Probing the Public Sphere in Europe.
Theoretical Problems, Problems of Theory and Prospects for further Communication Research.

Paper for the First European Communication Conference
24.-26.11.2005, Amsterdam, NL

Version 1.0 (10.2005)

Marian Adolf
marian.adolf@univie.ac.at

Cornelia Wallner
cornelia.wallner@univie.ac.at

University of Vienna
Faculty of Social Sciences
Department of Communications
Schopenhauerstrasse 32
1180 Vienna – Austria
Abstract
Based on the theoretical and empirical knowledge about the European public sphere, we discuss the theoretical problems by reviewing different theoretical models, their normative implications and the consequences for empirical studies, who are characterized by an empirical heterogeneity. In the second part we focus on the problems of theory, especially on the question of avoiding to simply extend our notions of national democracy to the European level and the alienability of theories to the European Union. We discuss the three categories of actors of the public sphere and draw conclusions for further research. We give reasons for a re-definition of the relevant fields of discourse and a re-definition of media functions in a European context.

Introduction
In the wake of European integration various scientific debates regarding the European public sphere and deficits in both democracy and public sphere have unfolded. Empirical surveys conducted on european public sphere¹ are characterised by divergence of results; consistent findings as to the dimension and quality of public sphere which can be applied to the whole of Europe have yet to be made. The available evidence suggests that this derives from insufficient theoretical conceptualisations and definitions as well as vagueness regarding our empirical knowledge on public sphere. Moreover, surveys mainly focus on political public sphere; in media societies, however, public sphere does not necessarily and exclusively have a political aspect to it, but refers to various aspects of society. Consequently, theories and conceptualisations have to take into account social change. This leads to the conclusion that an elementary discourse - based upon theory - on public sphere in Europe is necessary in order to develop the kind of research with regard to the process of Europeanization which is orientated on social trends and development.
Both theoretical and empirical knowledge reveal the necessity and importance of such theoretical work.

Theoretical problems

Plural public spheres – mediated public spheres

Public sphere is viewed as a crucial part of social organisation and it can be understood as a precondition for structuring society. (see Saxer 2005: 24) The more complexly societies are structured, the more important are public communication processes for the reduction of this social complexity. (see Luhmann 1996) Hence, public sphere with regard to the mass media is of central importance, particularly in media societies. The European Union is such a media society because the media have gained power to shape society in European states to such an extent that the requirements of the ideal type “media society” have been met: “European public sphere therefore is media public sphere.” (Saxer 2005: 27)

Public sphere as a concept is difficult to grasp, and it is still lacking a clear definition. From a socio-scientific point of view, the term public sphere is used in a normative sense as well as in an empirical-analytical one. Even when applied empirically, a normative aspect is implied, for public sphere that can be found empirically is “always measured by theoretical ideals. Normative ideas are not to be separated from the term public sphere; in scientific surveys they implicitly form its basis.” (Donges/Imhof 2001: 104) The normative quality inherent in the various approaches of detailed examination of European public sphere constitutes an important issue to be debated in Europeanization research in the communication sciences.

Neidhardt’s attempt to define public sphere has taken root, as a lowest common denominator it is capable of constituting a starting point for discussion: “Public sphere appears as an open forum for communication for those who express ideas and those who want to hear what others
have to say.” (Neidhardt 1994: 7). Here, the fact that boundaries of audiences can generally not be determined by the speaker is a vital criterion of public sphere (see Neidhardt 1994: 10).

Putting together several findings of surveys conducted on European public sphere, there is one single assumption that becomes apparent as common sense: European public sphere can only be described and assessed as a dynamic process and as public spheres rather than public sphere. (see Saxer 2005: 21) This assumption refers to the “arena model” of public sphere as well as to the organisation of communication processes.

The fact that public sphere is a dynamic process derives from public communication being structured into In-, Through- and Output. “Public sphere here is a system of communication where issues and opinions are being gathered (Input), processed (Throughput) and passed on (Output).” (Neidhardt 1994: 8)

The arena model identifies different arenas of public sphere which are formed by issues and opinions; observers and persons involved such as speakers, intermediaries and recipients actively participate in different arenas and levels of public sphere. (see Donges/Imhof 2001: 108ff) The importance of this most trivial conclusion will become significant in the subsequent chain of arguments. (see later)

Literature distinguishes three levels of public sphere: 1. media public sphere, which is complex and primarily communicated by the mass media, 2. public sphere with regard to issues and assembly such as forums and a “citizen public sphere” (medium public sphere) and 3. a simple or encounter public sphere, structured as an interpersonal level of public sphere. (see Donges/Imhof 2001: 106ff)² The number of forums of communication decreases from simple to complex forms of public sphere; decision-making powers and authority, however, increase. (see Klaus 2005) Mass-media public sphere is therefore characterised by the mass
media being a forum of communication and by a multitude of participants – of which fewer persons are actively involved.

It is obvious that the current state of research can no longer take “the” public sphere as a basis but has to be aware of multiple public spheres and has to understand mass-media public sphere as a part of the public sphere. Subordinate and direct forms of public sphere must not be disregarded; with regard to modern democracies medium public spheres play only “a minor role”, but they are of “major importance for persons involved in the public sphere who have not yet gained access to the mass media.” (Neidhardt 1994: 10) Even simple public spheres have significance for the process of opinion making, the processes of communication and for social organisation. This has to be taken into account particularly with regard to the thickening of communication and to new communication technologies which draw the attention to the micro level and to individual communication. Therefore it can be stated that mass-media communication in modern societies is the form of communication that, “even though being the immediately apparent one, is not the most powerful variant when it comes to shaping the way how Europeans live together.” (Saxer 2005: 34)

Europeanization research in the communication sciences has to start off at the level of the mass media, since they make the public sphere become a stable determining social and political dimension. Therefore it is inevitable for public sphere research to perceive itself as mass media research.” (Neidhardt 1994: 10)

**Functions of public spheres – Functions of mass media**

From a democracy-theoretical point of view public sphere – in media societies mass-media public sphere – performs crucial functions for society. (see Neidhardt 1994: 10) This can also
be applied to the European Union, which comprises complex societies - different as to their functions – which have been morphing into media societies. (see Saxer 1998)

Independent of their normative perspective, theories on democracy view the public sphere as a precondition for providing information and therefore as a precondition to enable formulation of will – a prerequisite of democratic processes. (see Dahl 2000: 37) To provide information is the predominate function of the public sphere.

