Media Agoras

Media Agoras:
Democracy, Diversity, and Communication

Edited by

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION

THE REALM OF CONTEMPORARY MEDIA AGORAS

IÑAKI GARCIA-BLANCO, SOFIE VAN BAUWEL AND BART CAMMAERTS

The relationship between diversity and the media in contemporary democratic societies has been receiving increased attention in academic and policy debates (e.g. Van Cuilenburg and McQuail, 2000; Bardoel *et al*., 2005; Lowe and Jauert, 2005; Howley, 2005; Bailey *et al*., 2008). One of the main reasons for this is that they are closely intertwined with profound transformations in our distinct societies. Overall, democracies face different kinds of challenges with regard to diversity and the media. In a time when traditional, nation-state based societies are no longer tied by the national, linguistic and ethnic uniformities that used to bind them, democratic institutions are experiencing difficulties in terms of guaranteeing the respect, political recognition and agency that minorities and social groups deserve.

Awareness of the increased social and cultural diversity of our societies, however, is not new. From the 1960s to the 1980s, "civic rights movements"–such as the peace movement (Moorehead, 1987), the gay and lesbian movement (Adam *et al*., 1999) and the women's movement (Krolokke and Sorensen, 2005)–have played an important role in acknowledging the internal diversity of Western societies. Civil society movements and networks have exposed latent as well as explicit tensions that the taken for granted uniformity of our societies generates. Despite the greater political and social recognition resulting from these social mobilizations, their demands for inclusion and recognition have never fully been met (Hine and Hussein, 1998), and have constituted a continued unresolved tension. For example, women rights are well protected through the legal systems of Western countries, but gender equality is actually far from being a reality (Hoskeyns, 1996). Similarly, sexual minorities have

achieved different degrees of (legal) recognition across Western societies, but there are still many obstacles to the full legal and societal recognition of lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender identities (Waaldijk and Clapham, 1993; Szymanski and Chung, 2001; Takàcs, 2006). Migrant communities have grown, bringing to the fore–once again–the cultural, ethnic and religious diversities in our societies. However, such diversity is not necessarily experienced as enriching or an opportunity for widening cultural horizons and deepening cultural exchange (Mitchell and Russell, 1994; Geddes, 2003). In fact, conflicts have arisen, which, at times, have led to hate crimes, to protests, riots and unrest, often contested with police brutality.

This book addresses these complex issues from a European perspective. The construction of a European polity under the motto "united in diversity" poses additional challenges to the relations between democracy, diversity and the media. As such, the EU considers that the linguistic and cultural diversity of Europe is a positive asset and, therefore, should be protected; the Treaty of Lisbon, for instance, states that the EU "shall respect its rich cultural and linguistic diversity" (European Union, 2007: 11). In addition, a common European identity is considered to be a crucial condition for guaranteeing the attachment of citizens to the European project (see, e.g. Lehning, 2001). The discourse on diversity within Fortress Europe is contrasted to a discourse on "other" identities, which can be seen as a "constitutive outside" (Derrida, 1974: 39-44; Staten, 1985: 16-19). However, such processes of othering often ignore hybrid identities of second and third generation migrant communities and new migrants. In this sense, the inner and the outer have been constructed on the basis of these tensions, and groups are excluded within the borders of Fortress Europe, but also in the periphery, outside this metaphorical fortress.

The EU itself has developed and promoted an institutional conception of diversity within the framework of a (more participatory) democracy. The "good governance" principles outlined in the White Paper on European Governance affirmed that "democracy depends on people being able to take part in public debate" (European Commission, 2001: 11). However, that very white paper envisages that public debate on European policies should take place between lobby groups representing the interests of traditional social groups. These groups were already established as institutionalized political actors in EU politics (Magnette, 2003; Magnette, 2006).

The need for a more inclusionary politics at EU level is often justified by the legitimacy crisis that the EU–and other institutions–are facing. The

complex institutional structure of the EU, the different visions and conflicting interests, in combination with decreasing civic engagement with EU politics, are fuelling the critique on a democratic deficit in the EU (Norris, 1997; Katz, 2001). As such, Héritier (1997: 180) argues that participatory policy discourses emanating from the EU, aim "to avoid conflicts by forming a broad consensus prior to embarking upon legislation and to sustain legislation once it is in place".

