Europe’s Missing Public: Problems and Prospects

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Introduction

The European Union (EU) is the world’s most advanced cooperation across borders and political levels and has resulted in a close regional interpenetration of societies, markets, and governments. The EU’s multileveled political architecture is historically unprecedented and its decision-making power substantial. However, the advancing European integration process was largely driven by political elites out of the public eye. EU-level policy-makers tended to act as if citizens with national loyalties no longer existed, while citizens of member states behaved as if the EU-level of administration had not come into being. The deeper the impact of ‘Europeanization’ – the influence of European-level decisions on member states’ policies – over time, the more this contradiction became a political issue about ‘democratic deficits’. The case of Europe’s missing public indicates a general problem for democratic politics in the context of globalization and de-nationalization: How is it possible to maintain adequate links between elite decision-making and citizens when power shifts to a level beyond the nation-state?

A quick solution could be through an increasing self-identification of European citizens with the EU. However, it is well documented that although decisions have shifted toward EU-level policy arenas, nation-states remain the primary focus for citizens’ collective self-identifications, voting preferences, and mobilizations. Studies of public opinion data conclude that ‘only a small proportion of the public holds strong affective supranational attachments’ (Gabel 1998: 112). Of course, the situation is not static. The expansion of markets and economic growth has produced Europe-wide economic, social, and political
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fields. Fligstein (2008) argues these have led to an increasing density of social interaction and a greater willingness among people to sometimes identify as Europeans. Ultimately, however, European self-identification is still for most people secondary to national forms, an 'identity-lite' (Risse 2010), with the result that 'Europe often reveals itself to be a community of strangers' (Katzenstein and Checkel 2009: 214). Even Fligstein (2008: 2) concedes that a gap remains between structural change and public perceptions: 'What has struck me most about the creation of a European society is the degree to which people in Europe are unaware of it.'

On democratic performance, many scholars see a lack of communication to be constitutive of Europe's perceived democratic deficit. They emphasize the need for mass-mediated coverage and public visibility for European policy-making as a requirement for a legitimate politics (for example, Habermas 2005). Behind the surface plot of Europe's democratic deficit lies the deeper concern of whether political and media systems can perform effectively, subsequent to the onset of globalization processes. Advancing economic and political integration involves a shift in power and competences from the nation up to the European political level and across to other European countries. The EU increasingly impacts peoples' lives, but the degree and extent to which modern democracies offer opportunities to see, be included in political decisions, and contest these impacts is less well known. What is clear is that mass media performance in supplying adequate information to citizens becomes ever-more important as political relations become more complex, institutional and geographical boundaries of competences become blurred, and politics becomes increasingly mediatized.

In a book that particularly focuses on Klaus Eder’s work, we discuss the related concerns of Europe’s missing public and the EU’s ambitions for democratization, by reference to the European public sphere field that he was influential in establishing. Instead of looking for Europeanization in individual-level identification processes and cultural transformations, such as the growing number of multilingual Europeans, the European public sphere approach examines the transformation of the field of communication across borders and between political levels. In this view, the Europeanization of public debates through an open system of public communication carries a strong democratizing potential for the EU, not least because '[t]he basic function of a public sphere is to democratize political institutions' (Trenz and Eder 2004: 7). The idea that talking publicly about the ‘deficit’ leads to processes of deliberation that can also potentially democratize