

Discussing Europe Online Debates on the Union Are Plural and Mostly Civilized

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The internet presents a revolution in communication. It allows instant communication across the globe at low cost. It represents a change in political communication from a 'one-to-many' logic where professional news corporations transmit news to the wider public to a 'many-to-many' logic in which everyone can easily communicate with everyone else.

People working in the field of political communication have spent considerable time debating what implications these new media have. Optimists consider it a major step towards more open or democratic political communication. They hail the opening up of the field and the decreasing monopoly of major news corporations on political communication. Pessimists tend to think that the logic of news making does not change much and that the patterns of news making and political communication we know from traditional mass media such as newspapers, television and radio will simply be replicated on the internet. Furthermore, they fear the disappearance of quality investigative journalism, as fewer and fewer people are willing to pay for access to news. As professional journalists lose control over newsmaking, the quality of discussion may decline toward a stage of communication 'sewage'. Finally, pessimists fear that – without professional journalists moderating the news – some loud voices may come to dominate less forceful ones and political actors will no longer be forced to provide adequate justifications for the policies they make.

In a recent study funded by the 6th framework program of the EU, Hans-Jörg Trenz (Copenhagen), Asimina Michailidou (Oslo) and Pieter de Wilde (WZB) analyzed internet debates on European integration and the legitimacy of the European Union. Debates about Europe on frequently visited websites in twelve EU member states were analyzed during the 2009 European parliamentary election campaigns. Frequently visited professional journalism websites and independent blogs were sampled from Austria, Belgium, the Czech Republic, Finland, France, Germany, Greece, Hungary, the Netherlands, Poland, Sweden, and the UK. To illustrate, this sampling included the online portals of quality newspapers like *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, *Le Monde* and *The Guardian*; of tabloids like *Bild*, *Kronenzeitung* and *De Telegraaf*; and blogs like *Blogy iDnes*, *Le Blog Politique* and *Geen Stijl*. All websites included in the study used interactive features known as Web 2.0 where readers are able to post comments in response to articles and other readers' comments.

We did not focus on how elections and political candidates were presented, but rather on evaluations of the European Union as polity. That is, we investigated how actors in the news – politicians, EU institutions, individual citizens, civil society and others – evaluate the EU. We differentiated between three targets of evaluation: European integration as a core principle (in the sense of whether European countries should collaborate in some form or another); the EU as political system (as it now exists in terms of competencies, membership and institutions); and possible future steps in European integration towards a more federal union.

What we find is that both politicians making the news and readers responding to the news frequently engage in discussing European integration and the EU polity. In other words, even before the Eurocrisis truly broke out in late 2009, the EU was a widely contested subject. Particularly striking is the very similar balance of positive and negative evaluations across EU member states. There are many more negative opinions than positive ones in all EU member states stud-

Summary: The EU is a widely contested issue on the internet, even before the Eurocrisis broke out in full force. We find lively debates between Europhiles and Eurosceptics on many interactive websites throughout Europe. The voice of Eurosceptics is stronger, with particularly fierce criticism leveled at EU institutions and the lack of democratic accountability. Internet optimists are right in expecting pluralist debate of decent quality while pessimists are right in expecting the continued dominance of traditional news corporations in political communication.

ied. Thus, the traditional assumption that some member states are more Europhile while others are more Eurosceptic should be reconsidered. In fact, citizens responding to news stories in online discussions across the EU are highly critical. Though participants in the debates criticize the EU; they are supportive of the principle of integration. That is, citizens – more than politicians – support the idea of European integration, but are, at the same time, very dissatisfied with the result of the integration process. They strongly criticize the institutions that currently exist and their competencies.

A particular bone of contention is the level of democracy in the EU. Many complain that their voices aren't heard, that they cannot influence what is being decided in the EU and that unelected bureaucrats within EU institutions have too much power. Yet, very few advocate a complete dissolution of the EU or even that their own country should give up membership. In that sense, the existence of the EU and our inclusion are taken for granted across Europe. So far, a remarkable consensus across EU member states is apparent. In short, European citizens and politicians alike agree in their arguments on the internet that we want Europe, but not this Europe.

These arguments clearly identify a problem, but not a solution. In effect, such arguments may best be labeled an expression of diffuse Euroscepticism containing a voiced grievance but no indication of what would alleviate the grievance. Few participants in online debates offer solutions, and the ones that do rarely agree with each other. While some advocate less Europe, others want more of it. Some see a solution in reverting back to the EU as a common market where we get rid of all the political integration and state-like symbolism. Others want to democratize Europe, for instance by directly electing the President of the European Commission or by making the Commission fully accountable to a majority in the European Parliament. The advocates of such changes accept that this democratization will probably come with a transfer of even more power to EU institutions.

Debates of unexpected good quality

The conclusion is that the internet is quite capable of hosting a lively and nuanced debate about a complex issue, such as European integration and the legitimacy of the EU. Not only do many people participate in online discussions, but the arguments are generally fairly well presented in terms of decency and argumentation. Furthermore, most websites presented a space for both Europhiles and Eurosceptics to voice their arguments. The debates were thus inclusive and of fairly good quality. This is a far cry from the characterization of political communication on the internet as sewage. So far, our study supports the expectations of internet optimists rather than those of the pessimists.

Yet, the debates predominantly unfold on websites that belong to traditional news corporations. That is, the most frequently visited political news websites in Europe tend to be the online portals of traditional offline media, like newspapers and broadcasting companies. As a result, these companies continue to control the flow of news and remain powerful agenda setters. To that extent, the internet pessimists are right to believe that the internet does not yet constitute a revolution in political communication. Instead, the political news as we already knew it, is replicated onto a new platform. For discussions on topics like European integration, the innovation of the internet does not lie in the content of news or the way it is presented. The innovation lies in the opportunity for readers to directly respond for all other readers to see. Through their public contributions, these readers contribute actively to the debate and become part of the news-making enterprise.

Although debates on the internet clearly identify the problem of an undemocratic yet powerful EU, they do not present us with a solution. In other words, there is no clear collective will presented in online debates on European integration that could be translated into a political reality to satisfy everyone. Instead, we are presented with a cacophony of different preferences. Given this



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dissensus and the recent history of European integration, we deem it likely that the EU will continue to evoke opposition as a simple result of its tremendous influence on the daily lives of EU citizens. Efforts by the political elite to publicly justify European integration simply provide fuel to the fire of online Euroscepticism. Euroscepticism may well be here to stay for as long as the EU exists and for as long as political elites try to justify it. Thus we will continue to observe a lively debate about the EU on the internet.

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