As mentioned above, this legitimacy crisis being suffered by formal democratic institutions is affecting not only the EU, but also European (nation) states, as the low degree of political involvement, and distrust in political institutions, are not exclusive to the EU (see McDonough *et al*., 1998). The decline in voter turnout and the increased levels of political disenchantment and scepticism are manifestations of this (Dalton and Wattenberg, 2000). Some politicians acknowledged this fact,[1] and certain political institutions have reacted to these signs of civic disengagement by promoting initiatives that foster more participatory politics. The case of the European Commission, in this regard, is paradigmatic; it has developed the previously mentioned White Paper on European Governance (European Commission, 2001) and the White Paper on a European Communication Policy (European Commission, 2006).

The EU has traditionally identified diversity with the multiple nation-state languages and cultures found throughout Europe. There is only marginal attention being paid, however, to the presence of diasporic communities in Europe. Instead of conceiving these communities as an in-between identity, producing healthy diversity and strong democracy, as it is now common in cultural theory (see Hall and Du Gay, 1996; Scheffer, 2003), they are often problematized as a potential challenge to "local" ways of living and the normal (and desirable) governing of democratic societies. European democratic societies, thus, face different challenges in their (normative) aspirations to respect promote diversity, guarantee pluralism and fundamental freedoms, and respect human rights, while promoting citizens' identification with democracy and their political participation at national and European levels. In this regard, European democratic societies experience difficulties balancing strategies of

[1] In this sense, José Luis Rodríguez Zapatero expressed his concerns about politically disengaged citizens in his inaugural speech as Spanish prime minister: "They feel that politics does not meet their needs and expectations, or speak their language or respond to their values. We must regain their presence and their participation. We must combat disillusionment. To do so, and above all else, we must achieve the revitalisation of Parliament … [which is now] corseted, a prisoner of the Government" (Rodríguez Zapatero, 2004).

empowerment–required to guarantee the integration and involvement of certain social groups and minorities (ethnic, sexual, or gender-based)–with the risks of social fracture that such empowerment may entail, above all when it opposes hegemonic discourses or existing power structures.

* * *

Some scholars emphasize the highly mediated nature of democratic politics in our societies (e.g. Bennett and Entman, 2001) and consider that the media constitute a (if not the most) crucial force in the transformation of political systems (e.g. Castells, 1997). If media and communication studies are to escape the circularity of simply asserting the important role that media and communication play in a democracy, the relationship between the media, communication, diversity and democracy should be clarified or even rethought.

The media constitute a privileged arena for the discursive (re)negotiation of the tensions and challenges that diversity brings about. *Media Agoras* can therefore be thought of as discursive spaces where social groups and communities are represented by "the media", but which at the same time allow these groups and communities to self-represent themselves and to struggle for acceptance or for other political aims. Media are thus both a forum for societal consensus building and for exposing or even celebrating difference and conflicts. From this perspective, media can be defined in a variety of ways. It can be positioned as "the (mainstream) media", constituted of public and commercial media organizations and the media professionals active in them, mediating news-flows and offering a continuous flux of information and entertainment contents where discourses about our societies are produced and reproduced, and images of different social and cultural groups are represented. At the same time media can also increasingly be regarded as communication tools, attributing citizens and civil society with more agency–or the potential for action. In order to sustain vibrant media agoras, respect for (and protection of) diversity of voices, of views, and of channels of communication becomes crucial. This debate is situated on the level of the production (user generated content and participation of citizens), on the level of content (diversity in the representations) and on the level of audiences (access, participation and media literacy). In this regard, it can be seen as part of the agenda of the emerging communication rights movement (Hamelink, 2003; Cammaerts and Carpentier, 2007)

Different fictional and non-fictional media formats offer a favourable context for the representation of social diversity, at least ideally (Van

Bauwel, 2004; D'Haenens *et al*., 2008). In this sense, the ultimate goal of information provision to citizens is the fair and balanced representation of and/or reflection on natural, social and political phenomena and/or practices. News production, however, is not as neutral as it is often presented to be. Bennett (2000: 205) reminds us that media transmit "values, problem definitions and images of people in society that provide resources for people in thinking about their lives and their relationship to government, politics and society". As such, the way that groups in society are represented and issues are addressed or "framed", matters (Goffman, 1974). As Entman (1993: 52) pointed out more then a decade ago:

> "to frame is to select some aspects of a perceived reality and make then more salient in a communicative text, in such a way as to promote a particular problem, definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation, and/or treatment recommendation for the item described"

Entertainment (and also all formats of infotainment) content offers an equally diverse range of opportunities for guaranteeing the democratic goals of respecting and enabling the possibility for political participation from different social groups. Entertainment content is potentially an excellent platform for promoting gender or ethnic equality and inclusion, especially when they are not particularly targeted at specific social groups, and foster the participation of a diversity of identities (Bhabha, 2004; Gilroy, 2000; Spivak, 2003). The same can be said about fiction content, which shows an increasing awareness of the necessity to offer an inclusive perspective for different social groups and/or minorities. The presence of gay characters in internationally acclaimed TV series (e.g. *Six Feet Under*, *Will & Grace*, *Ellen*), can be interpreted as an agent promoting the normalization of different lifestyles or so-called "new types of families".

As already indicated, participation and representation in the mainstream media are not unproblematic (Shohat and Stam, 1994; King and Mele, 1999). Mainstream media do not necessarily always play such a liberating or empowering role. For example, the potential media have for creating and above all sustaining stereotypes and patterns of (legitimized) behaviour has fed academic discussion since the publication of Walter Lippmann's *Public Opinion* in 1922. The media may act as an agent that continuously (re)legitimizes the status quo, rendering access to media contents difficult for certain minorities and social groups, and/or portraying biased, offensive or stigmatizing images of those groups or individuals that do not conform to the taken-for-granted patterns of behaviour (Philo, 1999; Downing and Husband, 2005).

Whilst not minimizing the important role of mainstream media nor the role of information and entertainment contents, media increasingly have to be seen in conjunction (and in contention) with alternative media as well as many-to-many communicative processes that potentially stimulate socio-cultural diversity and political pluralism (Bailey *et al*., 2008). The mainstream media have appropriated new media at a rapid pace, but, at the same time, citizens, activists, civil society organizations and networks are claiming their spaces through innovative use of new media, by-passing the gate-keeping power of the mainstream media (Deuze, 2006). Through websites with resources, blogs, wikis, online forums, mailing lists, as well as "old" media such as radio, citizens and civil society networks increasingly articulate their voices and organize themselves (Cammaerts, 2005). They thereby exercise their communication rights (i.e. through what is known as alternative or community media). At the same time these communicative tools allow for mobilization and more traditional forms of opposition, such as direct action. This shows that media agoras are also inherently conflictual spaces, striving against agonistic and also antagonistic struggles that do not respect the legitimacy of "the other" (Mouffe, 1999). In this context, we can point to the neo-fascist and the radical Muslim movements and discourses.

Current media agoras engender a number of pressing questions in relation to diversity and its importance to our democracies, characterized by a high degree of mediation and communication. Are the media fostering the empowerment of different social groups and minorities present in society? Or are they, instead, reinforcing stereotypes and promoting further stigmatization of certain groups and minorities? What is the role of policy in guaranteeing that plurality and diversity are respected in the media, whilst protecting minorities? Is the exercise of democracy richer and more complex as more articulate voices claim their right to participate in democratic politics? Are new media helping the political articulation of social groups and minorities? In essence, is democracy-as-we-know-it undergoing profound change; if so, what role is the media playing in this? What are the roles played by different social groups and minorities in this change? How do they become (a) public?

* * *

Media Agoras: Democracy, Diversity, and Communication groups a number of chapters covering a wide array of topics relating to the questions posed above. The contributing authors depict a diverse, documented, but still bittersweet image of the main struggles that

democracy is currently going through in most European societies, where, in spite of a declared combination of respect for civil liberties and welfare, certain social groups and minorities still have to strive for their democratic and communicative rights. The book is organized along three themes tackling the relations amongst democracy, diversity and the media from different perspectives.

The first of these themes dissects some relevant discussions on the theoretical and practical debates on the role of the media in European democracy and its relation to diversity. In spite of the strong normative character of Habermas's work, this debate has pivoted around the concept of the public sphere that has been crucial not only as an ideal type for theoretical reflection (Bennett and Entman, 2001), but also as a policy goal for European politicians and bureaucrats, as Hannu Nieminen shows in his chapter. His analysis is twofold, reflecting on the impact of the EU's institutional context in terms of both its political communication and its media policy. In spite of the strong motivation to overcome the lack of public debate at EU level, EU institutions seem to inescapably lower the aspirations of every initiative in that direction.