Democracy as the core value of social organisation and therefore also of the European Union implies that “societies can affect themselves. In order to do so a political understanding of ‘their’ society is obligatory for citizens so that they can perceive a common political scope; a system of policy which is able to erase deficits regarding social order via decisions which are generally applicable and mandatory is necessary whenever problems between parts of modern societies emerge. (…) Public sphere is the precondition for both citizens’ political understanding of society and the fact that these citizen societies affect themselves. Only in this public sphere society in a political sense can be observed and be created by intervention. This requires the scope of politics as well as society and public sphere to overlap.” (Imhof 2004: 40) Political figures are being observed by citizens via the public sphere, which – from a theoretical point of view – ensures the responsibility of those in charge to those who are subordinated. (see Gerhards 2002: 138) In modern democracies such an observation is undertaken by the public sphere via the mass media. “Only the mass media make constant observation of politics by the citizens possible; neither form of presence public sphere can handle this task.” (Gerhards 2002: 138) Mass media are forums of public communication and, together with mass-media public sphere, they perform crucial functions from a democracy-political point of view.
Further, more specific functions can be distinguished with regard to the model of public sphere as a dynamic process; however, they are valued differently by different theories. A crucial function of public sphere is to make processes more transparent (transparency function). This is with regard to a public sphere which is “of great importance for all social groups as well as issues and opinions.” (Neidhardt 1994: 8) From the point of view of both the liberal and discursive public sphere, this function has to be performed on the subject of the input level since this ensures the flow of information. However, different theories make different demands as to the degree of transparency. According to constructivism different social groups have varying chances of participation, depending on their position of power within society. (see Ferree/Gamson/Gerhards/Rucht 2002: 308)

The other two functions of public sphere which Neidhardt mentions already imply normative demands. The function of validation in the sense of a discursive debate of issues and opinions as well as a possible revision of one’s own opinion on the level of the throughput provides the possibility of a rational formulation of will – and thus a discursive understanding of public sphere. (see Neidhardt 1994: 8) According to Luhmann, rational formulation of will is not possible in the liberal model of public sphere. Likewise, from the point of view of a discursive model, an orientation function of the public sphere is only to be found and desirable in reality: “Public communication, which is carried out in a discursive way by people involved in the public sphere, creates “public opinions” which can be perceived as convincing and acceptable by the audience. Insofar as “public opinions” do have this authority, they perform a function of orientation which is politically effective.” (Neidhardt 1994: 9) Popular sovereignty is ensured by “public opinion” - the output of public sphere. (Habermas 1992: 209)

There are even more functions of the mass media concerning the political field of society which can be identified. Already taking the functions within the European Union into
account, Koopmans/Erbe mention a *legitimation function*, which the mass media perform for the political system: “(…) policies have to be made visible by the mass media, and it is in this public forum that they may gain (or fail to obtain) public resonance and legitimacy.” (Koopmans/Erbe 2003: 1) Not only do the media have the function to inform citizenry about politics, but also vice versa. This corresponds to a function of intermediation. Literature has this included in the *function of articulation* (see Burkart 2002: 393f) and it generally refers to the articulation of opinion as *forum function*. (see Bonfadelli 2001: 39). Koopmans/Erbe characterise this as *responsiveness function*, “(…) European policy-makers must depend for their information about the desires and concerns of the citizenry on the communicative channels of the mass media.” (Koopmans/Erbe 2003: 1f) As a third function of mass-media public sphere within the European Union the *accountability function* is mentioned. It is of vital significance for shaping public opinion since the citizens do not have direct access to the EU, but only one that is communicated by the mass media. This function also implies a discursive approach to public sphere, as opinions should be created via the public sphere. Similar to that is the mass media’s function of political socialisation, which is supposed to ensure the intermediation of political processes in highly differentiated societies. (see Burkart 2002: 294; Bonfadelli 2001: 39) The last function Koopmans/Erbe mention is the *participation function*. (Koopmans/Erbe 2003: 2) It refers to the general criterion of public sphere identified by Neidhardt, namely a public sphere “for everyone” and which is also supposed to boost political participation. (see Bonfadelli 2001: 39) Koopmans/Erbe fail to mention the *function of criticising and controlling* with regard to the European Union; The mass media can put political figures under pressure by investigating and publishing irregularities and therefore they perform a crucial political function. (see Bonfadelli 2001: 39) Despite a mass-media public sphere in the EU which might be poorly developed it has proven that the media perform this function also on a political level within the EU. (see Meyer’s remarks on the European Commission’s resignation in 1999, Meyer O. 2003)
Theoretical and empirical surveys on public sphere within the European Union primarily focus on the mass media’s political functions and their contributions towards democratic EU politics. As will be shown later we think that Europeanization research in the communication sciences has to go beyond reducing the functions of the mass media within the EU to their political functions only. Rather, further central social functions and contributions of the media have to be taken into account when examining European public sphere.

