 2007). The development of critical capacities of the

individual media users is further supported by the work of intermediators such as bloggers or independent journalists who see it as their primary duty to provide a reliable alternative or opposition to mainstream news coverage (Dahlgren 2005; Gimmler 2001). In short, both from a normative and an empirical perspective, it is possible to argue that the modern era of mass communication through individualised and anonymised reception of standardised content (the Lippman scenario) is gradually overcome by a new era of emancipated media use and co-production of media content through active and participatory publics (the Dewey scenario).

At the same time, critical media research has outlined the democratic hazards underlying the commodification of digital public conversational modes and the fragmenting effect of digitalization, which promotes public monologues in segregated blogospheres instead of dialogue in an integrated public sphere (Fuchs 2014; Gripsrud et al. 2010; Splichal 2012; Sunstein 2007). These observations bring into question the capacity of digital media as public intermediaries to actually make a difference to the plurality of views or news media frames. In many cases talk of 'active audiences' simply conceals the passive and asymmetrical practices that guide the majority of online activities. Social media 'sharing' constitutes a modality of economic production at this level of mass communication and 'readers' are thus elements of a newly emerging mass audience (Bruns et al. 2015).

The digital public sphere has further helped solidify the decades-old mediatization of politics, whereby politicians adapt to the media logics and culture in order to ensure media approval for their policies (Esser and Strömbäck 2014; Hjarvard 2009). According to this more critical perspective, the public political arena has become chaotic, unpredictable and ephemeral, whereby the only standard that guarantees visibility seems to be the level of resources a politician has at their disposal. Critical approaches of the digital public sphere question the capacities of individual citizens to take action for a stronger democracy ('slacktivism' instead of activism). Reflecting the sceptical position of Lippman,

public sphere and democracy scholars are seen as over-ambitious imposing on digital media technologies their wishful thinking and neglecting media users' more instrumental and emotional needs (Couldry 2012).

Another strand of critique questions the material resource base of the emerging online public sphere. By putting emphasis on citizenship, public engagement and participation, the democratic credentials of digital media are measured in terms of the cognitive and normative (critical) capacities of their individual users. This has led to a hype of media use and reception studies, but generally disregarded questions of ownership, unequal distribution of life chances and class. The development of individual skills and intellectual properties in relation to this new media environment is however dependent on the availability of collective resources for production. These latter are increasingly restricted by highly influential private companies who have put all our online activities under surveillance and commodified the social media user and the networks they are involved to the degree of constant exposure to advertisement (Fuchs 2014). Public sphere scholars should therefore not only ask what do social media do to the users but also raise the question who owns the social media (Fuchs 2014). The pressures of digitalization on the economic profitability of exclusively digital news media and quality of journalistic content are well documented, as much in smaller media spheres such as Denmark, as in bigger ones with greater international reach, such as the UK (Krumsvik 2012). Data also suggests that digital strategies of news media firms may have some influence on hiring patterns and that digital media executives tend to downplay traditional journalistic skills and values (Dennis, Warley and Sheridan 2006), although more recent research could not verify any statistically significant differences in the communicative ethos and reporting criteria between journalists working in traditional media and those working for digital news platforms (Strömbäck, Karlsson and Hopmann 2012).

Seen from this ownership/political economy perspective, social media 'sharing' needs to be analysed as a modality of economic production at a level of mass communication (Benkler 2012) and 'readers' ought to be approached as elements of a newly emerging mass audience. Reader-generated contents are only a small portion of the content that is commercially produced and made available and that has an impact on political debates in social media. It is important to see how sharing and liking is embedded in new business models for creating mass publicity. For the promoters of social media technologies, *privacy* assumes consequentially a negative meaning and, in contrast to openness, 'connotes opacity, non-transparency, and secrecy' (van Dijck 2013: 46). Social media, therefore, serve both as empowering tools for individuals, who use them to build, maintain and expand their networks and as commercial tools, used strategically to place content, to diffuse, to advertise and to sell in a personalized manner. Digitally sharing published content builds, in this sense on the same triangular relationship between the sender, the receiver and the audience as pre-digital forms of media content diffusion (Michailidou, Trenz and de Wilde 2014). Crucially, digitalization vastly increases the amount of information about customers, users and "prosumers" held by private companies, information which in turn is structured and sold (commodified) in ways that are impenetrable to anyone but possibly the most activist consumer. The same technologies strengthen the state's capacity to engage in surveillance of its own and foreign citizens. This in turn raises the question of appropriate policy responses of national and European level authorities, or in the words of Barber, 'Who will watch those who are watching the watchers? Who will prevent the media from controlling their clients and consumers?' (Barber 1998: 588).

