

ROMANIAN JOURNAL OF  
**COMMUNICATION**  
AND PUBLIC RELATIONS

Volume 17, no. 1 (34) / April 2015

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The Journal is published three times a year. The journal has been indexed by ProQuest CSA, EBSCO Publishing, CEEOL, DOAJ, Cabell’s Directory, Index Copernicus and Genamics Journal Seek. This journal is recognized by CNCISIS and included in the B+ category ([www.cncsis.ro](http://www.cncsis.ro)).

The titles of the articles have been translated into Romanian by the publisher.

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Oana Ludmila POPESCU\*

## German Quality in the Service of a European Public Sphere? An Analysis of the Deutsche Welle's European Journal program

### Abstract

The economic crisis of the European Union has rendered the European public sphere as a forever emerging concept marked by uncertainties regarding its structure. In this context, eyes of both European officials and citizens turn towards the media, the main communication link between the EU and its citizens. The present paper looks at a media product that is designed to permeate multiple national public spheres, the weekly news show *European Journal*, a half-hour TV program produced by Deutsche Welle and rebroadcast by partner TV channels throughout Europe. Considering the main characteristics of the European public sphere as identified in the literature, with a focus on *horizontal Europeanization*, and using the method of content analysis, this paper looks at the means employed by the *European Journal* to support the integration process and to add a European dimension to national public sphere. Findings suggest that the type of public sphere promoted by the *European Journal* is not centered around the EU as a distinct entity, but around the member states, approach which supports the idea of a *horizontal Europeanization*.

**Keywords:** European public sphere, horizontal Europeanization, *European Journal*, Deutsche Welle.

### 1. Introduction

Times of crises are times of great revelations when all the weaknesses of a system or of a mechanism are brought to light in a complex, never before performed radiography. Only when it stops working, is the intricate mechanism of a clock exposed to the naked eye and all its unique, minuscule pieces become all of a sudden relevant and essential for the functioning of the whole. Likewise, the crisis of the European Union exposed the weaknesses of its institutional system, the malfunctions of its decision-making process and, last but not least, the enormous gap between the EU and its citizens.

While theoreticians like Jürgen Habermas (2012) consider that the balance of power in the organizational structure of the EU is shifting in favour of the European citizens, who are expected to act in a double quality, both as citizens of the Union and of a specific member state, ordinary people seem to be unaware of the impact the policies adopted in Brussels have on their everyday life. After a short review of Habermas' perception on the role of the European citizens and the necessity of increased popular participation in the European project, the paper will present some general considerations regarding the role and characteristics of the European public sphere as seen by the most reputed scholars in the field. Since the Europeanization of national public spheres comes across as the only viable solution for the emergence of the Eu-

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ropean public sphere, we will then focus on the three forms of Europeanisation of public communication identified by Koopmans and Erbe (2003): the emergence of a *supranational European public sphere*, *vertical Europeanisation* and *horizontal Europeanisation*.

Against this theoretical background, the present paper looks at an interesting media product that is designed to permeate multiple national public spheres and has the potential to set a new trend in the European media landscape. The weekly news show *European Journal*, a half-hour TV program produced by Deutsche Welle, the German international broadcaster, transcends national boundaries and reaches a global audience by being rebroadcast by partner TV channels throughout Europe. According to the profile presented on its website, the *European Journal* “delivers the inside take – reports on important political, economic and cultural developments in the EU with a strong focus on the European integration process”. The aim of this article is to determine the means employed by the “magazine from Brussels” to support the integration process and to add a European dimension to national public spheres. By using the method of content analysis, we will tackle questions regarding the European dimension of the topics illustrated, the perspective they are presented from and the visibility of the European construction. Findings suggest that the type of public sphere promoted by the *European Journal* is not centered around the EU as a distinct entity, but around the member states, approach which supports the idea of a *horizontal Europeanization*.

In the dynamics of the new information age, the exchange of media products between public or private broadcasters from various member states of the European Union might become a generalized trend. Provided that the programs in question are samples of high-quality journalism focused on European topics, this could prove to be a viable solution to the limited coverage of European issues in national media and could raise awareness of the fact that, in a community of states, the political, economic and social realities of one member state affect the entire Union.

## 2. An opportunity in disguise

To a higher or lesser extent, the crisis affected all member states of the EU bringing upon them economic and social hardships, austerity measures and unrest at all levels of society. Yet Habermas (2012) manages to identify a secondary consequence of the crisis, one that could translate into an opportunity for the EU elites to overcome the democratic deficit. According to the German sociologist and philosopher “the economically generated apprehensions are inspiring a more acute popular awareness of the problems besetting Europe and are lending them greater existential significance than ever before” (Habermas, 2012, p. X). This means that the present circumstances, bleak as they may be, have caused a fracture in the “vicious circle of (non) communication” (Brüggemann, 2005, p.12) marked by a lack of interest on the part of the public, the media and the political class to read, write and talk about European issues.

