

Meyer, Jan-Henrik: *The European Public Sphere. Media and Transnational Communication in European Integration 1969–1991*. Stuttgart: Franz Steiner Verlag 2010. ISBN: 978-3-515-09649-2; 361 S., 26 SW-Abb., 41 Tabellen

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Since the 1990s the European public sphere has become the subject of various research projects. The debate was initially dominated by social scientists, who concentrated mainly on the post-Maastricht period. Only within the last years also historians became more interested in the subject.<sup>1</sup> However, their findings still remain rather conceptual and/or give broad overviews.

In his PhD thesis, Jan-Henrik Meyer aims to „provide a longer-term perspective on the European public sphere for the first time“ (p. 303) by examining systematically European public communication from 1969 to 1991. In particular, he has four main goals: First of all, he wants to trace the development of European public communication before the already well researched 1990s. By concentrating on the 1970s and 1980s, Meyer also aims to contribute to the current debate among historians whether or not this period should be understood as a back-fall in the integration process or as a period which has seen important developments by „Europe’s second generation“. Furthermore, by stressing the advantages of historical studies he also aims to highlight the importance of contextual explanations for his findings. Finally, Meyer attempts to contribute to the still on-going and highly normative debate about the European public sphere and European democracy.

Meyer decided to analyse the media coverage of five European summits between 1969 and 1991: The Hague (1969), Paris (1974), Brussels (1978), Luxembourg (1985) and Maastricht (1991). In spatial terms, the author concentrates on German, British and French quality newspapers. From each country, he selected two newspapers which roughly represent the political spectrum (France: *Le Monde*, *Le Figaro*; Germany: *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, *Frankfurter All-*

*gemeine Zeitung*; Great Britain: *Guardian*, *Daily Telegraph*). Methodologically, Meyer combines the historical approaches of comparison and the analysis of transfers with qualitative (critical discourse analysis) and quantitative (content analysis) methods derived from the social sciences.

After an introductory discussion of the normative-theoretical debates about the European public sphere and a historical contextualization of the selected European summits, the empirical parts are structured alongside five major research questions. Meyer starts by asking in how far the European polity has – in quantitative terms – increasingly become a point of reference from 1969 to 1991. He concludes that even before the media coverage reached a peak around Maastricht, the European polity has already been an important point of reference in the 1970s and especially in 1978. In the next chapter, Meyer takes Klaus Eder’s and Cathleen Kantner’s often used definition that a shared public sphere requires that the „same issues [were discussed] at the same time using the same criteria of relevance“ (quoted on p. 26)<sup>2</sup> as a starting point in order to examine the synchronicity of the media coverage. Following his quantitative analysis of front page headlines and editorials he draws the conclusion that also a high synchronicity of media coverage can be traced back until 1969 and basically continued afterwards.

In the third part, Meyer moves beyond a pure analysis of media content by asking in how far the structure of journalists and other authors – understood as mediators – changed in a way that suggests increased transna-

<sup>1</sup>E.g. Hartmut Kaelble / Martin Kirsch / Alexander Schmidt-Gernig (eds), *Transnationale Öffentlichkeiten und Identitäten im 20. Jahrhundert*, Frankfurt am Main 2002; Jörg Requate / Martin Schulze Wessel (eds), *Europäische Öffentlichkeit. Transnationale Kommunikation seit dem 18. Jahrhundert*, Frankfurt am Main 2002; Hartmut Kaelble et al. (eds), *Building a European Public Sphere. From the 1950s to the Present / Un espace public européen en construction. Des années 1950 à nos jours*, Bern 2010.

<sup>2</sup>Insertion in the original – see also: Klaus Eder / Cathleen Kantner, *Transnationale Resonanzstrukturen in Europa. Eine Kritik der Rede vom Öffentlichkeitsdefizit*, in: Maurizio Bach (ed.), *Die Europäisierung nationaler Gesellschaften*, Opladen 2000, pp. 303-331 (p. 315).

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tional communication and broader participation. He argues that with the increasing number of correspondents in Brussels, more contributions from external authors and foreign interviewees the overall structure of mediators became more diverse. However, he also stresses that his findings are based on a too narrow basis in order as to be treated as exhaustive.

Fourth, Meyer aims to complement his findings by also examining a possible increase in the level of transnational communication. Here, he follows Andreas Wimmel by conceptualizing transnational communication as „discursive references“ to views from abroad.<sup>3</sup> Meyer distinguishes between reference to national actors (horizontal) of other European states, EC institutions (vertical) and non-state actors. Besides the dominance of national interests, the results suggest an increase of horizontal reference between 1969 and 1991 and also an overall rising transnational awareness. Most interestingly, Meyer is also able to show a relative increase of references to non-state actors especially in 1978 and again around Maastricht.

Finally, by analysing comments around the European summits, Meyer addresses one of the core questions in the debate on the European public sphere: the possible development of a European self-understanding, which is expected by researchers like Thomas Risse to result from an increase of transnational communication.<sup>4</sup> Meyer himself is sceptical about the normative necessity of a European identity. In his conclusion, he stresses that the discursive construction of a European self-understanding was highly related to the respective context and that the analysis of his dataset does not support Risse's expectation. Nevertheless, he also stresses that in 1969 a strong sense of community was promoted, but national preferences were of continuous importance at the following summits and most clearly so around Maastricht. However, in 1991, in the face of the war in Yugoslavia and right after the fall of the Berlin Wall, Meyer interestingly finds a shared sense of responsibility as a new feature of European self-understanding.

In sum, Meyer is able to show that European public communication 1969-91 already

fulfilled since the summit of 1969 some core criteria of a European public sphere. Until 1991 it developed into the direction of a – still limited – more transparent European public sphere, in which also non-state actors had a voice. Although national preferences were found to be of continuing importance and no common European identity was developed, these findings are a desirable outcome from a normative point of view. Furthermore, by systematically analysing the news coverage of the European summits 1969-91 Meyer is also able to convincingly show that the development of European public communication closely reflected European politics. While he found a growing interest in EC affairs during the 1970s, with a peak in 1978, this development came to an end around the Luxembourg summit in 1985 before increasing again substantially around Maastricht. Meyer therefore argues that this development not only contradicts the findings of researchers like Jürgen Gerhards that EC coverage was continuously declining until Maastricht and the development of a European public sphere was therefore lacking behind the process of European integration.<sup>5</sup> By contrasting the high public interest in the European politics during the 1970s with the decline of media coverage during the deadlock of European integration in the early 1980s, he also stresses the importance of „Europe's second generation“ as a contextual explanation.

Meyer's results are based on a systematic and especially methodologically convincing analysis – but his study also has some shortcomings which he is well aware of. The inclusion of other countries would have been desirable. The same applies to the possible

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<sup>3</sup> Andreas Wimmel, *Transnationale Diskurse. Zur Analyse politischer Kommunikation in der europäischen Medienöffentlichkeit*, in: *Zeitschrift für internationale Beziehungen* 11 (2004), pp. 7-25.

<sup>4</sup> Thomas Risse, *Auf dem Weg zu einer europäischen Kommunikationsgemeinschaft: Theoretische Überlegungen und empirische Evidenz*, in: Ulrich K. Preuß / Claudio Franzius (eds), *Europäische Öffentlichkeit*, Baden-Baden 2004, pp. 139-151; Thomas Risse, *A Community of Europeans? Transnational Identities and Public Spheres*, Ithaca 2010.

<sup>5</sup> Jürgen Gerhards, *Westeuropäische Integration und die Schwierigkeiten der Entstehung einer europäischen Öffentlichkeit*, in: *Zeitschrift für Soziologie* 22 (1993), pp. 96-110.

extension of the selected time frame. However, that would have exceeded the resources of a PhD student and requires large teams of researchers like in the former EMEDIATE project.<sup>6</sup> Future historical research on the topic might also profit from the increasing digitalization of newspapers. Jan-Henrik Meyer's book therefore can be seen as an important and innovative contribution to the debate about the European public sphere as well as to research on the history of European integration.

HistLit 2011-2-016 / Tobias Reckling über Meyer, Jan-Henrik: *The European Public Sphere. Media and Transnational Communication in European Integration 1969–1991*. Stuttgart 2010, in: H-Soz-Kult 06.04.2011.

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<sup>6</sup>EMEDIATE: Media and Ethics of a European Public Sphere from the Treaty of Rome to the „War on Terror“, <<http://www.eui.eu/RSCAS/Research/EMEDIATE/>> (25.02.2011).