This critical reading of the media's role as public intermediaries in the digital era invites us for caution: there is much more technological determinism than free will in the use of online media. There is also much more manipulation, abuse of power and monopoly or control by government than we are willing to assume. There is, as Barber (1998) called this, the Pandora scenario of the new communication

technologies as a dangerous facilitator of tyranny. In formal democracies, which are dominated by digital media technologies, such tyranny, as Barber warned us back in 1998, might even go unnoticed: 'There is no tyranny more dangerous than an invisible and benign tyranny, one in which subjects are complicit in their victimization, and in which enslavement is a product of circumstance rather than intention' (Barber 1998: 581-82). The shift of the digital public sphere towards monopolization has since then been sufficiently documented to confirm that this pessimistic scenario is highly probable.

This 'Pandora scenario' of the use of new communication technologies for knowledge transfer and democracy is starkly evident in the case of the European Union, a transnational polity that nevertheless remains incompletely unified in political and economic terms, while also lacking common media intermediaries (the case of Europeanised national public spheres as opposed to a unified European public sphere). Digitalization is driving national and European policy in the domains of production and dissemination of information in the public sphere (European Commission 2016), and national and European regulatory bodies keenly stress the significance of the media, and of online media in particular, for a democratic public sphere. Nevertheless, their definitions of what actually constitutes a public sphere or what is 'democratic practice in public discourse' vary widely in scope and substance. In policy terms, the tendency has always been for the EU countries to converge in terms of the media regulatory frameworks in response to the challenges of digitalization (European Commission 2013). Nevertheless, this convergence process is neither quick, nor smooth and uniform across all sectors governing the operation of news media. There is a documented trend for EU and national media policies tackling digitalization to edge towards a free-market, deregulated model, with as little intervention from the state as possible, while expressly also stating their commitment to freedom of speech, media pluralism and promotion of cultural diversity (McQuail 2007; Sarikakis 2014). One particular dimension of regulatory challenges lies in the area of public service broadcasting and the ways in which this should be protected

from the pressures of digitalization that have been added onto the pressures brought on by the deregulation of the European audiovisual media landscapes back in the late 1980s and early 1990s (Donders, Pauwels and Loisen 2014). In the following second part of the chapter we examine how the changing role of the media as public intermediaries is affecting EU public communication policies and the European public sphere more broadly.

The European Union and the Internet: Building legitimacy through public knowledge

The relationship between EU institutions and the media could be described as awkward at best: biased coverage (mostly negative) or indifference (EP elections as 'second-order' elections in the news, for example) are frequently identified as characteristics of news media reporting on EU affairs, while the media effects on public opinion about the EU are remain significant (e.g. de Vreese and Boomgaarden 2006; Semetko, de Vreese and Peter 2000). It is a permanent grievance of EU officials from all institutions that the EU project either gets unfair, inaccurate coverage or no coverage at all from national media. No amount of media campaign spending – and in recent years spending has increased manifold – has succeeded to generate the desired level of media publicity, at least as EU institutions understand it. Over the past 14 years, the Commission has produced numerous information and communication policy documents (White Papers, Communications, Memoranda of Understanding with the other EU institutions and member states) with the sole aim to bring the EU closer to its people, recognising that '[c]ommunication is essential to a healthy democracy. It is a two-way street. Democracy can flourish only if citizens know what is going on, and are able to participate fully' (European Commission 2006).

On the surface, the EU institutions are making a great effort to communicate with their citizens and in recent years are fully exploiting the possibilities of direct communication with European publics that the digital media sphere offers. Whether broadcasting on the more elite social platform of Twitter or

reaching out to citizens through Facebook, EU institutions and high-ranking officials (such as the President of the Commission, Jean-Claude Juncker) are utilizing social media to create publicity and generate debate on issues and events of common EU relevance with increasing success (Michailidou, Trenz and de Wilde 2014).

Yet, research and public opinion polls remain inconclusive at best, as to how significant the impact of online media on politics and democracy exactly is in the EU and wider European context. In a seminal article, Claes H. de Vreese concluded that the visibility and framing of EU politics remains the domain of mainstream national journalism. EU news is mainly generated by professional journalists and amplified through central media organizations operating within a national context (De Vreese 2007). Even in the case of events with a 'genuine' EU focus, such as the EP election campaign or the Eurocrisis, news reporting and, subsequently, public contestation, show low patterns of Europeanization and remain embedded within the context of mediated national politics. Internet-era or not, EU political communication is thus inextricably linked to the traditional national public spheres of the member states (de Wilde, Michailidou and Trenz 2013; Michailidou, Trenz and de Wilde 2014).