At this stage it has to be pointed out that there is a distinction between theories regarding democracy and theories regarding the public sphere. Empirical figures suggest irregularities when these two approaches are mixed. (see Ferree/Gamson/Gerhards/Rucht 2002) Although these two approaches are connected to each other, their subject of examination is a different one: “Democratic theories focuses on accountability and responsiveness in the decision-making process; theories of the public sphere focus on the role of public communication in facilitating or hindering this process.” (Ferree/Gamson/Gerhards/Rucht 2002: 289)

Diversity of Theories

The two significant gateways to public sphere are the discursive and system theory models. Both basically assume that the public sphere should have access to the provision of information but adopt different positions in respect of the configuration and function of society. These essentially different models of public sphere can be further delineated based on theories of democracy. Even with this fine differentiation, significant differences in assumptions as to the extent of public sphere (see Neidhardt 2005), the quality of public sphere, participants, communication between participants, the conditions of public sphere processes as well as the desirable consequences of public sphere (see
A representative liberal and participatory liberal theory of public sphere as ideal models can be developed incorporating the liberal model in its assumptions whereby the representative model displays a strong emphasis on elites (see Ferree/Gamson/Gerhards/Rucht 2002: 295). The system theory model also known as liberal model (or “mirror-model”, Spiegelmodell) of public sphere is derived from Luhmann’s system theory and recognises public sphere as an opportunity for self-observation and reflection on social part-systems. Mass media makes self-observation of society possible through public sphere, however, according to Luhmann, a rational process of understanding through public communication is unlikely. Therefore no normative value can be attached to mass-media discourses. Liberal public sphere models are “normatively modest”, containing only “the requirement for openness on the input side (…) while no demands are made relative to discursive validation and orientation through argumentation. The only decisive factor from this viewpoint is that all participants and opinions are reflected in the “Mirror public sphere” and that self-observation is not compromised by the exclusion of individual groups or opinions” (Imhof 2003: 202).

In contrast, according to Habermas, the discursive model of public sphere does see a function of public sphere in rational decision-making through public debate and learning processes, which form the basis for communication processes and rational decision making. (see Gerhards 2002; see Wimmel 2005: 7f) The discursive theory is similar to the participatory model in respect of assumptions of citizens participation in public sphere as well as numerous opinions, “popular inclusion” being a central criteria in both. However the discursive model deals with a communication process, which ultimately leads to rational decision-making. (see Ferree/Gamson/Gerhards/Rucht 2002: 300ff)

Essentially, the empirical analyses of both models are based on the same theoretical question, namely the information output of the mass media. In the next step the models become
normative. The system theory model assumes that public information processes and expressions of opinion do not contribute to rational decision making, consequently the actual discussion content is insignificant and the normativeness refers to the number of discourses. The discursive model does demand a certain quality of discourse, thereby becoming normative in its judgement of the quality of the discourses (see Gerhards 1997 for a comprehensive comparison of the liberal and discursive public sphere models). These different approaches place very different demands for the empirical analysis of public sphere.

A constructive model of public sphere refers specifically to the different power relationships of the participants and the implications for participation opportunities, discourse formats and themes. Consequently proponents of this model argue that a multiplicity of public spheres is preferable to a single, common one. “Dialogue in a single public sphere is not necessarily as desirable as autonomous and separate cultural domains, or “free spaces” in which individuals may speak together supportively and develop their identities free of the conformity pressures of the mainstream.” (Ferree/Gamson/Gerhards/Rucht 2002: 309). The changing spokespeople affect not only the subjects but also the type of discourse and therefore the results of the discourse.

In accordance with the differentiation of who participates, in what sort of process, how ideas should be presented and outcome of relation between discourse and decision-making requirements for both these public sphere models can be derived in an ideal sense. Ferree/Gamson/Gerhards/Rucht are examining the composition of public sphere in Germany and the US along these lines and evaluate the discourses according to specific criteria. This evaluation enables them to allocate these two countries to one of the corresponding public sphere models, thereby judging public sphere based on theory. (see Ferree/Gamson/Gerhards/Rucht 2002: 316) The authors note that they regard this
methodology of a comparative analysis of the type and quality of public sphere as applicable to other areas or comparative studies as appropriate.

These theoretically numerous and differing normative demands appear to point to the possibility of very differing empirical research models. But even at a more basic level than that of the theory, the empirical research must determine the selection of the subject to be researched.

**European Public Sphere – Europeanisation of National Public Spheres**

In the communication field of Europeanisation research there must be differentiation between Europeanisation of national media public spheres, a European public sphere as well as Pan-European public sphere and segmented Supra-National public spheres.

A **European public sphere** is understood to mean a public sphere spanning sovereign states with a common media system; in this case the same media and contents would be available across Europe. (see Wimmel 2005: 5) Koopmanns/Erbe describe this form of public sphere as “supranational European public sphere constituted by the interaction among European-level institutions and collective actors around European themes, ideally accompanied by (and creating the basis for) the development of European-wide mass media.” (Koopmanns/Erbe 2003:6) Sometimes this form of public sphere is also called a “Pan-European public sphere.” (see Saxer 2005; see Eilders/Voltmer 2003: 251f)

Several pre-conditions have to be met for this form of public sphere to be realised, namely a common language, spoken by the majority of EU citizens in order to fulfil the public sphere criteria to present a generally accessible forum. Furthermore a European-wide media system would have to develop or at least a European-wide medium to begin with. This is unlikely from an economic standpoint for the moment, as the target group for such a medium is too
small for it to operate cost-effectively. (see Pfetsch 2004) A current line of discussion is that there exists no European public sphere, as there is no communication community based on a common language. (see Kielmansegg 1996)

Combined with the various theoretical public sphere models, two divergent forms of such a European public sphere emerge. A *European-wide common media public sphere based on system theory*, which would represent a common source of information to base political opinions on and a *European-wide discursive common media public sphere*, which would require European-wide discourses in addition to European-wide common information, can be differentiated. (see Wimmel 2005:9f)

