Communicative approaches to politics and ethics in Europe

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Political discourse cultures in Europe: Explaining the multi-segmentation of the European public sphere through a transnational and transcultural perspective

Andreas Hepp, Johanna Möller, Katharina Kleinen-von Königslöw, Michael Brüggemann, Swantje Lingenberg

1. THE 'THEORETICAL HORIZON' OF COMPARATIVE MEDIA RESEARCH

Reflecting on the current state of transnational and transcultural comparative media research, we can ascertain a certain paradox. On the one hand, there are many especially theory-driven publications on the high complexity of communicative landscapes in a 'global media age'. Arjun Appadurai speaks about the complexity of global mediascapes (Appadurai, 1996: 33), understanding them as "*fluid, irregular shapes*" of mediated communicative flows. Or Ien Ang has discussed the indeterminacy as a result of the "too many, *unpredictable determinations*" (Ang, 1996: 172 – emphasis in original) of global media culture. Based on arguments like these, a discussion is emerging about de-westernising (Curran & Park, 2000) and internationalising (Thussu, 2009) media and communication studies that is seen as necessary to address the translocal communicative connections of the present global media age.

On the other hand, we notice a striking narrowness in the methodological approach of much comparative media and communication research. Typically we find a methodological basis that has been called a "*container theory of society*" (Beck, 2000: 23), resulting in "*methodological nationalism*" (Beck, 2000: 64): The nation state is considered as a 'container' of a certain media system, media market and media culture. Comparative media and communication research is therefore structured

in a "*binary comparative semantic*" (Hepp & Couldry, 2009: 37), comparing two or more 'containers' and their 'contents' with each other: Comparative media and communication research in Europe and beyond invariably boils down to comparing 'one country' (and its media system, market and culture) with another. As we have outlined elsewhere (Hepp & Couldry, 2009: 37–41), we need a much more sophisticated transcultural comparative approach that at the same time reflects the complexity of present media landscapes and accepts the still existing relevance of the nation, especially in the field of political communication.

The transcultural comparative semantic we want to propose takes the existence of global media capitalism as its starting point. Across different states, global media capitalism becomes a structuring force in the sense that in different regions of the world media communication is more and more considered as an 'exchange of economic goods', and not merely as a communication process with the aim of a better reciprocal under-standing (cf. Hesmondhalgh, 2007). Nevertheless, we have to bear in mind that because of its over-determination, this global media capitalism does not standardise the articulation of meaning. Quite often, global media capitalism seems to be rather a source of ongoing cultural fragmentation, contestation and misunderstanding – not only *between* national cultures but also *across* them. However, within global media capitalism, political (media) systems are the most territorially related entities because the legitimacy of political decision-making is still to a high degree state-related. Nevertheless, as soon as questions of media culture come to the fore, we have to have in mind that cultural thickenings can either be broadly territorialised (as with national cultures, articulated with reference to a state and its territory) or they can transgress states and their territories (as with a transnational pro-fessionalisation of journalism) (cf. Mancini, 2007).

Within this chapter, our aim is to demonstrate that a more sophisticated comparative approach of this kind not only reflects the theoretical discussions within cultural and social sciences. Moreover, it also helps to explain 'what's going on' with the possibilities and impossi-bilities of a European public sphere. Therefore, we develop a four-step argument: First, on the basis of a long-term content analysis of media debates we want to explore how far we have to understand the Euro-pean public sphere as multi-segmented. Second, and in the frame of a transcultural comparative semantic, we outline a concept of 'political discourse cultures' as an explanatory tool for understanding these processes of multi-segmentation. Based on this concept, third, we can capture different cultural patterns of 'nationalisation' and 'addressing'

within European political communication. Finally, we discuss this research as a model that can generally widen our perspective on comparative media research.