However, all the attention that the European project is currently enjoying could prove to be short-lived and devoid of any significant consequences on the long-term if politicians do not „lay the European cards on the table without further delay” and „take the initiative in explaining to the public the relation between the short-term costs and the true benefits, and hence the historical importance of the European project” (Habermas, 2012, p. 6). Politics behind closed doors is no longer an option because the weaknesses of the European Union have

already been exposed and citizens, especially from the countries most affected by the crisis, have started to publicly question the efficiency of the supranational mechanism. According to the Eurobarometer survey, trust in the EU remains at a low level, for the third successive time, with only 31% of the citizens willing to put their trust in the European project (EB 81). However, it appears that more and more Europeans are now convinced that their voice counts in the EU. The proportion of EU citizens who consider that their opinion is taken into account by EU politicians has reached 42%, an increase of 13 percentage points since autumn 2013 (EB 81). Even if the results were definitely influenced by the European elections held in May, the citizens' trust in their power to influence the decision-making process is welcomed considering that, as Habermas (2012) puts it, the balance of power in the organizational structure of the EU has shifted in favour of the European citizens: „at the European level, the citizens should be able to form judgements and make political decisions simultaneously and on an equal footing both as EU citizens and as members of a particular nation belonging to the EU” (p. 37). Increased popular participation is seen by Habermas as a necessary step to overcome the impasse reached by „the process of European unification, which was constructed above the heads of the population from the very beginning” (p. 132).

If they are expected to act in a double quality, both as citizens of the Union and of a specific member state, people should also have access to information that allows them to cast intelligent votes and to understand the impact the policies designed in Brussels have on their daily lives. Here is where the role of high quality media and of the European public sphere becomes relevant. In order for people to have an accurate images of what is going on at European level, national public spheres must “gradually open themselves up to each other” and the media must not only “thematize and address European issues as such, but they must at the same time report on the political positions and controversies which the same topics evoke in other member states” (Habermas, 2012, p. 48). In other words, without a transnational discursive exchange between national public spheres, the formation of a genuine European space for debate is unlikely as the Europeanized public spheres remain segmented (Peters et al., 2005).

### **3. The European Public Sphere – a forever emerging concept**

The fact that the citizens received back seats at the show staged by the European institutions in an “external locus of decision-making” (Schlesinger & Foret, 2007, p. 416), determined the quick association of the so-called “democratic deficit” with a “communication deficit”: “the discrepancy between Europe’s institutional development, on the one hand, and the continuing predominance of the national political space as the arena for public debates and participatory citizenship, on the other, is at the core of Europe’s democratic deficit” (Koopmans, 2007, p. 183). If, in the beginning, EU officials could afford to turn a blind eye to the communication issue, the rejection of the draft Constitution in the summer of 2005 by people in France and the Netherlands – two of the EU’s founding states – and, later on, the initial rejection of the Lisbon Treaty by Ireland, demonstrated that the deficiencies of the European project could no longer be ignored.

According to the report of the High Level Group on Media Freedom and Pluralism (HLG, 2013), “the democratic legitimacy of the European Union is closely dependent, however, on the emergence of a public sphere which is informed about European issues and able to engage in debates about them” (p. 39). The need to construct and consolidate a European pub-

lic sphere has triggered the interest of many theoreticians, which has resulted in a great amount of literature on the topic. However, no consensus was reached with respect to the ideal structure of the forever-emerging European public sphere.

Whether it is viewed as “the engine of democratization” or as „the social and communicative infrastructure of democracy” (Trenz, 2005, p.1), the public sphere is a fundamental brick in the foundation of any democracy since it creates the premisses for basic requirements of democratic societies: popular control of the political agenda (Dahl, 1971), public participation (Beetham et al., 2002; Held, 2006), representation, transparency and accountability (Beetham, 1994). In this public arena where debate is facilitated by the media, which act as purveyors of information, people can share opinions and ideas, can comment on the activity of their political representatives and question their decisions and they can suggest a certain course of action. Thus, this „shared community of communication” (Risse, 2002, p. 10), this open field where a communicative exchange takes place (Trenz, 2008) also provides access to information, another basic characteristic of democracy.