The *Europeanisation of national public sphere media* signifies the point of focus of European themes in national public spheres and requires fewer pre-conditions to be met than a common European public sphere. National media systems have already been developed so media offers are available and there are no language problems as they are published in the appropriate national language. The investigation of the Europeanisation of national public sphere media has established itself in empirical research, proponents of this direction argue “that established nationally organised mass-media *could serve* as an equivalent to an overall European public sphere media.” (Wimmel 2005: 6) The realisation of such a Europeanisation demands certain content criteria from the national media offers, at the core of which is that “relationships of communication are increasingly Europeanised i.e. when European political themes and political actors increase in national public spheres while the national themes and actors decline. That means when the opinion forming processes become more open within the individual countries and when themes and actors are discussed, which affect Europe and other countries.” (Pfetsch 2004: 6) Key is the differentiation between discourses from a sovereign state perspective developing into a EU perspective, which would constitute a supra-national
European public sphere on the basis of sovereign state media and discourses on EU themes, which are discussed at national level in the mass-media public sphere and are therefore not considered under European meaning structures (see Risse/Steeg 2003:16) Criteria of such public sphere would be a high degree of salience of European issues; similar frames of reference and meaning structures across national public spheres; mutual awareness of each other in a supra-national space.” (Risse/Steeg 2003: 16)

Possible forms can in turn be derived along the lines of the theory. A model of a European-wide national media public sphere, based on system theory would mean, “information on European political issues, programmes and positions would be imparted with satisfactory intensity in a number of national media public spheres.” (Wimmel 2005: 10), the examination of this form of public sphere can only be carried out from a country-comparative perspective as no common standard of a “satisfactory intensity” could be established. (Wimmel 2005: 10) A Europeanisation as a “continuous increase of European references on the media agenda” can be established in “time comparison, country comparison or in comparison to a number of political areas,” (Eilders/Voltmer 2003: 255) in the from of an examination of “European reporting by the media compared to reporting of local, national or global issues.” (Risse 2002: 16) An “appropriate level” of Europeanisation cannot be measured in absolute values. It is therefore a question of determining the information quantity of European reporting and thereby the extent to which citizens are informed about Europe.

For example Gerhards has carried out a comparison of Europeanisation of reporting over time. He examines the national media public sphere in Germany in regard of Europeanisation with which he takes this to mean “a) the categorisation of European issues and actors in national public spheres on the one hand and b) evaluation of issues and actors from a non sovereign state perspective” and thereby bases his investigation on a liberal model of public sphere. He concludes that no clear trend to a supra-nationalisation of public sphere can be
discerned, European issues carry the least importance compared to other supra-national issues and an analysis of the actors demonstrates that it is mainly sovereign state actors who are centre stage and that a sovereign state perspective dominates discussion of European issues. One cannot therefore talk of Europeanisation. (see Gerhards 2002: 295f)

The second possibility is to nominate *Europeanised discursive national media public sphere*, which would require a “cross-border exchange of opinions between actors.” (see Wimmel 2005: 10) Based purely on the quantity of European reporting this examines information quality and method of reporting. Discourse structures and discourse quality can thereby be examined. (see Wimmel 2005: 15)

The application of this model is very un-uniform, e.g. Eder/Kantner see the presence of public sphere when European issues or actors are centre stage in a number of national media “(…) when the same (European) issues are discussed at the same time from the same relevant points of view in national forums.” (Eder/Kantner 2002: 4) Consequently, discourse at the EU level would only be assured when citizens “can form opinions on the same issues of the same relevance at the same time.” (Eder/Kantner 2002: 6) Eder/Kantner e.g. found a European public sphere in their empirical investigation. Risse on the other hand does not recognise the applied indicators as characteristics of a discursive European public sphere. (see Risse 2002: 16f) Van de Steeg additionally assumes a level of discourse reference, applied to actors from different EU countries through mutual reference. (see Steeg 2003)

These procedures are criticised by Wimmel amongst others, whereby “(…) the significant characteristic of a European discursive public sphere must be its supra-national extent.” (Wimmel 2005: 11) Consequently only those discourses are to be regarded as European discourses, where “a number of actors from different countries discuss European political issues together (…)” (Wimmel 2005:12), in other words where an opening up of communication lines for supra-national references takes place. A key examination criterion would be the mutual reference of the actors to each other, which is not the case for Wimmel
in the approach to date to discursive European national media public sphere. (see Wimmel 2005: 12)

Current empirical research requires that public sphere must be characterised by “the same issues at the same time” as important criteria. “Same criteria of relevance” are also decisive for a European public sphere. (see Risse/Steeg 2003: 16f) A consensus is emerging that the analysis of the discourse structure is focused on vertical and horizontal Europeanisation. (see Trenz 2005: 192) Vertical Europeanisation means the “communicative linkages between the national and European level”, which can be differentiated in a “bottom-up” process “in which national actors address European actors and/or make claims on European issues” and a “bottom-down” process “in which European actors intervene in national policies and public debated in the name of European regulations and common interests.” (Koopmanns/Erbe 2003: 6; similar see Koopmanns/Pfetsch 2003: 13f) Horizontal Europeanisation focuses on the “communicative linkages between different member states.” (Koopmanns/Erbe 2003: 6) Koopmanns/Erbe as well as Koopmanns/Pfetsch distinguish between weak and strong horizontal Europeanisation. Weak Europeanisation means that “the media in one country covers debates and contestations in another member state, but there is no linkage between the countries in the structure of claims-making itself.” (Koopmanns/Erbe 2003: 6) Strong Europeanisation means that “actors from one country explicitly address or refer to actors or policies in another member state.” (Koopmanns/Erbe 2003: 6f) In the current research by Brantner/Dietrich/Sauerwein this strong Europeanisation is regarded as a “conglomerate” from of Europeanisation, permitting a finer differentiation in the empirical analysis. “Conglomerate communicative linkages also critically demand vertical linkages but which are complemented by horizontal-supra-national communicative linkages. For example, that the Austrian media should include the views of at least one other member state on a political question concerning the EU or that the Austrian media should report on political debate
within the EU (for instance the constitutional issue in France) without reference to Austrian actors or positions”. (Brantner/Dietrich/Saurwein 2005: 36)

A further possible form of public sphere are the “**segmented supra-national public sphere issues**” based on the assumption that a European public sphere can be constituted on single issues, which are limited in time or not available to all citizens (elite-public sphere). One can also differentiate here between a liberal model and a discursive model; in the first instance such a public sphere would be a given if a particular issue receives publicity for a period of time. In the second instance this publicity must additionally be characterised by European-wide discourses.