2. THE MULTI-SEGMENTATION OF A 'EUROPEAN PUBLIC SPHERE'

Although the concept of the public sphere was conceived of in the 18th century and has only been further theorised since the 1960s (Habermas, 1989), within a short time it rose to become a key concept for research on political communication. Without going into too much detail, we want to define *public sphere* in an overall empirical orientation as a general accessible thickening of political 'forums' networks, legitimating political decision-making and actions (Ferree et al., 2002). Therefore, a public sphere is a space of political communication, "*characterised by a higher density internally than that across borders*" (Peters, 2008: 218).

Such an understanding of public sphere makes it possible to theorise national public spheres within Europe as well as a transnational public sphere without one precluding the other: While national public spheres remain as national thickenings of political communication, we can understand the European public sphere as a certain thickening that 'layers' in a lesser intensity across these national public spheres. Thus we can investigate empirically the articulation of a European public sphere across three dimensions of the transnationalisation of national public spheres (cf. Wessler, et al., 2008: 10f.):

- *Vertical dimension*, in the case of the European public sphere a shared monitoring of EU politics.
- *Horizontal dimension*, which means a shared discussion about each other across national borders.
- *Collective identification*, especially the expression of a shared sense of belonging, for example through European we-references.

Based on these considerations we have conducted content analyses of the most important 'quality' and 'tabloid' newspapers in six European countries (Austria, Denmark, Germany, Great Britain, Poland) over two constructed weeks in the years 1982, 1989, 1996, 2003 and 2008 (cf. Wessler et al., 2008: 26–32)[1]. We focus on the press because quality news-papers can be considered as containing the most transnationalised media content, much more than for example television news (cf. Groothues,

2004; Kevin, 2003), while tabloids can be understood as their opposite in this aspect. Additionally, a focus on print media makes historical content analyses possible. The core component of our content analyses were discursive articles in the political section of the newspapers.

Figure 1: The Multi-Segmented European Public Sphere
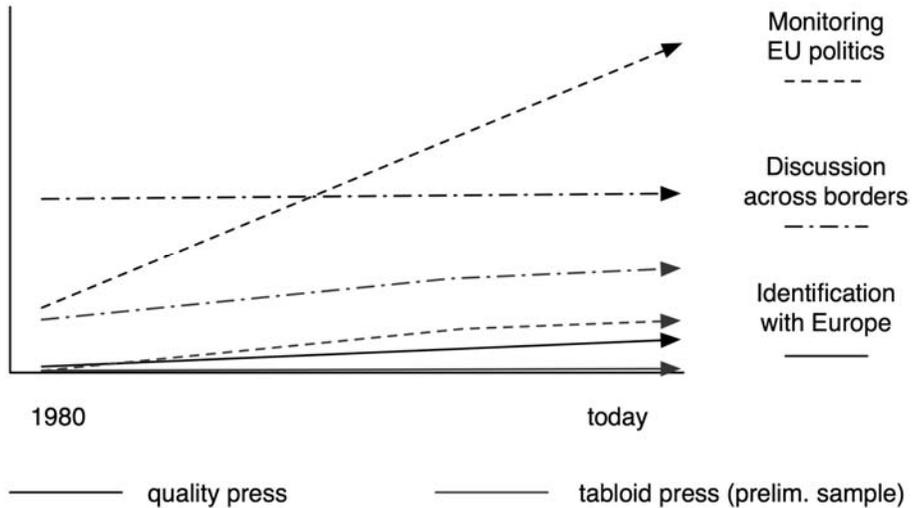
The complex results of our analysis can best be condensed using the concept of a *multi-segmented European public sphere* (see Figure 1). In the vertical dimension, we have across all countries especially within the quality press (and on a lower level within the tabloid press) – an increasing monitoring of EU politics. In the horizontal dimension, we find in the quality press a high-level stagnation of cross-border discussion (that is a media coverage about other European countries), in the tabloid press an increase starting from a much lower level. And in relation to an identification with Europe, we find a certain amount of identification in the quality press (expressed in the use of a shared 'we'), but nearly no identification in the tabloid papers. We understand these results as a *multi*-segmentation as, first of all, across all countries a European public sphere exists in the sense of a thickening of the monitoring of EU politics. However, this thickening remains *segmented in relation to nations* (first the vertical monitoring of EU politics remains in the frame of a national reporting, second the horizontal discussion does not increase) as well as *segmented in relation to the kind of media outlet* (the quality press is much more Europeanised than the tabloid press).
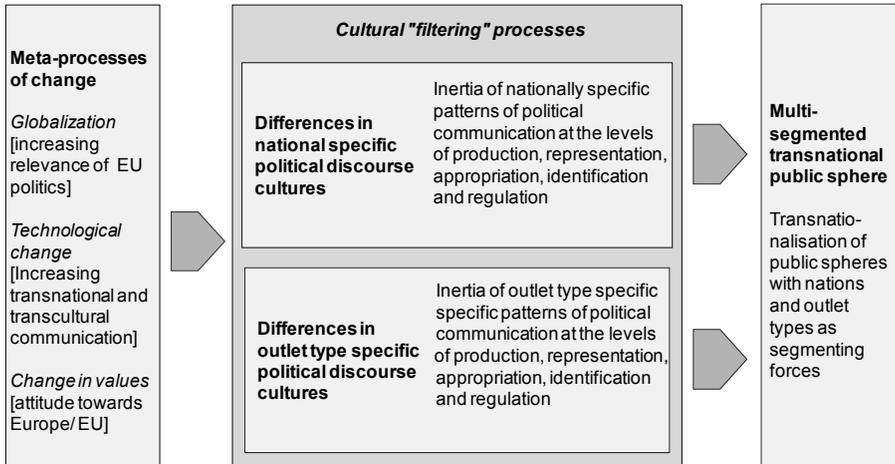
3. 'POLITICAL DISCOURSE CULTURES' AS AN EXPLANATION