The media, for their part, seem to have a special skill to irritate EU officials by turning their attention to the politics of the EU at precisely those moments when its institutions could do with less publicity, as for example in the case of the Eurocrisis; or by persistently framing EU politics in national terms, such as in the case of the European Parliament elections, the outcome of which typically becomes a mid-term opinion poll for national politicians. But a closer examination of media coverage shows that in certain instances (as in the case of the Eurocrisis), the biased coverage has been largely in favour of EU and national political and technocratic elites (Michailidou, Trenz and de Wilde 2014; Tzogopoulos 2013).

Moreover, while it is undoubtedly true that the Commission and European Parliament have committed resources in their communication efforts with the public, a closer assessment of their communication strategy reveals two major weaknesses in the deployment of the media as intermediaries for increasing knowledge about the EU, an externally-imposed one and a self-inflicted one. As regards the former, EU institutions are restricted in their public communication efforts by the other core partner of the union, namely the EU member-states. For decades, national politicians have often used the EU institutions as a point of reference to contextualize their own political battles. The EU then becomes an arena where national politicians, in terms of public rhetoric at least, have to defend national interests rather than work together with politicians from other member-states towards a common future. Then there is the self-inflicted flaw in the EU's media and communication strategy: Although both the Commission and the European Parliament correctly recognise the value of free, accurate information as a key component of a democratic public sphere, they conflate the availability of such information with a positive change in public opinion about the EU. As is evident from the communication strategy proposals and action plans that EU institutions have produced over the years, the main assumption is that if citizens have the right information about the EU, then they will appreciate its work and value more; they will like the EU more (Michailidou 2010). This is a case of building legitimacy through public knowledge; a strategy that comes closer to the epistemic than the participatory government ideal. This misconception about the purpose of building a strong relationship with the media and the public has until recently left EU institutions unprepared for the type of critical, occasionally hostile even, public debates that unfold through national television, newspapers and social media (Brüggemann 2010; Craglia and Annoni 2012).

Nevertheless, conflicts and polarization are not only to be expected but also welcome in the case of the EU, in so far as they function as structuring and integrating elements in an otherwise fragmented public sphere (de Wilde and Lord 2016). But if exposing themselves to the whole range of media

coverage and public debates, from the uncritically pro-European to the fanatically anti-EU, is the necessary path for EU institutions to democratic maturity, then both the Commission and the Parliament recently appear determined to have as much control of the process as possible through increased professionalization of their public communication strategies. For example, the most recent turn of the Commission's communications strategy from 'building a European public sphere' to corporate communication signals the recognition that the EU institutions can only ensure that they are open to the media and the public whilst maintaining some control of how their public image is received them.[1]

This evolution of the EU institutions' communication strategy would arguably invite the critique of the 'mediatization' school of thought, if we were to interpret the progressive professionalization of the interaction with the media and the public as a manifestation of the media's increasingly functioning as an institution independent from the democratic principles that underpin all other aspects of our society. From a mediatization perspective, the consistent and progressively more sophisticated efforts of the EU institutions to establish effective public interactions with the media and EU citizens is indicative of the power that the media have acquired in the public sphere: their influence has become such that politicians constantly seek to adapt to the media logics and culture not only in order to ensure their own visibility in the media sphere but also to ensure that the policies they formulate will receive media approval. Seen in this light, one could argue that what is made public by the EU institutions is not necessarily that which

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[1] In the second Barroso Commission (2010-2014), the EU's communication strategy became part of the portfolio for Justice, Fundamental Rights and Citizenship (under Commission Vice-President Viviane Reding) and, while it maintained the principle of engaging citizens with the EU, it took a more corporate turn, with emphasis on streamlining the Commission's image, symbols and form of public communication. See http://ec.europa.eu/dgs/communication/services/visual_identity/index_en.htm for the detailed guidelines on the visual identity of the Commission and http://ec.europa.eu/ipg/basics/policy/index_en.htm for more details on the rationalisation plan for the Commission's public websites.

is needed for voters to make informed choices, but that which is most likely to be media-friendly and thus which is more likely to get the media's attention.

Approached from a Dewyean perspective, however, the continuous investment of EU institutions in professionalized communication with the media and the public constitutes a necessary step in order for them to facilitate the process of democratic accountability. Political leaders have a responsibility to make themselves and their decisions available to institutional and public scrutiny. Even if they opt for a largely 'silent' management style, especially in times of crisis, their actions will be publicly contested: this is the effect of the democratic public sphere. Since the responsibility to gain public legitimacy rests primarily with the politicians themselves, it follows that they are within their rights – obliged even – to communicate their positions and actions as clearly and transparently as possible, which includes having concise and effective communication strategies with the media.