This is found again in empirical investigations as investigation of issue specific discourses, dealing with “definable part public spheres on specific issues”. (Eilders/Voltmer 2003: 252) The problem from a democratic perspective is that “the majority of citizens” would be excluded “from participation in the political discourse as it is an elite communication.” (Eilders/Voltmer 2003: 253) The constitution of an issue specific public sphere is focussed on a limited audience and interested expert domains. For example, Eilders/Voltmer only see a “broad European public sphere” in the Europeanisation of national public spheres model (see Eilders/Voltmer 2003: 253)

If one does not regard these two models (European public sphere and Europeanisation of national media public spheres) as an “either/or” choice but views the development of European public spheres as a process (see Eilders/Voltmer 2003: 255) then one can assume – according to Pfetsch – that the Europeanisation of national media public spheres is a precursor for a common European public sphere. The basis of the argument is the interaction between national and supra-national levels of public sphere. “National discursive forums are not
isolated from the outside world, but are receptive to new ideas to varying degrees” (see Eilders/Voltmer 2003: 254)

In short, Europeanisation of national media and the resultant access to European issues and discourses can create receptive interest so that a potential demand develops allowing potential European-wide media to operate cost-effectively and thus establish a common European-wide media public sphere. (see Pfetsch 2004: 6)

Empirical Heterogeneity

Although a certain agreement to research Europeanisation of national media public spheres has developed, it is still unclear how public sphere in Europe should look, which normative criteria should apply and consequently what input is appropriate for this research. The criteria described, which a national public sphere must fulfil in order to be regarded as a supra-national public sphere with a European linkage, represent the beginnings of common sense in empirical research (and application), but are in no way generally accepted or undisputed.

Accordingly the results of the research on the existence or non-existence of public sphere in Europe are very divergent. (see Gerhards 2002) Part of the empirical work done implies the existence of a European public sphere, viewed positively by some, another part of the research sees this as accomplished by the Europeanisation of national public sphere, while yet another part does not recognise any European public sphere. (see Neidhardt 2005)

Varying theory inputs with varying normative assumptions are to be seen alongside equally varying empirical research work. “At the centre of the arising debate was the question as to what characteristics actually defined a European media public sphere and function they should fulfil. Broad agreement could only be reached on the limitation of issues: it is generally assumed that discussion of a “European Media public sphere” is only meaningful if
European political issues in general and freely available forums, in other words in the mass-media, are communicated. In what structural form these European political issues should be communicated precisely in order to fulfil the expectations linked to the concept of a European public sphere, was and remains hotly contested” (Wimmel 2005: 5) Similar findings by Risse pointed to the fact that there was little agreement in the debate on European public sphere “which actually constitutes democratic public sphere as to how a European public sphere should look if it is to fulfil democratic requirements – and which criteria and indicators would allow us to find out if it existed or not” (Risse 2002:15)

The major differences in the empirical studies are mainly due to the unclear definition of the research subject (actors, form of public sphere, issues etc), in particular the term “European”. (see Neidhardt 2005) As a result of various initial theories a different normative is applied to evaluate public sphere and possible shortcomings, dependent on which theory is used. (Gerhards 2002: 136) Conceptually in empirical research, a European media public sphere stands alongside Europeanisation of national media public spheres, complemented by research of issue specific media public spheres. The descriptive examination of the content stands alongside the research of discourses, whereby the discourses are studied not only in regard of their structure but also the quality of their content. The choice of research material determines further artefacts – although research of quality media, particularly print media, dominates. The application follows finally but when speaking of a “European linkage” in reporting in a variety of ways – some authors regard European, not national actors as the criteria, others again the reference of national spokespeople to European and not national issues. This heterogenity can be established on the basis of the theories and consequently leads to an empirical heterogenity and thereby to empirical data, which may be valid as individual results considering their respective specifications but do not however permit a comparability within Europe or comprehensive evidence of the existence of a European public sphere. Therefore the following conclusion on the current Europeanisation
communication research is to be noted: “Different concepts of a public sphere inevitably result in different empirical indicators how to measure it which leads to almost incompatible data.” (Risse/Steeg 2003: 1)

Theoretical problems thereby lead to empirical ones, the disagreement on the theoretical level leading to disagreement on subjects, to disagreement on use of terminology and finally to varying concepts on European public sphere – which is increased in the initial theoretical starting points by the lack of a form of words for the empirical results. (see Saxer 2005; see Neidhard 2005) In view of the differing empirical concepts, it can be questioned whether we are really researching that public sphere, which we are looking for?

**Problems of Theory**

Following these arguments, we want to raise the question, how the public sphere could be constituted at the European level. According to Saxer we can pose, “which contribution mediated public sphere in particular makes to a democratic European coexistence.” (Saxer 2005: 36), which contribution the mass mediated public sphere should make?, wherein we find their specific qualities for the European societies? as a central question for further research on Europeanisation in communication studies. Thus the core question is for the functions and contributions of the mass media in Europe.