Whereas it is clear that the public sphere is ultimately a space where citizens discuss issues of public interest (Van de Steeg, 2004), the concept of European public sphere is still subject to hot debate: „the very idea of promoting a European public sphere, the possible emergence of European media, increased European awareness within the national public spheres, or increased national coverage of European affairs, is still controversial in many quarters” (HLG, 2013, p. 39). Theoreticians consider that the European public sphere is „the prerequisite for better governance, legitimacy and citizens’ participation in the emerging European polity” (Trenz, 2005, p. 5) and that it „seeks to understand the engagement or lack of it among European citizens with the political project” (Golding, 2006, p. 3). Irrespective of the wording, the importance of this concept in humanizing and legitimising the EU, in bringing it closer to its citizens is easily perceived.

Many scholars argue that the only viable solution for the emergence of the European public sphere is the Europeanization of the national public spheres (Brüggemann, 2005; Kopper & Leppik, 2006; Schlesinger & Fossum 2007). The coverage of European topics and the actions of EU officials in the national public spheres as well as their evaluations from a European perspective that goes beyond national interest were identified as the main characteristics of this process of Europeanization (Bârgăoanu, Negrea & Dascălu, 2010). In the emergence of this type of European public sphere, the national media play a crucial role as “according to the citizens themselves, their knowledge of the EU is derived largely from the mass media (television and radio)” (Kunelius & Sparks 2001, p. 9). So, acting as facilitators of the public debates in society, the national media bear the responsibility for adequate coverage of European issues and politics and have to “use similar criteria of relevance and similar forms of reference across national public spheres when discussing European issues” (Risse 2003, p.3). However, in order to speak of an authentic Europeanization of national public spheres, the European dimension of the issues debated must be “made visible in one way or another to the public” (Koopmans & Erbe, 2003, p. 5). If the audience is not aware of the European-level origin of the topic debated at national level, if its transnational relevance is not highlighted in the media coverage, it is perceived as a domestic issue and the European dimension is lost.

Analysing the process of Europeanization of public communication, Koopmans and Erbe (2003) emphasised three different approaches: the emergence of a *supranational European public sphere*, *vertical Europeanisation* and *horizontal Europeanisation* (p. 6). The *supranational European public sphere* implies an interaction between European-level institutions and

collective actors ideally facilitated by European-wide media. *Vertical Europeanisation* refers to „communicative linkages between the national and the European level” (p. 6) and has two dimensions: „bottom-up” – when national actors address European ones or European issues – and „top-down” – when European actors express a point of view in national policies and public debates in line with European regulations and common interests. *Horizontal Europeanisation* refers to „communicative linkages between different member states” (p. 6) and it also has two versions: “In the weak variant, the media in one country cover debates and contestation in another member state, but there is no linkage between the countries in the structure of the claim-making itself. In the stronger variant, actors from one country explicitly address, or refer to actors or policies in another member state” (Koopmans & Erbe, 2003, p. 6-7).

In analysing the means employed by the weekly news show *European Journal* to support the integration process and to add a European dimension to national public spheres, this paper will focus on instances of weak horizontal Europeanisation, which is supposed to strengthen the connection between member states, without ignoring traces of vertical Europeanization, be it bottom-up, when regular citizens presented in the reports make references to European rights or regulations, or top-down, when EU officials make comments on the situation in a certain member state.

#### **4. *European Journal* – the Magazine from Brussels**

As we have seen in the previous section, the role of mass media in the creation and consolidation of the European public sphere is undisputable. Irrespective of the type of public sphere taken into consideration, the communication flow between the EU and its citizens is facilitated by the media, which provide an arena for public debate, disseminate information and increase the level of participation in the public debate on European issues. The High Level Group on Media Freedom and Pluralism (2013) reinforces the link between mass media and the citizens’ level of participation and engagement in society which is „shaped by the ability of the media to awaken and maintain their interest in a variety of issues. If reports produced by the media are superficial, unprofessional, visibly biased or just plain boring, citizens will “turn off” and disengage from topics that may have important consequences for them” (p. 30).

However, if we are to consider past experiences, attempts to establish pan-European media have not met with success. Established in 1986 by four public service broadcasters from Germany, the Netherlands, Ireland and Italy, the Europe TV channel proved to be short-lived (Kleinsteuber, 2001). The newspaper *The European* shared a similar fate while, according to Koopmans and Erbe (2003), other EU media products „lead a marginal (and often heavily EU-subsidized) existence (e.g., the television station *Euronews* or the independent, but limited in terms of expert readership, *European Voice*)” (p. 3-4). The scholars argue that transnational media that have managed to create a name for themselves in the media landscape (e.g. *CNN*, *BBC World*, *International Herald Tribune*, *Financial Times*) „have a global, rather than European profile and audience” (p. 4).

The solution to the problems encountered by European-wide media could lie in the exchange of media products between public or private broadcasters from various member states of the European Union. Deutsche Welle, Germany’s international broadcaster, favors this approach. It is regulated by public law and financed by federal tax revenue, but, according to its mission statement, „it carries out its legally defined mission while remaining journalist-