Conclusion

The faith in the capacities of public intermediaries – of the media in particular - to transform expert into public knowledge that informs citizens' participation and voters' choices has been in long-term decline in contemporary Western democracies. The 'art of political bullshit' (Hopkin and Rosamond 2015) reigns over factual argumentation in recent controversies over global warming, the merits of austerity or British exit from the European Union. Increased levels of risk and uncertainty as experienced in the current context of financial and economic crisis have made these deficits of public intermediation even more acute. In the post-factual democracy, populist political parties and leaders have gained ground, winning elections by 'getting the narrative right and the facts wrong' (Hendricks 2016). Another side-effect of this demise of public reason is the rise of technocracy and the set-up of powerful expert bodies

with capacities to deal with complex problems and to compensate for the failure of representative institutions of democracy.

In this article, we have defended a notion of public intermediation of knowledge as an indispensable condition for the generation of democratic legitimacy. In light of these requirements of democracy as an inclusive forum of plural opinions, both populist government and epistemic governance fail to address the opinion-based nature of democratic legitimation, which is not simply based on the rationality of knowledge, nor can it be restored by turning to the 'genuine' expression of the voice of the people. Entrusting political decision-making to professionals as the pure defender of truth or to populist leaders who are sovereign to disregard truth are the mirror images of a disfigured democracy (Urbinati 2014). Epistemic governance and popular government can in this sense be said to mutually reinforce each other. The 'art of bullshitting' is no longer restricted to particular, well-known forums such as tabloid newspapers, but proliferates into the mainstream, precisely because the public sphere is transformed by radical uncertainty through which scientific-technical expertise is continuously questioned and rarely confirmed (Pellizzoni 2003).

In this new constellation, the possibilities for sustaining a notion of democratic legitimation as an open and ongoing process of intermediation depend on the availability and performance of new public intermediaries, notably journalists, civil society organisations and political parties in response to the ongoing digital transformation of the public sphere.

We have argued in this article that the digitalisation of political communication is not to be understood as the straightforward transformation of traditional one-to-many hierarchical mass communication to a new form of pluralist many-to-many network communication. This scenario for a network society of knowledge generation and diffusion has been widely discussed in academia, with early digital-era scholarly works announcing the coming-of-age for democracy, whereby power would

be generated through plural voices in global networks (Castells 1996; 1997; 1998). It is against this early optimism in the democratising capacities of new media technologies that we have juxtaposed the more recent conceptual and empirical works which show how the digitalisation of political communication offers not only a plethora of new opportunities but also risks for the intermediation of knowledge and democracy within and beyond the nation state. Along these lines, it can be claimed that the virality of digital media has strengthened the trend towards a 'postfactual democracy' (Hendriks 2016). Especially in more user-centred interactions are arguments hardly tested or facts corrected. Our focus has however not only been on the short-term virality of certain emotional stories but on the public use of new media technologies over time. Evolving digital media practices indicate an important shift of the digital public sphere towards monopolization, but we also find numerous 'good practices' for a democratic knowledge transfer and a new pluralisation of horizontal opinion-exchanges through the use of digital media which survive against the hegemony of mainstream media conglomerates and show resilience.

This dual nature of the digital media transformation of the public sphere is also strongly evident in the case of the EU. EU actors and institutions have engaged in numerous attempts to build legitimacy through the transfer of knowledge to the citizens. Digital media have thus acquired a central status in the attempts to establish a European public sphere, with EU institutions constantly seeking to adapt to the media and ensuring their own visibility in the digital media sphere. Drawing on John Dewey's work, we propose that such a continuous investment of EU institutions in professionalized communication has facilitated the constitution of publics through the encounter with citizens. EU institutions are increasingly aware of their responsibility to engage in public talk and to respond to the demands of democratic legitimacy. Nevertheless, their attempts to manage such transnational or European publics through digital media are often naïve, insufficient or outright counter-effective. EU actors and institutions thus often experience the failure of their communication efforts and they face enhanced public contestation,

especially in times of crisis. Yet, such contingencies are always part of the democratic public sphere and they only reaffirm that legitimacy can neither be built through the claims of the efficiency of governance nor simply be restored by reverting to populist, renationalised government.

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[i] Nadia Urbinati discusses the deficits of both versions (epistemic and populist) in relation to plural opinion formation and not to public intermediation (even though one could argue that this is the same). She further distinguishes a third 'plebiscitarian element', which we do not include in our approach here.