It is a fundamental problem of the work on theory, that a transformation of consisting theories to the European level is possible only conditionally, because they are designed for the national level. How can we avoid to simply extent our notions of national democracy to the European level? Hence, we regard an increased consideration of the social framework and
change processes as a core link for the scientific research on Europeanisation in communication studies.

**Post-national State Theoretical Work**

Due to the European integration process the national societies receive a further frame of reference, their fields of political responsibility are changing, a separation of many processes from the nation-state occurs. The Regulatory competences in many policy fields have been transferred to the EU. In short, the nation-states underlie a strong exogenous and endogenous change. From these political and economical dynamics of developments follows that the conventional notion of public spheres has to be reconsidered. (see Saxer 2005: 21) Also the imputations of functions to the media emerged on the national level, they can act as a starting point for the identification of the functions of the mediated public sphere on the European level, though they should be discussed regarding their actuality and sufficiency for an European public sphere and the European Society(-ies).

The conjunction of politics with public sphere so far was realised in the context of nation-states. “Within this construct of the organisation (of the nation-state; CW) the connection between a nation-state, which is based on a legal system with the idea of the nation occurred.” (Imhof 2002: 206) This process took place through and with the development of a political public sphere that refers to the political ambit on the nation-state level. Due to the transnationalisation of politics and economy, it comes to a successive abolition of previous national boundaries and thus to an expansion of the potential public sphere. This is followed by a (partial) dissociation of the public sphere from national boundaries.
At large the dynamics of development at the nation-state level as well as at the European level of society have fundamental effects on structure and function of the public sphere. A transformation of existing theories to the European level requires a severe examination, due to the fact that they were developed within the national context and due to the fact that the European Union could not be equated with nation-states. As its constitution is entirely different from the traditional notion of national democracies the European Union could be regarded as a further step of development of the political and societal organisation. The outcome of this is our second connecting factor: the enlargement of discourse fields.

Enlargement of Discourse Fields

Empirical research so far is characterised by probing quantity and quality of the political public sphere. The general conditions of society are in a changing process, societies mutate to media societies, the public itself as well as the comprehension of citizenship is changing. These mutations lead us to the thesis, that focussing the political public sphere only is no longer up to date.

In media societies mediated communication is rated highly, the media is variously institutionalized (see Saxer 1997: 21) and have changed from mediating agencies to independent actors. Based on Saxer media societies are characterized as societies, in which media communication as communication via technical resources achieved an ubiquitously reach and became a “soziales Totalphänomen” (Marcel Mauss), is present on a national as well as on a world-wide level, where media communication develops a multifaceted capacity. (see Saxer 1998: 53) Our knowledge of society is based on media content, public sphere and the space of discourse are provided in and by the media. Societal developments are reflected in media content as well as they are engendered by the media. As a consequence, mass media
can be denoted as “motors” for societal developments. This is also valid for the societies in the European Union and it is obvious, that the various cultural and social functions of the massmedia fulfilled on a national level (see e.g. Bonfadelli 2001: 39; Burkart 2002: 368ff) may also occur on a European level. In our point of view the media functions have to be discussed within a European context, the results may lead to an extension and a re-definition of the fields of discourse for research on europeanisation.

The necessity of such a discussion arises also because of the changes of the public. Democracy and the public are linked closely together, but the public is not only political. They go together on a social level as well. “The public is not politics and economy, but the (political and economically co-determined) forum of communication about politics, economy and many others.” (Neidhardt 1994: 16)

The change of the public leads to a modification and a partial break-up of the borders between the public and the private (see Arendt 1958/2003; Habermas 1962/1990; Klaus 2001) and therefore to a structural change of the original purely political public. The mediated public sphere is linked with many other social areas – the public sphere not does not only hold political functions.

At the same time the understanding of citizenship is changing, the originally trisection of civil, political and social citizenship becomes enlarged by cultural citizenship. Cultural citizenship focuses on the meanings of culture for the citizens and refers to “the historical and social determined repertoire of symbolical meaning- and interpretation capabilities, which are at the citizens’ disposal in a nation or world-society.” (Klaus/Lünenborg 2004: 197)

In media societies the mediated public sphere provides the main access to cultural resources and they are reflected in the political process – in contrast to the original nation the citizens are proactive in a specific culturally contextualised perspective. Cultural citizenship is mainly induced by the media, on an information level as well as on an entertainment level, which
interfere with different concepts of life and mediate ideas for the formation of a cultural – hence civic – feeling of affiliation. (see Klaus/Lünenborg 2004: 197ff)

As a consequence, research on public sphere cannot be limited to democratic theories only, but also has to consider other areas of the public sphere in respect to their democratic functions. Equally Saxer, whereupon a restriction to the two models – a discoursive and a deliberative public sphere – would be an abridgement and would ignore substantially the social mutations. (see Saxer 2005: 25)

A central contracting point for the needful theoretical discussion is the analysis of the functions of the mediated public sphere for the European Union. Such functions have to be further reaching than the political functions and have to take into account the cultural and social functions of the mediated public sphere in Europe – in particular they have to refer to the entertainment content.

Taking all this together we suggest an extension of the relevant fields of discourse, based on political public and taking account of other levels of the public sphere for further communication studies.

We want to substantiate this thesis also from an other perspective, namely by a short discussion of the democratic deficit and the lack of public sphere and a contingently identity deficit in the European Union.

**Analysis of the three Categories of Actors**

Based on the model of Neidhardt, we can distinguish between three groups of actors along the communication process, speakers, the media, and the recipients. They all have to have a minimum of interest on a public sphere at their disposal. An analysis of the several actors
enables us to structure the coherences between the public, democracy, identity and possible deficits and substantiates our theses, that an enlargement of the relevant fields of discourse is profitable for further research.