Strictly speaking, the Habermasian normative notion of the public sphere is not entirely compatible with the social diversity of contemporary Western societies. Theoretical debate on the public sphere has attempted to overcome this through a complexification of the original Habermasian concept, developing a more sophisticated conception of democracy in which consensus is not the ultimate political goal (Dahlgren, 2005). Authors such as Gitlin (1998) and Taylor (1995) introduced concepts such as "public sphericules" or "nested public spheres", challenging the unicity of the Habermasian notion, and pushing the concept so it could be exploited for thinking about social diversity, political conflict, different forms of collective action, and even anti-democratic groupuscules or anti-publics (Cammaerts, 2007). The concept of counter-public spheres has been crucial in developing anti-essentialist theorizations of contemporary politics (Downey and Fenton, 2003). In his chapter, Jeffrey Wimmer offers a thorough meta-analysis of the empirical research published in English and in German, linking counter-public spheres and media activism.

Christina Ortner and Ingrid Paus-Hasebrink centre on a scarcely researched area. Their chapter discusses media consumption and the formation of attitudes towards Europe amongst citizens living in precarious conditions. This chapter sheds light on the part played by the media in the well-documented direct relation between higher levels of income and education, and support for the EU. Until recently the scholarly

debate on Europe and the media has focused exclusively on media coverage, with little attention to the way citizens select and use Europe-related content. This chapter illustrates the relevance of analysing media use (and selection) of different social groups in relation to their attitudes towards Europe and their participation generally in the European public sphere.

The book's second theme is media representations of diversity, with special interest in the construction of gender and the feminine/femininity through media discourses, informed by related, but still different theoretical backgrounds. Carla Jorge and Ana Martins analyse the construction of the feminine in Portuguese popular dailies, stressing the prevalence of gender stereotypes in press content. Their chapter provides critical analysis of the role of popular media in maintaining and feeding essentialist discourses that actively enforce the discursive construction of systems of stratification linking wealth, gender, sexuality, race and marital and parental status, among others. This chapter illustrates a tradition within feminist media studies (van Zoonen, 1994) where the media content is analysed to access stereotypical representations of woman and femininity (e.g. Mediawatch, 1995; Rakow and Kranisch, 1991).

Tonny Krijnen, in turn, examines the moral discourses underlying prime-time television content in The Netherlands. Her approach, heavily rooted in theoretical works on (popular) culture (see Hermes, 1995; Hartley, 1999) as well as feminist theory (see Benhabib, 1992), identifies the prevailing discourses on socially structuring issues such as norms, family, democratic values, and violence. Krijnen offers an ambivalent picture highlighting the positive reinforcement of crucial democratic values exercised by prime-time television, while helping to maintain certain stereotypical clichés. Using conceptualizations from Nussbaum (1995; 1997) and Rorty (1989), Krijnen sets out the realm of norms and their televisual articulations. Her contribution stresses the agora-esque nature of media as constituting an arena where the hegemonic struggle for discourse fixation can take place, while denouncing the moral panic fuelling the fuss about moral decay fostered by television programmes.

Cláudia Álvares inspirationally suggests in the last chapter in this section that the image of the media as an agora is inextricably linked to media audiences, stressing the need to look beyond the representations and emphasizing the contribution of interpretative audience research (see Ang, 1985). Her reception analysis examines the reception of women representations in the media of both Portuguese and Brazilian women living in Portugal, and critiques the reported experiences of these women. Álvares's analysis fully embraces the debate around the (dis)empowering

potential of contemporary media, establishing a fruitful threefold dialogue between the interviewed women, and landmark contributions to the fields of reception studies and feminist media studies.

The book concludes with three chapters analysing different aspects of the relationship between media, diversity and democratic participation in policy-making processes. A crucial aspect of the relations between media and diversity has to do with the diversity *of* the media. The media themselves are also victims of homogenization processes emanating from global economic trends in media concentration; fewer and fewer owners control more and more media outlets. The media are becoming less and less diverse, which poses a threat to media pluralism, which is crucial for a healthy democracy and for social and cultural diversity. The EU has addressed these concerns over media pluralism somewhat hesitantly, while trying to achieve a compromise or balance between its own interest in fostering pan-European media, and its defence of competition through effective enforcement of anti-trust regulation. The stakes, the negotiations and the lobbying efforts determining the latest evolutions of EU policy in relation to media pluralism, are analysed by Giorgia Nesti. In her chapter, Nesti unveils a considerable amount of "grey" literature, shedding light on the closed-door negotiations that–somehow ironically–surround the elaboration of policies pursuing the free flow of information and fostering the transparency necessary for informed public debate.