We would like to propose that these results of a multi-segmented European public sphere can best be explained culturally. An argumentation simply within political economy falls short, as newspapers across *all* the different researched countries are in private ownership and we do not have differences with respect to state, public or private ownership. Additionally, a shared transnational ownership, as is the case of the Polish *Fakt* and the German *Bild* – both part of the Springer press consortium – does not result for example in shared transnational coverage. Moreover, language is – though highly important – not a sufficient explanation, as national segmentation also occurs between countries with the same language (Austria and Germany). However, as Bernhard Peters (2008: 246) has argued, "*public spheres have a social and cultural foundation that extends well beyond the framework of media markets and media organisations*". In our perspective this 'foundation' can be theorised as 'political discourse culture' (Hepp & Wessler, 2009). In core, we understand a political discourse culture as a specific thickening of cultural patterns producing, representing and appropriating political communication as well as related cultural patterns of regulation and identification. These cultural patterns are much more stable and inert than the – in some cases highly situative – political discourses on a certain topic, constituting in their totality the communicative spaces of national and transnational public spheres.

Bearing this in mind, we are – at least theoretically – confronted with two possible kinds of inertia in relation to political discourse cultures in Europe:

1/ *Inertia of national political discourse cultures*: A 'stability' of national cultural patterns of political discourse that might explain the national segmentation.

2/ *Inertia of political outlet type specific discourse cultures:* A 'stability' of cultural patterns in relation to certain types of outlets that might explain a segmentation on this level.

Besides that, we have at least the possible development of pan-European shared cultural patterns of political communication that might be the foundation of a more stable European public sphere in the future. Such an approach helps to explain the present multi-segmentation of public spheres in Europe (see Figur2 below).