Speakers

This level is closely linked to the democratic deficit, whereupon the structures of political decisions and the non-direct election system of the commission lead to little incentives of the political actors for communication with the European citizens. According to Gerhards, the main reason is based on the fact, that the political actors are not forced to solicit support for their decisions and do not need to electioneer, because they are not linked directly to the citizens in terms of elections or referendums. (see Gerhards 2002: 154) The political constitution leads to a low interest in the mediated public sphere and transnational communication, which explains “the deficits in self-expression of the political instance of the EU.” (Pfetsch 2004: 11) Gerhards draws the conclusion, that the lack of public sphere is “downstreamed” to the democratic deficit. “A democratization of the EU (…) would relieve the public sphere deficit probably mostly.” (Gerhards 2002: 154) Such an democratization would require majority-decisions, which many authors see implementable only, if they are based on a European identity and if the citizens have individual incentives to participate on elections – because of the heterogenity and the enlargement of the EU that might not be the case. (see Gerhards 2002: 154f)

However, as stated in the literature the democracy deficit is not the only crucial factor for the public sphere. (see e.g. Trenz 2005: 188) Also media companies and recipients must have an interest in the mediated public sphere. Thereby the discussion about an European identity has to be added to the discussion about the public sphere and the democracy deficit. The consciousness of identity is next to the public sphere a basic condition for democratic
organisation. “The democratic constitution of political policy is based on three fundamentals: the dissociation of the political territory and membership, the contingency and common made praxis of political communication – which has the function of extensive information brokerage and opinion-forming – and the definition of a corresponding consciousness for affiliation and community. This defines (...) three dimensions of social integration (…).” (Trenz/Klein/Koopmans 2003: 8)

Legitimation and integration are necessary as structuration processes for socially organisation (Giddens 1997: 335f) and “the public sphere is the communicative state these processes are getting started and keep persisting.” (Saxer 2005: 24) According to this, Saxer means, that integration can be understood as a “superordinated demand of problem solving” (“übergeordneter Problemlösungsbedarf”). (see Saxer 2005: 24)

In media societies the mediated public sphere is the central condition for the creation of identities. As a crucial connecting factor results, that the mediated public sphere in the European Union has not only political but also social functions.

Now we have to respond to the question, in which way an identity consciousness of the European public is – apparently from political participation – connected to the public sphere.

Recipients

First, it must be noted that the citizens as recipients are not to be understood to be the minority elite public sphere, but refers to the broad mass of recipients, as interpreted as the ideal situation in democracy theories.

It applies that at the level of the recipients, a “minimum activity level” on the side of the recipients must be evidenced for the constitution of mass-media public sphere. The motivation to participate in public sphere depends on the interests of the recipients. (see Neihardt 1994: 11f). This motivation is co-determined by identification with the public sphere
issues, which in turn influences awareness of public communication and issue preferences (see Gerhards 2002:152) and so points to the importance of identity in European public sphere. Citizens must be interested in Europe and thereby in participating in communication. “There must therefore be a minimum of community belief and feeling of togetherness amongst people that can create a common linkage to communication. It is therefore a question of a European identity.” (Pfetsch 2004: 7)

Political decision making structures can only be democratic in as far as they are actually applied in social behaviour by citizens – as they also constitute public sphere and identity through social behaviour. (see Trenz/Klein/Koopmanns 2003: 10; see Risse/Steeg 2003) The social behaviour necessary for democracy is established by the inter-relation of identity and sovereign state public sphere. Within sovereign states, public sphere is formed in relation to the sovereign state and thereby also in relation to national democracy and statehood – characterised by a physically defined territory, citizenship, often also through language or homogenous ethnicity as well the developing public sphere, which all act to strengthen identity. (see Imhof 2002: 40)

At the EU level these preconditions of statehood and therefore identity are not as prevalent as in sovereign states. Discourses on the European integration process always end up with the question of the creation of a collective identity of the European citizen, a so-called “we feeling”. Two separate views can be discerned. “For some, it is an indispensable requirement to be able to join in democratic behaviour through a collective identity of integrated citizenship. For others however, the feeling of identity of a democrat with political self-determination only comes about through growing democratic practice.” (Trenz/Klein/Koopmanns 2003: 12) A substantial model is therefore aligned alongside a procedural model (see Habermas 2001: 12f) The creation of a European identity is seen as a precondition for a democratisation and integration process on the one hand, which is to promoted through politics. (see Habermas 2004: 68ff) On the other hand, identity is seen as a
possible but not necessarily inevitable consequence of the political and economic integration process, which are not mandatory as such for the operation of economic and political spheres. The idea is also propounded that the EU “only” needs a political identity not a cultural one – such a political identity must be promoted by active politics however. For Meyer, political identity is “(...) a project and a production process. It must be organised and consciously driven forward particularly through a politicisation of European politics.” (Meyer 2004: 233) As a significant precondition in the “process of political identity formation” he sees “a living political public sphere that stretches as far as the political sovereignty sphere itself to which the expectation of identity formation is linked.” (Meyer T. 2004: 56) In both cases, the agents of change are the mass-media – from a theoretical view an agent on the purely political level or as agent in social, cultural and „life-world“ (lebensweltlicher) regard. Even if the expert opinion on the role of mass-media on the creation of identity is not uniform (see Saxer 2005) it can nevertheless be assumed that the media is a contributory factor. (see Imhof 2002; see Klaus/Luenenborg 2004) The concept of identity must briefly be addressed at the European level, as it cannot be assumed that identities formed by sovereign states are to be absorbed into a European identity and sovereign states will not lose their importance. “The power of identity of nationally established society cannot be replaced by a new European systems. Simultaneously, sovereign states are being Europeanised and with that also the identity criteria of sovereign states.” (Lepsius 2004: 5) Rather it is to be assumed that it will transform into multiple identities as a result of changing society (see Saxer 2005: 26) or “multi-option society”. (see Gross 1995) In doing so, a European identity can form part of a citizen’s identity. Similarly, the theory of the creation of a “hybrid identity”, which means that “opposing meanings and action logic resulting from separate action spheres can be brought together in new patterns in which the contradictory reference points remain visible and effective.” (Kohli 2002: 128) This reference level of a European identity also plays a part in discussion on post-national identity or “supra-
national identities”, which assumes that new reference levels of identity creation run parallel to supra-national dominance. (Kaelble/Kirsch/Schmidt-Gering 2002: 25f)