Karen Donders and Caroline Pauwels address the conflicting debates among media actors, the EU, and EU member states concerning public service broadcasting, competition among different broadcasters, and state aid. Donders and Pauwels dissect the arguments triggered by the various actors and stake-holders in the constant give-and-take between those supporting a media sector exclusively regulated by market laws, and those justifying different degrees of state (economic) intervention.

Finally, Sabine Lang offers a citizen-oriented chapter, focusing on the advocacy potential of transnational women's networks in the EU. Informed by three case-studies, Lang assesses the impressive lobbying ability of these networks, which have succeeded in almost all of their campaigns at the institutional level. However, Lang also suggests that excessive orientation towards EU-institutions may plunge these networks into a legitimacy crisis, due to lack of public visibility and, consequently, civic support.

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PART I

PLURALISM AND SPHERES

CHAPTER ONE

THE EUROPEAN PUBLIC SPHERE AND CITIZENS' COMMUNICATION RIGHTS: A PROPOSAL FOR DEMOCRATIC MEDIA POLICY IN THE EUROPEAN UNION

HANNU NIEMINEN

Introduction

The European media and communication landscape is in the midst of profound transformation. The commercial logic of the print media has been contrasted to other functional logics such as the universal service principle of telephony or the public service principle of broadcasting; today, digitalization and computerization of information has utterly changed this context. As a result of this, different regulatory regimes are converging today. The commercial logic appears to emerge as a winner, promoting a neo-liberal regulatory framework (see Kaitatzi-Whitlock, 2005).

At the same time the ambitious project of European integration initiated after the Second World War appears to have run out of steam, to such an extent that even the European Commission in its documents speaks of a crisis in public trust and confidence in the European Union (EU) (European Commission, 2005a). One of the remedies proposed is the improvement of European media and communication policies and the development of a European public sphere (EPS) (European Commission, 2006a). It is hoped that increasing public inlets and ways for citizens to participate in public debates on European issues would increase support for the EU and European integration process.

In this chapter it is argued that the commercial logic followed in the European media and communication regulatory policies (see Nesti's chapter in this book) contradicts the aims to open-up and strengthen the

European public sphere. There is a need for a re-definition of the basic values of EU media and communication policies, and for this purpose we propose a specific approach to European media and communication regulation based on the concept of citizens' communication rights. The communication rights framework is normative and rests on the belief that deliberative democracy is not merely a theoretical concept, but can be applied in concrete policy oriented ways. In this sense, I will initially call my approach *a proposal for a democratic regulatory framework for European media and communication*.

The arguments are developed in three stages. First, the present condition of the EU is briefly explored. It is characterized as a twofold crisis because it concerns both politics and legitimacy. Second, the ways that the European Commission uses media and communication policies in an attempt to solve this political and legitimacy crisis are discussed, as well as the Commission's deployment of the notion of a European public sphere. Finally, and as the main outcome, we outline a proposal for a new democratic regulatory framework for European media and communication.

The twofold crisis of the EU

Despite many achievements and continuing enlargement, the European integration project, which began after the Second World War, is being challenged at a fundamental level. On the one hand, the problems are political: the EU is suffering a political malaise, as is shown by the failed European Constitution ratification process. On the other hand, the EU suffers from a lack of popular legitimacy, which is exemplified, among other things, by the alarmingly low turnout for European Parliamentary elections (see e.g. Der Spiegel, 2005).

Although the EU encompasses the world's third biggest population,[1] it is considered rather weak politically. The EU's political weakness is present in many areas: in global security and foreign policy, as there is a lack of common policy e.g. diverging views on the US-led war in Iraq; in European security policy, as there appears to be no effective common approach to the conflicts in the Caucasian region; in energy policy, as there is no coherent approach to future energy sources; etc.

This lack of common political power is inherent in the EU. As its original aim was economic integration and the creation of European single

[1] In 2006, the EU (25) had 457 million inhabitants, China had 1,288 million and India 1,064 million. The USA had 291 million and Indonesia 245 million. See GeoHive, http://www.xist.org/earth/population1.aspx (accessed 24 April 2007).

market, its basic structures were not aimed at developing and deciding on common policies. Problems started to emerge only when the main contours of the European single market were established and the primary aim was more or less fulfilled. From the early 1990s, and perhaps earlier, it became clear that in order to be globally competitive, more than European economic integration was needed. In the Maastricht Treaty the EU's mandate was extended to include not only the economic, social and environmental policy areas (Pillar I) but also common foreign and security policy (Pillar II) and cooperation in internal security (Pillar III).

This naturally resulted in a growing tension between the need to create more centralized decision-making structures for the EU–to transfer more binding political powers to the European Commission and other EU institutions–and the traditional sovereignty of the EU's member states. This tension is exacerbated by the fact that the popular legitimacy of the European political system rests on two elements, namely citizens' direct participation in European Parliamentary elections and the legitimacy derived from these decisions being backed by the national governments and representative institutions of member states. There has been no transfer of national sovereignty to the EU, and member states do take an active stance either in EU policy and decision-making or in the implementation of EU norms. As citizens have come to trust their national governments and institutions less and less (see European Commission, 2005e), the state of the EU's legitimacy has grown increasingly unhealthy. The embedded character of the political dilemma that the EU is facing is obvious if we compare its two recent major policy challenges: the Lisbon strategy (European Council, 2000) and the European constitutional process (European Council, 2005; 2008).

The Lisbon strategy was adopted by the European Council in March 2000. It set the target for the EU "to become the most competitive and dynamic knowledge-based economy in the world" by 2010 and it recognized the need "to set a goal for full employment in Europe" within the same timeframe (European Council, 2000). The overall Lisbon strategy is global economic competitiveness. The main fear is that Europe is lagging behind not only the US, but also the rapidly developing Asian markets. The aims and values that the Lisbon strategy promoted are measured by economic criteria and concepts–such as competitiveness, profitability, growth, and efficiency. As was obvious by February 2005, the Lisbon strategy had not produced the outcomes that were hoped for:

> "the Commission finds the results to date somewhat disappointing and the European economy has failed to deliver the expected performance in terms of growth, productivity and employment. Job creation has slowed and there

> is still insufficient investment in research and development" (European Commission, 2005c)

The fate of the Lisbon strategy can be compared with another major policy initiative of the EU, the attempt to anchor the EU to a constitutional basis–and in effect, to transform the EU from an intergovernmental construction to a more federal structure or to a federation of nations. The European constitutional process was an attempt to meet two different needs: on the one hand, the need for more effective and more centralized policy making, instrumental for the success of initiatives such as the Lisbon strategy; and on the other, the need to clarify the power structures and the legal basis governing the EU. The former was a response to the need for more efficiency; the latter was a response to the need for more democratic legitimacy and accountability (Eriksen *et al*., 2005).

While it is undoubtedly the case that one of the main aims of the constitutional process was to make the EU more transparent and more democratically accountable, and to establish, at least in the initial stages, a European "rule of law", in popular social imaginary other aspects of European developments took the forefront. It is not accidental that the two strategic processes, the Lisbon strategy and the European constitution, were conducted in parallel. In public debate the hard economic aims and values of European integration–as promoted by the Lisbon strategy–were considered as being more important than the concerns relating to legitimacy and accountability. The launching of the European constitution was thus not viewed as representing an increased democratization of the EU and as promoting social and cultural cohesion, but rather as centralization and as a "command and control" type of governance, transferring sovereignty from the nation states to the faceless Eurocrats in Brussels (see Bonde *et al*., 2005; Abitbol *et al*., 2003).

In sum, it can be argued that the political crisis of the EU does not originate from the negative results of the French and Dutch referenda (in 2005), rejecting the European constitution, or from the Irish "No" vote on the Lisbon Treaty (in 2008), but from the crisis between two very distinct logics or value systems that the EU attempts to combine, a market-based economic logic versus a democratic logic of social and cultural values.

The results of these three referenda (France's and The Netherlands' votes on the constitution, and Ireland's referendum on the Lisbon treaty) clearly show the difficulties that popularizing the EU poses. The EU's decision-making processes are complicated and not exactly open to democratic accountability as the processes underlying the decisions are not always clear. This is not only caused by the opacity surrounding the development and negotiation of policies within the triple-headed structure

of decision making (where the European Commission, the European Parliament and the Council of the EU use balancing powers), but also by the heavy involvement of the large army of civil servants and experts (some 23,000 in total) in policy planning and advocacy.[2]

As a result, the EU has remained remote for European citizens, and it seems that, in recent years, the gap between the EU and the popular mood has even increased. The recent results of the Eurobarometer 69 (European Commission, 2008d) show that:

a) Support for EU membership is decreasing among the citizens of EU countries. In spring 2008, on average, only 52% of EU citizens believed that their country's membership of the EU was a good thing. In spring 2007 this percentage was 57% (European Commission, 2008d);
b) On average, in spring 2008 only 48% of EU citizens viewed the EU positively; this was clearly less than the 52% measured in spring 2007(European Commission, 2008d);
c) An overwhelming majority of citizens in the big Euro-zone countries believe the Euro has damaged their national economies (European Commission, 2006c).

European citizens' political alienation is reflected also in recent developments in the European Parliament elections. The turnout for these elections has been steadily declining over the years: in 1979, the turnout was 63%; in 1994 it was 57%; in 1999 it was 50%; and in 2004 it was 46% (Mellows-Facer *et al*., 2004). We can contrast these figures with voting activity in national elections: although voting in general has been steadily declining in most EU countries, between 1945 and 2002 the average turnout for national elections in the EU countries has been 83% (IDEA, 2004).

The media and communication policies of the EU

The European heads of states were shocked by the results of French and Dutch referenda. "Europe is not in a state of crisis–it's in a state of profound crisis", the then-President of EU, Luxemburg's Prime Minister Jean-Claude Juncker is reported to have said in June 2005.[3] As the

[2] On the other hand, the City Council of Barcelona directly employs 6,479 persons, serving only 1.5 million citizens.

[3] The EU "crisis" after failure of the summit, http://edition.cnn.com/2005/WORLD/europe/06/17/eu.summit/index.html; see also http://www.cnn.com/2005/WORLD/europe/06/18/eu.summit/index.html; http://www.marxist.com/Europe/european-union-crisis200605.htm

European constitutional process was effectively halted, the European Council declared a period of reflection in June 2006 to be used for extensive and wide scale public consultation on the future of Europe (European Council, 2005). The period of reflection was officially declared to be over in January 2007, but without having achieved any clear outcome (see Euractive, 2006).

The main focus during this period of reflection was improving the communication and public relations (PR) activities of the Commission, as several central documents from that period show. In other words, instead of taking seriously the critiques of citizens and civil society towards the European project, the reasoning developed was that more communication and PR would ultimately persuade the dissenters. Examples of this are:

a) Action Plan to Improve Communicating Europe (European Commission, 2005b);
b) Plan-D for Democracy, Dialogue and Debate (European Commission, 2005a);
c) White Paper on a European Communication Policy (European Commission, 2006a);
d) Period of Reflection and the Plan D (European Commission, 2006b);
e) Communicating Europe in Partnership (European Commission, 2007a);
f) Debate Europe-Building on the experience of Plan D for Democracy, Dialogue and Debate (European Commission, 2008a).

In this chapter three different areas of policies which appear to be either directly or indirectly initiated and affected as a result of the period of reflection are assessed: improving the European Commission's communication and PR-work; emphasizing media pluralism in Europe; and promoting the European public sphere.

Improving the European Commission's PR activity

The documents mentioned above emphasize the necessity for reforming the communication and PR activities of the European Commission. The basic message is that the reason for the recent crisis of the EU does not rest on EU policies, but on their ineffective communication to the great European public. Obstacles to effective communication include especially the following:

a) The Commission's communication activities are criticized for being insufficiently coordinated and planned; the messages are

not linked to citizens' interests and needs, but instead, "current campaigns focus[ing] on the political elite and media and fail[ing] to portray the benefits and consequences for day-to-day life in a direct and understandable manner"; and the strategies are focused more on financing campaigns than developing dialogue and communication (European Commission, 2005a; European Commission, 2006b);

b) Constant tensions between the European Commission and the member states have been negatively reflected in the public debate: "Ending the blame-game, both by Member States and the European institutions, is an important change that must take place" (European Commission, 2005a);

c) The media has not played its part in promoting the European agenda, and vice versa. Media coverage of European issues "remains limited and fragmented": between the reporting of major events such as European Council meetings, there are periods when "there is no comprehensive cover of EU affairs". Regional and local newspapers "generally give little space to European issues". On television (TV) and radio, "time devoted to political information and to European issues is squeezed still further and competition for 'television space' has increased" (European Commission, 2006a).

The solution, as suggested in the documents, is rather obvious: the Commission's communication work must be improved, it should become more professional, more resources should be allocated to it and new methods and new technologies must be applied. All this is aimed at meeting and listening better to the needs and aspirations of European citizens:

> "The European Commission is therefore proposing a fundamentally new approach–a decisive move away from one-way communication to reinforced dialogue, from an institution-centred to a citizen-centred communication, from a Brussels-based to a more decentralised approach" (European Commission, 2006a)

By autumn 2008, a number of new methods of participation and communication activity had been designed and put into practice (see European Commission, 2008a).

More emphasis on media pluralism in Europe

As stated above, according to the 2006 White Paper, one of the reasons for the lack of popular support was the negative exposure given to European issues in the media, which resulted in a bad image of the EU. Recent interest in media pluralism in Europe can be perceived as an attempt to respond to these concerns. In January 2007 the European Commission announced a "three-step approach" to media pluralism. According to this approach:

> "the notion of media pluralism is much broader than media ownership; it covers access to varied information so citizens can form opinions without being influenced by one dominant source. Citizens also need transparent mechanisms that guarantee that the media are seen as genuinely independent" (European Commission, 2007b)

This approach was new on two counts. The issue has been a constant topic in different EU organs at least from the early 1990s (European Commission, 2005d; European Commission, 2007b: 4-5), but the Commission has not been sufficiently proactive in developing a clear policy on media pluralism as it closely concerns such sensitive issues as media ownership and media concentration. In spite of the growing transnational character of media ownership in the era of satellite-TV and Internet, its regulation traditionally has been left to the member states (Nesti, 2007). Secondly, and related to the above, is that traditionally authorities in general are reluctant to discuss issues that could be interpreted as attempts to interfere with the freedom of the press.

It is not clear where the three-step approach has led. The first step consisted of publication in January 2007 of the Commission's working paper setting the outlines for the discussion (European Commission, 2007b). The main aim seems to be to establish empirical indicators to measure the levels of pluralism in EU member countries. To this end, the second step consisted of the commissioning of a major independent study. The third step will be the establishment of indicators on the basis of a wide scale consultation process (European Commission, 2007b). There is no clear indication of how these indicators would be used, or what measures might follow from the results of the consultation.

Promoting the European public sphere

Although the main thrust of the documents described above is similar to that in many modern PR- and corporate communication manuals, they also include elements that go further and indicate the existence of a deeper understanding of the crises facing the EU. The White Paper on a European Communication Policy (2006a) discusses at some length the prospects for and necessity to create a European public sphere, endowed with such attributes as inclusiveness, diversity, participation, among others. However, development of the idea of a European public sphere is restricted almost exclusively to the White Paper; the other documents make only minor reference to it and do not explain or contextualize it further.

The attempt to bring to the debate on European communication policy Habermasian vocabulary as well as the normative-theoretical insights of deliberative democracy, is not accidental. The European Commission Vice-President, Margot Wallström, who is also Commissioner for Institutional Relations and Communication, echoed some of the interventions in the academic debate on the prospects for a European public sphere (see Risse, 2003; van de Steeg, 2002), when she stated in January 2007:

> "It would be very important, from the 'public sphere' perspective, that issues of common interest–for example energy security, climate change, social Europe–are discussed more or less at the same time, by people across the European Union, and possibly within a common framework of values" (Wallström, 2007)

In the same speech, she also joined the debate on communication rights, central to the ideals of deliberative democracy. In defining the values and principles that should guide the EU's communication activities, the starting point "can only be the citizens and their democratic rights", which she listed as follows:

> "The right to full and fair information about decisions that affect their lives, wherever they are taken;
> The right to hear and compare different opinions and points of views;
> The right to debate issues of common interest;
> The right to express their views and to be heard" (Wallström, 2007)

Unfortunately Margot Wallström has been a rather lone voice among the Commissioners. Since the publication of the White Paper in February 2006, public sphere has appeared only occasionally in the EU documents,