Figure 2 Explaining the multi-segmented European public spher

This figre visualises the complex interrelationship between meta-processes of changing political communication, the inertia of political discourse cultures and the resulting multi-segmented, transnational European public sphere. On the one hand, we argue that each country in Europe is confronted with comparable meta-processes of change. That is, first, an increasing globalisation, which is, beside other consequences, reflected politically in the project of the European Union that concentrates more and more of the fundamental political decisions. Because of this, we have a gaining national relevance of European Union politics, which explains the increasing transnationally shared monitoring of EU politics. Second, a technological change is taking place, offering easier possibilities of transnational and transcultural communication via different satellite technologies and digital media. These technological conditions affect any transnationalisation of national public spheres. Finally, a change in values in relation to political attitudes occurs. This becomes evident especially in Europe, where a large number of images of the 'other' nation have dispersed since World War II and the breakdown of the former Eastern Bloc.

However, these meta-processes do not automatically compel a transnational communicative space, such as a European public sphere. Our research outcomes display a double inertia of political discourse cultures: First, we found differences in nation-specific political discourse cultures – that is: inertia of national patterns of political communication. Second, differences in outlet types (types of newspapers) point towards specific political discourse cultures – that is: inertia of outlet-related

patterns of political communication at the same levels. These different kinds of inertia 'filter' the meta-processes of change nationally as well as transnationally and have as a result a multi-segmented European public sphere. While the first kind of filtering process roots in the stability of national patters of political communication, mediated by the national traditions of political decision making (cf. Pfetsch, 2001), the second kind of filtering process is related to a transnational and transcultural professionalism in journalism that is more determined by the type of media outlet than by the journalists' national context (cf. Mancini, 2007).

Such a scheme is of course highly simplifying, but because of its simplification it gives us an orientation for empirical research on cultural patterns of political communication in Europe.

4. CULTURAL PATTERNS OF 'NATIONALISATION' AND 'ADDRESSING'

Analysing these two filtering processes, we first of all focused on the level of production, where we can concretise them to processes of 'nationalisation' and 'addressing' in and across our researched European countries. More specifically, we observed and interviewed EU and foreign affairs editors from quality and tabloid dailies, as well as from regional newspapers. This broad sample aimed at discovering national specifics by comparison of country-specific political discourse cultures and, second, at investigating overlapping outlet specificities – possibly transnational patterns of news production. Both, investigation and analysis put the emphasis on EU-related and other foreign coverage. Thus, filtering processes of nationalisation and (outlet related) addressing display the contrast of national and transnational elements within daily journalistic practice.

1. Nationalisation as a journalistic practice means framing news content in a way that a reader living in a given country will be able to relate its content to his own experiences. In order to identify nationalisation practices in our interview data with journalists on the media coverage practices, we considered a limited set of codes related to journalistic decision-making and article production processes – these are *preferred topics*, *importance of reporting on EU*, *importance of reporting on EU countries* and *importance of reporting on other foreign news*. Considering these codes, one finds that nationalisation patterns become evident in the repeating and consistent references to national paradigms, mainly regarding EU,

but also foreign news coverage. To put it more precisely, topics make it to a newspaper's agenda, as journalists are able to link them to experiences and problem constellations readers feel familiar with in their given national context. Throughout the whole sample, journalists repeatedly point out that on the one hand EU politics have an increasing impact on people's daily life, but still topics purely focusing on EU related matters do not prevail on news agendas. One of the Polish interviewees puts it clearly: *"Reporting on Europe in the first place is boring"*. Leaving out topics with an unquestionably high news value, preferred EU-related material links transnational events to national matters and experiences. This is true in the case of tabloids as well as in the case of quality and regional newspapers. While the former focus on questions formulated, for example, by an editor of the German *BILD* *"Will this or that EU decision directly affect the reader?"*, the latter aim at pointing out processes relevant for the political situation readers live with.

Focusing more on non-EU foreign coverage, the significance of national paradigms becomes even more evident. Generally, those topics make it to the newspaper's agenda, which relates a foreign story directly to situations readers feel especially familiar or exceptionally irritated with. These moments of either emphatic comparison are characteristic with regard to every sample unit. Consequently, the Polish press was exceptionally interested in the case of civil war in Georgia. The suffering of Georgian people from Russian suppression reminds Polish readers of their own dependence on the former world power – a senior editor of the *Gazeta Wyborcza* summarizes: *"Russia always wins through!"*

Despite these nationalisation processes, conceptualized as emphatic moments of national comparison, our analysis suggests another natio-nalisation pattern: the 'everyday soaking' of the paper with EU-related coverage and content. By this we mean first that the EU has become part of everyday reality to an extent that coverage related to it can no longer be categorized as foreign, economic or national news. The French quality newspaper *Le Monde* and its departmental structures provide an illustrative example. Coverage on the Lisbon Treaty debate had to be realized by the national as well as the international department, resulting in negotiations between them. Since then, EU coverage has become an integral part of the national reporting. Among other things, this resulted in the newspaper section 'Europe-France'. One of the senior editors highlights that giving birth to this new section reflects the increasing difficulty of covering national politics without instantly comparing this to events outside France. A similar case can be found in the Polish *Gazeta*

Wyborcza. The editors created a regular section with a flexible title; one day it reports everyday life in Poland in the section 'Welcome to Poland'. Another day the focus is on Poles or people from other European countries experiencing their everyday life as Europeans. These articles are published under the headline 'Welcome to Europe'. Second, this pattern of 'soaking' includes the increasing significance of EU references within media content – facts, information and aspects related to the EU appear regularly *as part*, not *as object of* articles or comments. The EU has, as a foreign news editor of the German *FAZ* puts it, become "*an area of political action*" – the question of being part of readers' natural surrounding seems to be answered. Under these conditions an EU 'soaking' of national and other news coverage seems corollary.

The aforementioned two patterns depict, albeit in a reduced way, the interweaving of nationalisation and Europeanisation processes. The relevance of national paradigms for EU coverage as well as the simultaneous 'soaking' of newspaper structures and press content by EU references throughout the investigated sample shed light on a more complex idea of the emergence of Europeanised public spheres. Europeanisation seems to be more comprehensive, while taking into account processes of nationalisation at the same time.

2. Besides nationalisation patterns, journalistic practices differ among newspaper types. Our analysis allowed for the construction of four outlet types, differing by their way of addressing publics – 'analyst', 'ambassador', 'reporter' and 'caterer'[2]. These are not limited to specific countries, but cover all the newspapers included in our sample. In order to shed light on a further segmentation determining Europeanisation processes (various levels of Europeanisation in the case of different outlet types), we found a categorization which moves beyond the simplifying distinction of quality and tabloid newspapers. The key category *self-conception newspaper* was crucial in order to clarify a newspaper's rationale behind their EU and foreign news coverage.

A newspaper fitting the type 'analyst' puts emphasis on an extensive discussion of political processes. Here, 'extensive' means the newspaper aims at regarding central topics from different standpoints, in different sections and in different forms – even within a single issue. An extreme example is the German *FAZ*, regularly presenting a wide scope of various journalistic approaches: "*We often have very heterogeneous ideas within the newspaper concerning specific topics, whatever it may be, either, education policy, retail-price maintenance for books, or the war in Iraq*". This approach is also true in the case of EU coverage. In contrast, the

'ambassador' puts high emphasis on explaining political processes with regard to a specific ideology. Thus, journalists working in a newspaper that fits this type, often use a pedagogical approach on EU and foreign affairs topics, linked to an explicit pro-EU position. One example is the Polish *Gazeta Wyborcza*, which, in the words of the editor-in-chief of the foreign department, regularly highlights its supportive position towards Europe – nowadays mainly in terms of the European idea: *"We try to be a European newspaper. […] It means to be open to Europe and to the world. Not to be limited only to Polish problems"*. Another example is the case of the French daily *Le Parisien*, as well as the regional newspaper *Ouest France*. One of the editors highlights the importance of addressing people and explaining to them the political world they live in: *"It's necessary to be didactic and pedagogical at the same time, so that the people can understand a little bit of what is happening. There are very fascinating topics […] Europe: it's still necessary to explain it to me"*. The third type, the 'reporter', neither presents the ambition of extensive coverage, nor do journalists feel the necessity of explaining the world to the people – this kind of newspaper contains a reduced and compact coverage of political processes. Foreign and EU news is covered on a basic level and is thus part of the news service the daily provides. This very economic way of reporting foreign and EU news is often realized by regional newspapers, such as the German *WAZ* or the Polish *Dziennik Zachodni*. The 'caterer', last but not least, plays primarily to the (perceived) audience interests. Newspapers such as the German *BILD* or the Polish *Fakt*, provide their readers mainly with EU and foreign affairs soft news. International coverage is only of interest if the news is shocking, sensational or if they allow strong emphatic comparisons.

There is one main conclusion resulting from seeing European newspapers through the lens of this typology of addressing publics. In order to understand the possible emergence of a European public sphere one needs a more sophisticated understanding of newspapers' self-conceptions and missions. The hitherto predominant distinction of quality and tabloid press limits the understanding of public spheres to the simple contrast of some papers pushing and other papers hindering the emergence of a European public sphere. Instead, we find four types of 'addressing' – the 'analyst', 'ambassador', 'reporter' and 'caterer'. All these types occur transnationally.

Relating this back to our more general reflections, we see how far cultural patterns of 'nationalisation' and 'addressing' in journalistic practice help to explain why we are confronted with a *multi*-segemented European public sphere: This is articulated on the bases of stable

national political discourse cultures, while across them outlet-type specific political discourse cultures develop. To what extent the latter might not only bring about an additional segmentation but also – substantiated in their transnational character – contribute to a European public sphere remains an open question.

5. WHAT CAN WE LEARN FROM THIS?

The aim of our chapter was twofold: Basically we tried to demonstrate the way a cultural approach helps to explain the multi-segmentation of a European public sphere. Beyond this empirical argumentation, we framed this as an example, demonstrating that such a cultural explanation cannot remain in a binary comparative semantic, but must take cultural patterns beyond the national seriously. Considering this, three aspects can be learned from this kind of research on a more general level.

1/ 'Open comparison': In all, our research can be understood as a cue to conduct comparative research in a much more open manner than is usually realised within media and communication studies. Therefore, we must be 'open' when comparing different cultural patterns, and in this process reflect very carefully which patterns are 'national' and which patterns are stable 'beyond' this national level. Only such an open comparison makes it possible to investigate 'what's going on' in the field of transnational and transcultural communication.

2/ 'Cultural complexity': Our research as we understand it demonstrates the multi-layering of the cultural thickenings we are confronted with when analysing transnational and transcultural communication. On a theoretical level, the implication of this is that we need more sophisticated understandings of 'culture' and its relation to media communication than we mostly find in comparative media research, with its tendency to theorise (media) culture more or less on a national level.

3/ 'Translocality of the media': This brings us to our third argument, and that is to reflect culture and media communication translocally, a fundamental approach others also argue for (cf. for example Carpentier, 2008). This means to realise that the specificity of media communication lies in its opportunity to construct communicative relations beyond the local across space (and time). For many years this translocal connectivity had been national-territorial and was strongly related to the construction of the

> nation state. However, in the present we are confronted with a much higher complexity of communicative relations that can also be related to the construction of the supra-national (in our case the EU) or to deterritorial communities (political movements, youth scenes etc.).

Therefore, the present translocality of the media refers back to a more open comparison and a reflection of the related cultural complexity. This said, we hope that our study can function beyond its concrete results as an invitation for an open comparative media and communication research that analyses the present cultural complexity critically.

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NOTES

1   While the content analysis for the quality press has been completed, the content analysis for the tabloid press is still in progress. So all respective arguments are based on a preliminary sample.

2   The terms 'reporter' and 'ambassador' were first introduced by Heikkilä and Kunelius (2008). However, they theorise them in a different way than we do.