Currently, a lack of identity in the EU can be established along with a public sphere and democracy deficit. (see Imhof 2002: 52) Habermas has established that “today, the answer to the question of the existence of a European identity is negative. But the question is incorrectly put. It is a question as to whether the preconditions can be met so that citizens can expand their national solidarity beyond their respective borders to achieve inter-relational inclusion.” (Habermas 2004: 76) This poses the question to communication science namely such an expansion of solidarity in accordance with communication preconditions and the function of mass media.

One can surmise that the inter-relationship between public sphere and identity is significant in many ways. The interest in participation in (political) public sphere is subject to identification with issues that are selection mechanisms of interpretation resources, dependent on “individual frames” of recipients (see Schenk 2002: 480), who depend again on collective identities. Mass media participate in the constitution of identity, collective as well as individual as “Individual and collective creation of identity, the process is mainly media-built.” (Klaus/Lünenborg 2004:209) Not only is the mass-media political public sphere significant but it can be assumed from the point of view of entertainment research that entertainment offers in the mass-media convey lifestyle suggestions, value and standards hierarchies, thereby influencing daily life and identity creation through entertainment. Saxer notes that public sphere is not only to be found in the political arena but is already present in other social arenas. (see Saxer 2005: 25) At the same time, it is to be assumed that entertainment offers are more likely to be taken up by recipients if there is a desire for relaxation etc. instead of a recognisable interest. (see Pfetsch 2004) Therefore entertainment and popular culture has increasingly been taken into account in Europeanisation research into communications. (see Klaus 2005; similarly Saxer 2005)
Participation in European public sphere demands on the one hand a certain offering in the mass media of European issues and opinions (agenda setting and agenda building; see Schenk 2002: 399ff), on the other hand a degree of interest on the part of the recipients of the offer.

This links to the third group of actors, mass media itself.

Media

Media can help to create public spheres with agenda setting an agenda building in as much as they are interested (from an economic standpoint) in producing public sphere. Economic aspects of media production come into play in the production of a Europeans public sphere as media companies must act in accordance with economic principles or at least cover their production costs. However, if the potential audience for European issues is too small for a cost-effective production, then this offering will not be put forward in line with economic logic. Apart from the direct sales revenue the advertising revenue is dependent on the number of recipients (see Advertisements-circulation spiral; see Kiefer 2001: 170ff; see Heinrich: 240ff) and without a significant audience the media product is not attractive to the advertising industry – with no recipients’ interest, no media offering, no advertising and no cost-covering production. For media offerings at European level as for national media companies the decisive factor is “whether an adequate audience can be attracted and maintained.” (Pfetsch 2004: 14) This applies equally for European issues in the national media as well as for a pan-European media. Political information calls for more interest on behalf of the recipient than for entertainment communication, which is used even with far less identifiable interest and is therefore offered more frequently. This means however that a (possible) public sphere deficit ensues not only from a deficit in democracy or identification but also from the production logic of mass-media companies. Therefore “when it is a matter of public information and political opinion-making then the European media assume a definite interest in Europe and
European politics but at least a minimum of interest in events in other EU countries. Only a small minority of Europe’s elite can be committed to this.” (Pfetsch 2004: 14)

At the level of the media actors, we see the use of media system analyses in European research into communication as profitable on the one hand, on the other we are of the opinion that important conclusions can be drawn from the media actors’ perspective through a broadening of discourse fields.

**Prospects for further research**

What are our main conclusions for further research into communications?

Theoretical problems demonstrate that we cannot always assume that the public sphere we mean is researched and that the normativeness of the initial assumptions strongly determine the results. We therefore see it as a fruitful approach not to make such research per se dependent on a particular public sphere model but according to Ferree/Gamso/Gerhards/Rucht (2002) to examine the empirical structures of mass-media communication and then to classify the public sphere in accordance with the characteristics of the ideal indicators into one of the theoretical models.

Such models require further discussion in the EU context on two points as seen from the problems of theory, namely their transferability from a national context to a supra-national union of states on the one hand and on the other the integration of social and cultural media functions and the desirable results of public sphere according to model – in other words a discussion on media functions and services for a democratic EU. Such a discussion requires an inter-disciplinary approach in order to capture the increased complexity of social organisation and changed communication structures appropriately. Based on an expanded concept for media functions we regard an expansion of the discourse fields for the theoretical
and empirical research as particularly beneficial. We would like to close with Saxer who summarises the future tasks of communication studies as follows:

“At the very top of the scientific agenda must be re-conceptualisations, from notions on actual and ideal democratic political culture to the rediscovery of the educational potential of popular entertainment. This can be followed by the systematic transfer of proven approaches from political science and communication science to the European context, if necessary their expansion and redrafting and the development of new integrative paradigms for supranational communication of general and political information, in particular as further steps for better support of the theory of European public sphere(s).” (Saxer 2005: 46f)

Notes:

1. “european public sphere” is generally referred in order to describe the public sphere in Europe. “European public sphere” is to be understood as a term to grasp a general European public sphere. German citations translated by MA and CW

2. According to Donges/Imhof literature has different terms for the different levels of public sphere. (see Donges/Imhof 2001: 106)

References


Habermas, Jürgen (2004): Der gespaltene Westen. Kleine Politische Schriften X. Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp


