Four models of the European Public Sphere:
An Analysis of the Actor Structure of EU news in Light of Normative Public Sphere Theories

Stefanie Walter
Ph.D. Candidate
University of Mannheim

1 Paper prepared for delivery at the ECPR Graduate Student Conference 2014, University of Innsbruck, 3-5 July 2014. Panel “Democratic Representation and the European Public Sphere”.
Work in progress, please do not cite without the authors permission.
2 Contact: Stefanie.Walter@mzes.uni-mannheim.de
Abstract

While previous research has taken into account different normative theories when examining the concept of the public sphere at the national level, the normative conceptualisations of the European public sphere has often remained vague. However, better understanding whether the European public sphere is able to fulfil its democratic role requires further specification of the underlying normative criteria. This study considers different normative public sphere theories in the context of the European public sphere. Specifically, it focusses on one main criterion, namely the actor structure, and examines which normative public sphere theory is able to describe the empirical levels of visibility of different actors in the European public sphere best. An ideal-typical actor structure of the liberal, discursive, participatory and elitist public sphere theory is developed and compared to the empirical levels of visibility of different actor groups in the European public sphere. The analysis is based on secondary data of a large-scale content analysis of TV and newspaper articles of all 27 EU member states gathered during the 2009 European Parliament election campaign (N=12850).
1. Introduction

Who should participate in public discussions? This question is a central element of normative public sphere theories that have been derived originating from democratic theories. While the democratic theories revolve around accountability and responsiveness of governance, public sphere theories focus on public communication and its role in facilitating accountability and responsiveness of the decision making process (Ferree et al. 2002a p.289). Accountability and responsiveness are two central, and closely related, aspects that contribute to democratic legitimacy in representative democracies. Responsiveness refers to the process where the government is formed and implements policies according to citizens’ preferences (Markowski 2011; Powell 2004), while accountability refers to this process that assures that responsibilities can be assigned to political actions and is considered a top-down mechanism of political representation (Andeweg and Thomassen 2005). For legitimacy overall, but also accountability and responsiveness of governance, transparency and public communication play a key role and are necessary requirements of representative democracies (Habermas 1990; Gerhards and Neidhardt 1993).

Originally, this communicative process applied and was limited to the nation state. In the context of the nation state, normative public sphere theories have been developed stating different requirements for the public sphere to fulfil its function for the democratic process (Ferree et al. 2002a). Previous research has identified four main normative models, namely the liberal, discursive, participators and elitist public sphere theory and compared their normative requirements with empirical, observable results of discussions on national governance (Ferree et al. 2002a; Ferree et al. 2002b; Gerhards et al. 1998). Today, however, the EU is taking decision in policy fields that have formerly been considered sovereignty rights of nation states (Jachtenfuchs and Kohler-Koch 2003). Even though the EU is not a state itself, it can be considered a “functional equivalent” (Eder 2000, p. 168) that likewise requires a European public sphere for legitimacy of governance at the EU level. The question this study addresses is: Which normative model of the public sphere is best able to describe the visibility of different actors in the European public sphere? In a second step, it is considered whether this model is the same for the vertical and horizontal dimension of the European public sphere. In order to answer this question, this study develops ideal-typical actor structures proposed by the normative public sphere theories which are then compared to empirical observable levels of visibility in the European public sphere. The question is highly relevant since it helps to better understand what underlying model of democracy and political
representation at the European level becomes visible to the EU citizens via the European public sphere.

An increased number of studies has focused on the European public sphere (e.g. Boomgaarden et al. 2013; de Vreese 2001; Koopmans and Erbe 2004; Trenz and Eder 2004). However, little research has taken into account that different normative models of the public sphere state different requirements for a functioning of a European public sphere. Studies are usually implicitly or explicitly based on Habermas’ conception of the deliberative public sphere, which is only one out of a variety of normative models (cf. Ferree et al. 2002a). Depending on the underlying normative theory, research might derive different conclusions about whether a European public sphere is able to facilitate accountability and responsiveness of EU governance. Hence, a more precise elaboration of the underlying normative and analytical criteria of the public sphere are needed to understand whether the European public sphere is able to fulfill its democratic role. This paper focuses on one important criterion upon which the existence and performance of those normative public sphere theories can be evaluated: the level of visibility of different actor groups. One group that has systematically been neglected in European public sphere research are the EU citizens. While the absence of citizens in public debates is desirable from point of view of the elitist and liberal public sphere theories, it would indicate shortcoming the deliberative and participatory theory (cf. Ferree et al. 2002a).

The first section of this paper discussed the concept of the public sphere and outlines the four different normative theories of the public sphere. Special attention is paid to the different requirements of visibility of actors in the public sphere that each theory states. Next, definitions of the European public sphere by previous research are examined. After the research strategy is discussed, the findings of this study that are based on a secondary analysis of content analysis data of the 2009 European Parliament election news coverage are presented, followed by a discussion of the results in the context of the European democratic deficit. This paper aims to contribute to the theoretical understanding of the European public sphere and to stimulate debate about the importance of normative public sphere models in the context of the European public sphere.
2. Public Sphere: A definition beyond normative models
In this study, the *public sphere* is understood as “the social space in which different opinions are expressed, problems of general concern are discussed” (Wessler 2011). One important criterion is that these discussions are not private, but take place publicly. What can be expressed openly in this public space at a certain point in time is understood as *public opinion* (Gerhards and Neidhardt 1991, p. 42). A useful way to generally conceptualise the public sphere is the idea that it is organised in different ‘forums’ that can be differentiated on basis of their scope (Gerhards and Neidhardt 1991). On a very specific stage, a public sphere can emerge rather spontaneously in day-to-day situations, e.g. in form of discussions of public affairs between ordinary citizens that take place publicly. This kind of public sphere is referred to as *encounter publics*. One distinguishing characteristic is that the role of the audience and speaker is rather fluent so that every participant can embody both. The encounter level is limited with regard to its spatial, social and time dimension. On the next level, the public sphere is more organised, namely into *issue publics*. They can e.g. take place in form of public events or demonstrations and emerge spontaneously or possess a high organisational level. Here, the role differentiation between the audience and the speakers is more pronounced.

On the most general stage, there is the *media sphere*. It is constituted via the mass media (press, television, radio and internet), which are seen as the primary forum of the public sphere in modern societies and able to establish a *permanent* forum for political discussion. Mass media have a broad reach and a high capacity to concentrate public attention on a small and highly specific set of themes and actors. It is the only forum that is in principle visible to society at large. Therefore, the media sphere is considered the most important forum of the public sphere for democracies and with regard to the issue of legitimacy, since the mass media provide a “vision of the public sphere” (Peters 1994, p. 3) to a vast number of people.

2.1. Actors in the national public sphere
The public sphere can be conceptualised as a communicative space where various groups of actors come together and exchange their views publicly (Wessler 2011). Reflecting the structures of the democratic political system, these actors can broadly be classified into actors originating from three groups, namely the governmental system, the intermediary system and the citizens of the respective political community (Rucht 1993). (A) *Governmental actors* comprises of the government, the parliament, the judiciary and the political administration. The governmental system is responsible for aggregating and articulating common goals, the
policy making process and the implementation of collectively binding decisions. (B) Intermediary actors are non-governmental associations formed on a voluntary basis aiming to articulate societal problems (Habermas 1992, p. 443). The intermediary system ought to moderate between the state and its citizens. Intermediary actors can be differentiated based on how closely they are located on the side of the governmental system or on side of the citizens, starting with (B1) political parties, which are closer to the government, and (B2) the civil society, which can be divided into more formally organized interests (formal civil society), such as interest groups, and less-formally organised interests (informal civil society), such as social movements and citizen’s initiatives. (C) Citizens are ordinary persons who are members of the respective political community and are, based on their legal status, entitled to certain rights and duties, exercise these rights and duties, and participate in the political community. Citizenship is of vast importance for democracy since democratic legitimacy originates from the people. Citizenny, then, accounts for the entity of members of a political community, such as the nation state.

3. Normative Public Sphere Models
Besides these general conceptions of the public sphere and its actors, differently nuanced normative theories of the public sphere, proposing different criteria for the public sphere to fulfil its democratic function, have been derived originating from democratic theories (Ferree et al. 2002a). Previous research has distinguished between the liberal, discursive, participatory and elitist public sphere theory (Ferree et al. 2002a; Ferree et al. 2002b; Gerhards et al. 1998). The theories have, inter alia, different standpoints regarding which actors and with what intensity ought to become visible in the public sphere and diverge whether or not individual citizens are seen as part of the actor constellation. The four public sphere theories are summarised below by first providing some brief background information on the respective democratic theory and then answering the question how communication in the public sphere should take place and who are the actors ought to become visible in public discussions to derive an ideal typical actor structure proposed by each of the public sphere theories.

---

3 The term civil society is normatively loaded and closely related to the discursive and participatory public sphere theory. Here, it is used without any normative reference to classify actors that belong to the intermediary system.

4 The distinction between formal and informal civil society actors has been derived in compliance with the discursive and participatory public sphere theory that are outlined in the following section. The distinction is adopted to be able to classify and analyse civil society actors more accurately.
3.1 Liberal Public Sphere

The notion of the liberal public sphere has its roots in the liberal democratic theory and is influenced by the thoughts of theorists such as Mill and more recent works by Rawls. Liberalism puts great emphasis on equality and personal freedoms. The role of the state should be limited and it is differentiated between the public and the private sphere, the latter being free of state interventions (Beetham 1992). As such, “liberty of thought and discussion” (Mill 1859/1989, p. 19) are both vital constituents of liberalism. Furthermore, political participation is seen as a key mechanism for citizens to articulate their interests. Yet, a direct participation of citizens in political everyday business is not needed. According to Mill (1861 p.268) “[r]eading newspapers, and perhaps writing to them, public meetings, and solicitations of different sorts addressed to the political authorities, are the extent of the participation of private citizens in general politics” during non-election times. The quote indicates that liberal democratic theory highlights the aspect of political representation. In this sense, citizens participation goes beyond the electoral process by being represented by and/or being members of political parties, trade unions and other civil society organisations (Beetham 1992 p.47).

In the liberal conception, the public sphere’s main function is to make different standpoints transparent and visible to society. In this sense, the liberal public sphere is also referred to as a “representative public sphere” (Gerhards 1998 p.31). In a liberal public sphere, public communication should reflect a variety of opinions that are present within society. The way in which different standpoints are communicated is not of interest. The only normative communicative requirement, from a liberal perspective, is that actors show mutual respect (Gerhards 1997, p. 19).

More recently, Gerhards and Neidhardt (1993) have synthesised the approaches to a liberal public sphere to a more coherent concept. Regarding the visibility of actors, the liberal public sphere merely distinguishes between the governmental and intermediary system. From the perspective of the liberal public sphere, actors who are legitimised via elections, namely governmental actors and political parties, possess distinct legitimacy to be present in public debates (see Gerhards 1997, p. 10). Besides political parties, within the public sphere, there is no requirement for a strong representation of intermediary actors, such as interest groups, social movements, or citizens’ initiatives. Yet, in terms of pluralism, it is seen as important that a broad variety of different societal interests and opinions are present in order for the public sphere to account as a democratic one. Civil society is not further divided into formal and informal actors. Finally, a direct form of participation of citizens is neither needed nor desired, because it is assumed that political representation is more efficient in holding
governments accountable than individual participation (Dahrendorf 1967 p.1116). Hence, citizens are understood as the audience whose preferences and interests are articulated and represented by collective actors (cf. Gerhards 1998 p.31).

3.2 Discursive Public Sphere

The discursive public sphere theory originates from the deliberative democratic theory. Deliberative democratic theory is based on scholars such as Bessette (1980), Gutmann and Thompson (2009) as well as Habermas (1999). The deliberative democratic theory centres around the process by which the democratic will is formed. It is based on the “ideal of a democratic association in which the justification of the terms and conditions of association proceeds through public argument and reasoning among equal citizens” (Cohen 2003). In this sense, discussions should be of a deliberative character, meaning that, in principle, participation is open to everyone, participants see each other as equals, topics discussed are relevant for society at large and discussions take place in a rational manner so that in the end a consensus can be reached (Cohen 2003; Habermas 1990; Peters 1994). This “consensus” is commonly referred to as public opinion. Regarding participation of ordinary citizens in the democratic process, the deliberative theory argues that voting in elections or being represented by civil society organisations alone is not sufficient (Gutmann and Thompson 2009 p.4). Instead, citizens have to be granted access to deliberative discussions.

The idea of deliberative democracy is closely linked to the notion of the public sphere itself, since it is defined as the public space where deliberative discussions take place and public opinion is formed (Habermas 1974). One of the first scholars who aimed to conceptualise the public sphere was Jürgen Habermas. His classic work on “The Structural Transformation of the public sphere” has been a major contribution to the field. According to Habermas, the original “bourgeois public sphere” (Habermas 1991, p. 401) of the 18th century consisted of private individuals who came together to publicly discuss matters of general interest. Yet, this ideal version of the public sphere is not feasible for modern mass democracies. Habermas argues that in modern societies, the democratic function of the public sphere is diminished by large-scale organisations and interest groups that strive to communicate with governments directly, rather than engaging in public discourses. As a consequence, the public sphere is excluded and thereby weakened. Habermas concludes that the former model cannot be applied to today’s mass societies. The underlying normative claims of the discursive theory nevertheless remain intact.
With regard to the actors in the discursive public sphere, Habermas follows the approach of Peters (2007) who differentiates between the governmental and intermediary system, or in other words, between the political centre and the periphery (cf. Habermas 1992 p.429). The former consists of the government, the parliament, the political administration and the judiciary. It is argued that governmental actors possess the highest legitimacy to implement binding decisions and are therefore in the centre of attention in the public sphere, at least during political everyday business (cf. Habermas 1992 p.459; Peters 2007 p.44). The periphery refers to the intermediary system which is further spilt up into formal and informal civil society actors. Formal civil society actors (output periphery) are more closely connected to the political centre. They possess official structures and are hierarchically organised, such as political parties, large scale umbrella organisations or head organisations of trade unions (Habermas 1992 p.454). Their primary aim is to influence the implementation of policies, not the decision making process of policies, e.g. by being officially or un-officially consulted in committees (Peters 2007).

Informal civil society actors (input periphery), on the other hand, mainly aim to influence public opinion, the decision making process and the formulation of policies. Informal civil society actors are more autonomous and usually possess low-scale organisational structures, such as smaller public interest groups. Within the group of informal actors, Habermas pays special attention to social movements and spontaneously emerging (grassroot) organisations. Habermas assumes that newly emerging social movements, in the initial phase, have more deliberative potential since they rely largely on public support and can communicate more freely due to a lack of (bureaucratic and formal) constraints. While informal actors might receive less attention during political everyday business, their role in the public sphere becomes heightened during times of crisis and when normative issues are discussed; then, the visibility of actors from the input periphery should be high (cf. Gerhards et al. 1998 p.35).

Regarding the visibility of ordinary citizen, the idea of discursive democracy puts great emphasis on the participation of ordinary citizens in public debates. Likewise, one defining criterion of the discursive public sphere is that the participation in discussions is in principal open to everyone, including citizens. Especially in earlier works, Habermas highlighted that citizens should be able to discuss in the public sphere (Gerhards 1997 p.4), while at the same time favouring the importance of collective civil society actors (Gerhards et

As Habermas (1992, p.431) notes correctly, the differentiation between the two groups is not always clear-cut.
al. 1998 p.100). Citizens themselves are not seen as an autonomous actor group, but are located at the level of informal civil society. From the discursive public sphere theory, the inclusion of civil society and citizens is especially required when conflictual or normative issues are discussed (Ferree et al. 2002a p.300; Gerhards et al. 1998 p.35).

3.3 Participatory Public Sphere

Another point of view, which contradicts the liberal democratic theory by arguing that limited participation in the political process is insufficient, is provided by the participatory democratic theory, also referred to as strong democracy (Warren 1992; Barber 1984). The participatory democratic theory has its roots in Rousseau's (1913) work who favours direct democracy over a representative one and highlights the participation of individual citizens in the political process. A more recent understanding of participatory democracy is based on scholars such as Barber (1984) Hirst (1994) and Warren (1992). The participatory liberal theory aims to maximise citizens’ representation in the political process and assumes that civic participation in form of voting alone is not sufficient. It is argued that by more participation and empowerment, citizens become “more public-spirited, more tolerant, more knowledgeable, more attentive to the interest of others, and more probing of their own interests” (Warren 1992 p.8) which will benefit the functioning of democracy in general. While liberal democratic theory argues for a strict separation of the public and private sphere, the participatory theory, on the contrary, makes the case for expanding democracy to the economic and social realm, such as peoples’ workplace or local governments (Warren 1992 pp.8–9).

A normative requirement of the public sphere is that different viewpoints in society are represented. The importance of the presence of ordinary citizens and civic society organisations is especially emphasised. It should be the citizens setting the agenda rather than political elites (cf. Barber 1984 pp.180–182). What is important is that civic participation takes place continuously. Participation during elections or at the beginning of a decision making process is not seen as sufficient (Ferree et al. 2002, p. 296).

Regarding the actor constellation in the public sphere, the participatory approach differentiates between the governmental system, the intermediary system and the citizens (Curran 1991 p.31). Special attention is paid to a strong representation of the intermediary system. Similar to the discursive public sphere theory, civil society is further divided into more formal and informal actors. It is stated that “organizations with active forms of member participation and a leadership that is accountable to members are more desirable mediators
than those who are only nominally accountable” (Ferree et al., p. 296), such as large scale organisations due to their rather bureaucratic nature. Furthermore, the need for the presence of voices of ordinary citizens is emphasised to guarantee an authentic image of the will of the people (cf. Martinsen 2009). Citizens function as experts of their own living environment (ibid., p. 56) and participation that is exclusively based on representation is not accepted. The public sphere, then, is seen as responsible for giving citizens a forum to express their point of view directly and to participate in political discussions. Citizens should be encouraged to contribute to public debates so they can take part in the political process.

3.4 Elitist Public Sphere

The idea of the elitist democratic theory limits citizens’ participation to the electoral process alone, where the governing elite is elected. Additional forms of political participation are dismissed because of “citizen’s ignorance and lack of judgement” (Schumpeter 1943 p.261) in general political affairs. Schumpeter (1943), for example, argues that despite political information being broadly available, people lack political knowledge and are not capable of rational decision-making in political matters. Therefore, the functioning of democratic system relies on the competences and expertise of political elites. From the point of view of the elitist democratic theory, the “democratic method” (Schumpeter 1943 p.269) and only normative requirement is that political decisions a based on a competitive struggle for votes. Because politicians aim to be re-elected, policies will reflect peoples’ preferences. In this way, accountability of governance is guaranteed.

In the elitist democratic theory, the political system is conceptualised as being divided into the governing elite and the citizens. Contrary to the other three normative democratic theories discussed above, there is no extensive intermediary system needed to facilitate between the government and the people. Instead, peoples’ preferences remain latent “until they are called to life by some political leader who turns them into political factors” (Schumpeter 1943 p.270). Instead of popular inclusion, the functioning of the democratic system relies on the competences of its political elite.

It is the role of the public sphere to make the elites visible to the citizens, but also to provide information on political affairs so that citizens are able to make an informed voting decision. “If the media are doing their job, citizens will be encouraged to vote, and the media will provide enough information about the parties and candidates so that citizens can choose intelligently among then” (Ferree et al. 2002a p.291). This means that the role of the media is seen in a one-dimensional or top-down manner. Its function is to report from the
governmental arena to the citizens, but not to give citizens a voice and report back to the governmental actors.

The actors ought to be visible in the elitist public sphere are mainly limited to those belonging to the governmental system. There is no need for intermediary actors, with the only exception being political parties. While political parties in the aforementioned models of the public sphere are located as closely related to the governmental system, parties alone function as the intermediary system in the elitist vision of the public sphere. Political parties represent citizens and thereby facilitate between citizens and the government (Ferree et al. 2002 p.290). Hence, there is no need for additional civil society actors to be present. “By anticipating public reactions the elite grants the citizenry a form of indirect access to public policy making, without the creation of any kind of formal institutions and even in the absence of any direct communication” (Walker 1966 p.286). As in the liberal model of the public sphere, the presence of ordinary citizens is altogether dismissed.

4. Approaches to the European Public Sphere

The notion of the public sphere has initially been developed departing from the nation state as its reference framework and original works on the public sphere do not discuss the idea of a supranational or European public sphere. However, these days many politically important decisions are made at the EU level. The European integration process has led to a shift in governance from the national state to the supranational policy level and is increasingly affecting people’s lives. Even though the European Union is not a state in itself, it can be considered a ‘functional equivalent’ (Eder 2000, p. 168) to the nation state that consists of territory, political authority, the people and a public sphere that is able to control governance. Eriksen (2005, p. 342) argues: “Despite the fact that the EU neither is a state nor a nation, its development as a new kind of polity is closely connected to its development as a communicative space”.

As its national counterpart, the European public sphere likewise consists of different forums that differ in scope. However, European public sphere research has nearly exclusively focussed on the European media sphere (for exceptions see e.g. Freudenberger 2013; Imig and Tarrow 2003). One reason is that at the EU level, the importance of the media is heightened since there are only very few people that have direct experience with the EU. Despite a growing number of studies on the European public sphere, research has not developed a common definition of the European public sphere. However, consensus has been reached that two models of the European public sphere can be distinguished: a) as a transnational
European public sphere (also referred to as cross-national or pan-European public sphere) and b) a Europeanisation of public spheres of the EU member states (see Gerhards 1993).

The idea of a transnational European public sphere, in essence, applies the national concept of the public sphere to the EU level. It postulates the existence of a single European public sphere that covers all member states at once. One central problem for the emergence of such a European communicative space is the language diversity within the EU (Graf von Kielmansegg 2003; Machill et al. 2006; Strohmeier 2007; van de Steeg 2002). When applied to the media sphere, a transnational European public sphere requires the existence of a uniform European media system so that the Europeans could potentially simultaneously consume the identical media content (see Gerhards 2000, p. 288; Machill et al. 2006, p. 62; Strohmeier 2007, p. 29). Although there is currently existing EU-wide media, these are presently predominantly addressing an elite audience of political and economic decision makers and are not able to reach the wider public (Brüggemann and Kleinen-von Konigslow 2009, p. 707; Schlesinger 1999, p. 272). In this sense, a transnational European public sphere is currently limited to communication that takes place among a minority of politically interested actors and does not reach a broader audience (Neidhardt et al. 2000 p.265). Therefore, the notion of a transnational European public sphere has largely been rejected by research (de Vreese 2003; Koopmans and Erbe 2004; Schlesinger 1999).

Previous studies mostly claim that the emergence of a European public sphere can more realistically be expected to result from a Europeanisation of national public spheres (Commission of the European Communities 2006, p. 4; de Vreese et al. 2006, p. 479; Gerhards 2000, p. 293; Machill et al. 2006, p. 63). Here, research has developed a variety of differently nuanced definitions of the European public sphere that are often explicitly or implicitly influenced by the deliberative public sphere theory. European public sphere definitions vary with regard to (a) what should be discussed, (b) by whom, and (c) how discussions should take place. Some common definitions of current European public sphere research are discussed in the following.

Gerhards (1993), who systematically introduced the distinction between a transnational European public sphere and the Europeanisation of national public spheres, defines the latter as discussions on EU governance in the national media. Later on, research has broadened this definition by introducing the distinction of vertical and horizontal Europeanisation (Koopmans and Erbe 2004; see also: Brüggemann and Kleinen-von Konigslöw 2009; Peters et al. 2006; Pfetsch and Koopmans 2006; Wessler et al. 2008). In line

---

6 Such as the European Voice or Euronews
with the previous definition, *vertical Europeanisation* refers to a connection between the national and EU level, in the sense that EU affairs are discussed in the national public spheres (Brüggemann and Kleinen-von Konigslöw 2009 p.29). *Horizontal Europeanisation*, on the other hand, refers to a linkage between the member states in from of an increased focus on events taking place in fellow EU member states (Brüggemann and Kleinen-von Konigslöw 2009 p.29). The rationale behind it is that “[i]n an intergovernmental polity, the other member states can no longer be treated as foreign countries whose internal politics are not really relevant for one’s own country” (Koopmans and Erbe 2004 p.101). However, when thinking about the role of the public sphere for facilitating accountability and responsiveness of governance, it is the vertical dimension of the European public sphere that is of primary importance for the legitimacy of EU governance. In addition to the first criterion, previous research has also defined the European public sphere by the visibility of EU level actors (vertical) and actors from fellow member states (horizontal) (cf. e.g. Koopmans and Erbe 2004).

Regarding how discussions should take place, a number of different criteria have been proposed, all being heavily influenced by the discursive public sphere theory. As a second criterion of the European public sphere that is part of Gerhards' (1993) definition suggests that discussions on EU governance need to be evaluation from a non-national perspective. Likewise, Eder and Kantner (2000) define simultaneous discussions on European topics with similar aspects of relevancy as the main criterion for a European public sphere (also: Peters et al. 2006; Wessler et al. 2008). In other words, discussions of EU governance have to take place at the same time in the EU member states and arguments have to be defined in a similar manner, with a European “frame of reference”. However, this approach has been criticised since EU issues have not yet developed a clear cleavages (Mittag and Wessels 2003). Therefore, the criterion of similar discussions in the EU member states is currently regarded as difficult to fulfil.

Another stream of research demands not only a Europeanisation of the news coverage, but also a “Europeanisation of collective identities” (Brüggemann et al. 2007; Wessler 2007). Collective identities are perceived as Europeanised if citizens feel a sense of belonging to the European political community. With regard to discussions in the European public sphere, this aspect addresses the question whether actors in the European public sphere are defined or define themselves by a national or European reference (e.g. the French vs. “we” Europeans) and develop a European identity that distinguishes them from out-groups (such as the US). Here, also a shared history and cultural values play a role. From this perspective, such a
feeling of togetherness and solidarity is one of the preconditions for the existence of a European public sphere. These thoughts are likewise influenced by normative criteria originating from the discursive public sphere theory (cf. Habermas 2001).

Since this study is interested in a comparison of different normative public sphere theories in the context of the European public sphere, criteria derived from those normative theories cannot be part of the initial definition of the European public sphere. Hence, a definition of the European public sphere that goes beyond any of the normative requirements of the four public sphere theories is needed. Or in other words, one needs to find the lowest common denominator of what constitutes a European public sphere. This study proposes a minimal definition, in which the European public sphere is constituted by public discussions on EU governance.

Also as a result of different definitions and empirical measurements of the European public sphere, research has derived different conclusions with regard to what extent a European public sphere has emerged (e.g. Sifft et al. 2007; Trenz 2004; Peter and de Vreese 2004). Taking discussions on EU governance as the defining criterion for the European public sphere, findings indicate that the degree to which national public spheres are Europeanised differs across a) policy fields (de Vreese and Boomgaard 2006; Eder 2000; Koopmans and Erbe 2004; Peter and de Vreese 2004) b) media outlets (de Vreese et al. 2006; Kleinen-von Königslöw 2010) as well as c) EU member states (de Vreese 2001; Schuck et al. 2011).

Neidhardt (2006) advises not to idealise the notion of the European public sphere by applying benchmarks that will eventually lead to the conclusion that there is a deficit in its development. For example, it is plausible that the degree of Europeanisation varies across policy fields, since the EU does not have equal decision-making authority in all policy fields. However, when assuming that all policy areas should be equally Europeanised, the standards by which the existence of a European public sphere is measured against are unnecessarily high. Hence, a lack of Europeanisation of policy fields that are mainly located at the national level, such as education and pensions, cannot be seen as an indication that a European public sphere does not exist (Koopmans and Erbe 2004 p.109; Pfetsch 2008).

Overall, if one applies this minimal definition, there is good reason to believe that a European public sphere exists (Trenz 2004; Wessler 2008) and empirical findings indicate a stable trend of Europeanisation of the national public spheres (Peters et al. 2006; Kleinen-von Königslöw 2012). A lower degree of EU news reported compared to news on national

---

7 It should be noted here, that also public spheres at the national level are segmented, in the sense that also at the national level, the news coverage varies across media outlets (cf. e.g. Erbe 2005).
governance cannot automatically be seen as a sign for a European public sphere deficit or even its absence. As Neidhardt et al. (2000 p.275) argue, the need of a public sphere depends heavily on the decision making structures of the respective political system. The more decision making powers are located at the respective level, the higher the requirements for a public sphere. Today, the role of the nation state is not obsolete and based on the principle of subsidiarity, the EU is only taking action on policies fields that can more effectively be solved at the supranational than national or sub-national level.

So far, research on the European public sphere has hardly taken into account that there are different normative public sphere theories, each stating different requirements for the functioning of the public sphere. Instead, the underlying normative conceptions of the European public sphere are most often based on Habermas’ deliberative theory (Eriksen 2004; Brüggemann and Kleinen-von Königslöw 2009; Peters et al. 2006; Kleinen-von Königslöw 2012). Some studies, furthermore, lack information on what normative public sphere theory their conception of the European public sphere is based on (see e.g. Machill et al. 2006; Garcia-Blanco and Cushion 2010).

There is only one study by Latzer and Saurwein (2006) that theoretically discuss three normative public sphere theories in the context of the European public sphere. The normative role of the public sphere from point of view of each of the theories is outlined. In addition, it is discussed on what aspects empirical studies on the European public sphere would focus from point of view of the respective normative theory. However, there is no direct comparison of normative public sphere theories and empirical findings in the context of the European public sphere. Another empirical study by Downey et al. (2012) compares different models of the public sphere in the context of the EU constitutional debate. Yet, the main focus of the study is on differences between national public spheres across different states and over time. Only the thematic context, not the theoretical one, concerns the EU. Hence, a direct link to the European public sphere is missing. A claim-making analysis is conducted by focussing quotations made by the 30 most quoted actors in the media of four EU and two non-EU member states. As a result, there are nearly only exclusively politicians from the national political arena included in the sample (ibid., p. 6). Furthermore, the study only takes three normative public sphere models into account, namely the elitist, the liberal and discursive public sphere. The notion of the participatory public sphere, which puts mainly emphasis on the visibility and participation of ordinary citizens, was not examined. The next section

---

8 The liberal, participators and discursive public sphere.
provides a brief overview of different actor groups in the European public sphere before turning to the research strategy of this paper.

4.1 Actors in the European public sphere

If one could simply apply the actor structure of the national political system to the EU level, one would differentiate between (A) the EU’s governmental system consists of the Commission, the Council of the EU, the European Parliament and the Court of Justice, as well as the EU’s administration, (B) the European intermediary system which can likewise be separated into (B1) European political parties (B2) European organised interest and finally (C) the EU citizens.

However, the EU’s political system is not a genuine “European”, but it is inevitably linked to the member state level. Therefore, in the European public sphere, one can distinguish between a) actors from the national arena that appear in the context of EU governance (horizontal) and b) EU level actors (vertical). Referring back to the three groups of actors mentioned above, one can distinguish between (A) national vs. EU-level governmental actors, (B1) national political parties vs. political groups of the European Parliament. Both are relevant since it is the national parties of the EU member states that run in the European elections. However, within the European parliament, transnational party groups that exceed purely national interests have emerged (Hix et al. 2006). (B2) civil society actors based at the national vs. EU level, representing “European” interests (Eising 2012; Pollack 1997). Finally, this study makes the case that EU citizens can be divided into (C) national vs. supranational EU citizens. National EU citizens are ordinary persons from the EU member states who are members of the EU’s political community, as such, they are entitled to certain rights and duties and exercise these rights and duties and participate in the EU’s political community. The reference to “national” indicates that it is known from which member state the respective EU citizen is. One example of national EU citizens are French citizens who vote in the European Parliament elections. They can be identified as EU (not national) citizens because they are citizens of one of the member states and participate in EU (not national) governance. While they account for EU citizens, it is simultaneously known from which EU member state they are, namely France. Supranational EU citizens, on the other hand, account for the members of the European political community as such, meaning that they cannot be differentiated by nationality. In this sense, supranational EU citizens represent a truly European citizenry and comprise the citizens of the EU as a whole. An example of supranational EU citizens are the European voters that cast a vote in the European
Parliament elections. The “European voters” are EU citizens and as such entitled to participate in EU governance. To have the legal status as an EU citizen and to be entitled to that right, one needs to be a native citizen from one of the member states. However, for supranational EU citizens the member state of origin is unknown, instead, they accounts for the EU citizens as a collective.

Both, actors from the horizontal-national level and the vertical-European level account for the overall actor structure of the European public sphere. However, it can be argued that the vertical actor dimension reflects a more advanced and truly European public sphere, since these actors are directly related to the EU level. The horizontal dimension, on the other hand, simultaneously links back to national sentiments. It is possible that levels of visibility of actors vary on these two dimensions, hence, in addition to the overall visibility, the vertical and horizontal dimension are examined separately.

5. Research strategy: Applying normative public sphere theories to the EU level

The normative public sphere theories are ideal types that state, among other criteria, desired levels of visibility for different actor groups. This study aims to empirically examine the actor structure of the European public sphere in the light of the four different public sphere theories. The primary research question is: Which normative model of the public sphere is best able to describe the empirical levels of visibility of different actors in the European public sphere? In order to answer this question, this study compares the ideal typical actor structure proposed by theories with the empirical observable levels of visibility of different actors in the mediated European public sphere. For this purpose, this study derived expectations for the visibility of different actors from the normative public sphere theories, paying special attention to the role of intermediary actors and citizens (Table 1). The desired levels of visibility of different actors proposed by the public sphere theories have been divided into high, medium and low. The rationale behind this is that in order to examine the empirical relevance of normative theories, vaguely defined entities of the theories have to be replaced with more concrete, measurable concepts (Mutz 2008). What is important is that these categories are not understood in absolute numbers. Instead, this paper makes the case that the actor structures put forward by the public sphere theories have to be seen in terms of the relationships between these different actors. I argue that none of the public sphere theories expects that the visibility of governmental actors is low, even if they put forward a citizen-centered view, such as the participatory public sphere theory. Governmental actors are central in the political system and possess direct legitimacy. To communication their activities to the citizens and
gain legitimacy for their actions, governmental actors have to be visible in the public sphere. What is more important is how the visibility of other actor groups relates to the visibility of governmental actors. Taking the visibility of governmental actors as a benchmark, the presence of the remaining actor groups is measured against the visibility of governmental actors.

*Table 1* Overview of public sphere theories and expected levels of visibility for actors

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Actor</th>
<th>Elitist Public Sphere</th>
<th>Liberal Public Sphere</th>
<th>Discursive Public Sphere</th>
<th>Participatory Public Sphere</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Governmental actors</td>
<td>High</td>
<td>High</td>
<td>High</td>
<td>High</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Political Parties</td>
<td>Medium</td>
<td>Medium</td>
<td>Medium</td>
<td>Medium</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Formal Civil Society</td>
<td>None</td>
<td>Low</td>
<td>Medium</td>
<td>Medium</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Informal Civil Society</td>
<td>None</td>
<td>Low</td>
<td>Medium⁹</td>
<td>High</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Citizens</td>
<td>None</td>
<td>None</td>
<td>Medium⁹</td>
<td>High</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 1 furthermore shows that the public sphere theories conceptualise the compositions of actors differently. For example, while the discursive and participatory theory divides civil society actors into formal and informal groups, this is not the case for the liberal public sphere theory. Besides, citizens are seen as belonging to low scale civil society actors in the discursive theory, while they represent a separate actor group only from the point of view of the participatory perspective.

As mentioned previously, the actors of the European public sphere consist of actors from the national level that appear in the context of EU governance as well as EU-level actors. Both of those two groups constitute the overall actor structure of the European public sphere. However, as discussed above, research distinguishes the vertical and horizontal dimension of the European public sphere. Here, the second research question is whether the visibility of actors is equally distributed on those two dimensions. Or in other words: Is the normative model that best reflects the empirical actor structure of the European public sphere identical for the horizontal and vertical level? The question is relevant since previous research has indicated that the horizontal and vertical level of the European public sphere are not developed to an equal extent (cf. e.g. Brüggemann and Kleinen-von Konigslöw 2009). This

---

⁹ Even though the discursive public sphere theory pays special attention to unorganized civil society actors, a high level of visibility of this actor group is only demanded when normative issues are discussed (Habermas 1992, p.460). Since this analysis does not focus on discussions of normative issues, a medium level of visibility of informal civil society actors is sufficient.
might impact the overall actor structure and otherwise crucial insights about the actor composition at these two different levels might be overlooked.

5.1 Data and Methodology

To analyse the different normative models of the public sphere in light of the European public sphere, this study draws on a large scale content analysis of the 2009 European Parliament election carried out by the Providing an Infrastructure for Research on Electoral Democracy in the European Union (PIREDEU) project. The 2009 PIREDEU media study provides rich data on different actor groups that become visible in the news coverage of the 2009 European Parliament election and it includes content analysis data from all 27 member states. For each country, two broadsheets and one tabloid newspaper, in addition to two television news programmes from the most widely watched public and private TV stations were coded.\textsuperscript{10} Depending on the date of the election in the respective country, the sample period covers the time span of three weeks between May 14 to June 4 and May 17 to June 7 (for more details see data documentation report in Schuck et al. 2010).

For the purpose of this study, the original sample of 48983 national and EU news stories (30620 newspaper articles and 18363 TV news) was limited to what is defined in the data as EU news stories that discuss EU affairs extensively or whose main focus is on EU policy, polity or politics to ensure that actors appear in the context of EU governance (N=12850). Since not all EU member states are represented equally in the sample, and thus to avoid that the coverage of individual EU member states distorts the results, this study created a weight that takes into account the number of EU news stories per county. Regarding the reliability of the data, the inter-coder reliability has been tested, using Krippendorff’s alpha\textsuperscript{11}. For the PIREDEU data set, the actor coding has been proven to be reliable (cf. Schuck et al. 2011).

Since it is the EU citizens who determine the outcome of an election, their visibility in the news coverage is likely to be higher compared to non-election times. The same arguably applies to other EU level actors, such as MEPs and political groups of the European Parliament. Hence, this analysis is carried out under favourable conditions which likely to increase the visibility of actors from the vertical dimension of the European public sphere.

\textsuperscript{10} One exception is Belgium, which has been coded as two media system (Flanders and Wallonia). Furthermore, four TV programmes for Germany; one programme Luxembourg; three programmes for Malta and three programmes for Spain have been coded.

\textsuperscript{11} The data and results of the reliability test were provided by the PIREDEU project.
This needs to be kept in mind when interpreting the results, especially with regard to generalised statements on the visibility in the European public sphere.

5.2 Measures
The normative models of the public sphere mentioned above are ideal types. To operationalise the respective actor categories that have been derived from the theories, this study recoded and combined different groups and individual actors from the PIREDEU codebook which were coded on the EU and member state level. Since the codebook was not constructed for a comparison of public sphere models, some compromises and approximations had to be made to measure the actor groups that have been derived from the public sphere theories. These are discussed in the following.

In the data set, for each news story, up to six actors were coded when they were mentioned at least twice in the respective news story. An actor can be a person, but also a group, an institution or an organisation. The first actor coded is the main actor of the news story, which was identified by the number of mentions and general importance in the story. The remaining actors were coded in order of their appearance. For each of the following categories, a dummy variable has been created, indicating whether a specific actor has been mentioned in a news story or not (mentioned=1, not mentioned=0). The news story has been chosen as unit of analysis, because only up to six actors per news story and not all (potential) actors mentioned in the news story were coded. Using frequency of mentions would potentially over- or underestimate the visibility of actor groups. Therefore, it is more meaningful to consider whether (and not how many times) different actors are present.

Based on the normative models, actors in the public sphere have broadly been divided into actors of the governmental system, the formal and informal civil society actors and individual citizens. The operationalisations of the respective categories are outlined in the following:

**Governmental actors** In this study, governmental actors are defined as actors that belong to the governmental system of (a) the EU member states or (b) the EU. The governmental system itself consists of the executive, legislative, judiciary and the political administration. The PIREDEU data set includes actor codes that can likewise be classified into these categories (see Table 1 for more details).

---

12 For a detailed overview of the respective codes see Appendix.
13 See Appendix 1 for an overview of the actors coding in table form.
**Political parties** Even though political parties are located at the intermediary level of the public sphere, they are analysed as a separate category. This is because parties are seen as the only relevant intermediary actor in the elitist theory, while they are seen as rather closely related to governmental actors from the point of view of the discursive and participatory public sphere theory (Gerhards et al. 1998 p.68). The category includes national political parties from the EU member states, but also political groups of the European Parliament.

**Formal/informal civil society** Formal and informal civil society actors are part of the intermediary system. Both the discursive and participatory public sphere theory differentiate between more formal and organised and more informal and less organised civil society actors. Formal civil society actors possess an official organisational (and often hierarchical) structure, while unorganised civil society actors are less formally organised. Ideally, formal civil society actors would include trade unions, professional organisations and head organisations and leading interest groups, while informal civil society would consists of smaller interest groups, social movements, citizens’ initiatives and grassroot organisations. Unfortunately, since the codebook was not constructed for a comparison of public sphere models, civil society actors were not coded in this fashion so that some compromises and approximations had to be made.

To approximate the concept of formal civil society actors, I draw on two actor categories of the PIREDEU codebook, namely “professional groups” (representing e.g. the interest teachers, framers etc.) and “interest organisations”. The code for interest organisations is a rather broad category and while it would be desirable to be able to differentiate what particular interests are represented and whether those organisations are highly or less organised, this is not directly possible based on the data set.

Instead, to measure informal civil society actors this research proposes to follow the strategy of Gerhards et al. (1998), who operationalise informal civil society actors as individual actors that are not representatives of formally organised interests (cf. ibid., p.100). In the PREDEU codebook, “activists” and “experts” can be seen as such individual civil society actors that constitute “informal civil society actors” in this study. Activists can, at the same time, be used as an approximation to measure social movement actors.

**EU citizens** An EU citizen has been defined as a citizen from the EU member states who takes a role as an EU citizen when EU governance is concerned. This study has proposed that in the European public sphere, EU citizens can be further differentiated in national and supranational EU citizens. To operationalise national EU citizens, I draw on the PIREDEU
actor scheme of the content analysis codebook, where for each EU member state, non-organized ordinary citizen(s), non-organized population groups or the population of a country as a whole (e.g. voters, people or the public; for television, e.g. country's ordinary citizens being interviewed) were coded. Together they account for the national EU citizens in this study. The concept of supranational EU citizen refers to a supranational, European citizenship, meaning that the respective citizen or group of citizens cannot be distinguished by nationality, but accounts for the EU citizens as such. To operationalise supranational EU citizens, I rely again on the PIREDEU actor scheme. At the level of EU-wide actors, non-organized ordinary citizen(s), non-organized population groups or the EU population as a whole (e.g. Europeans, European voters, European citizens, European population or European public) were coded, which constitute the supranational EU citizens in this study. Together national and supranational EU citizens are used to approximate the concept of the EU citizens that is put forward by this study.

6. Results

This section presents the results on the visibility of different actor groups in the European public sphere in light of the four normative public sphere theories. When looking at the overall levels of visibility in the European public sphere (Table 2), governmental actors are visible in about 87 per cent of the EU related news coverage. Their visibility clearly prevails compared to all other actor groups. Political parties represent the second most visible actor group. Compared to governmental actors, their visibility is about three times lower (30.53 %). Both formal and informal civil society actors are the least visible actor group in EU news. Turning to the last category, the visibility of EU citizens reaches 25 per cent. Even though the visibility of EU citizens is 63 per cent lower compared to governmental actors, it exceeds the presence of formal and informal civil society actors combined. This is even more remarkable when keeping in mind that EU citizens have so far mainly been neglected in European public sphere research. Yet, what do these results mean in the light of the different normative public sphere theories?14

14 For an overview of the actor structure of the respective normative theories see Appendix 2.
Taking the visibility of governmental actors as a benchmark, the empirical levels of visibility are compared to the normative expectations of the public sphere theories. From the elitist perspective, political parties ought to represent citizens’ interest and they have the highest share among the intermediary actors in EU news. In the elitist model, there is no need for the presence of additional actor groups. Yet, civil society actors and citizens combined are visible in 37 per cent of the news, which even exceeds the visibility of parties. Hence, it can be concluded that the actor structure of the European public sphere is not the one of an elitist public sphere. It is neither participatory, because the theory demands a high visibility of informal civil society actors and ordinary citizens. However, informal civil society actors are by far the least visible group and their visibility is approximately 15 times lower compared to governmental actors. Even though citizens are the second most visible intermediary actors, their visibility is still three times lower compared to governmental actors and cannot be considered as high.

The empirical levels of visibility in the European public sphere are largely in accordance with the liberal and discursive public sphere theory. When considering the actor structure based on the normative criteria of the liberal public sphere, civil society actors are the least visible actors group in the European public sphere. The visibility of civil society actors is six times lower compared to governmental actors and can be considered relatively low, which is nevertheless sufficient for the normative expectations of the liberal public sphere. The only category that is not in line with the expectations of the liberal theory is the visibility of EU citizens, which should be non-existent. In the actor structure of the discursive public sphere theory, citizens are seen as actors that belong to the group of low scale civil society actors. If defined in this way, informal civil society actors reach one third of the visibility of governmental actors and are as visible as political parties. Hence, low scale civil society actors are among the most visible intermediary actors in the European public sphere.
Only the presence of formal civil society actors is too weak from point of view of the discursive theory.

As mentioned previously, the European public sphere possesses a vertical and horizontal actor dimension and it is possible that the results might vary on these different levels. The horizontal actor structure looks at actors from the national level that appear in EU news. The image of the horizontal actor structure (Table 3) seems, at first glance, relatively similar to the overall actor structure. Yet, the visibility of governmental actors decreases by more than 30 per cent, while the visibility of the remaining actors decreases only by maximum five percentage points. As a consequence, the visibility of intermediary actors and citizens increases in comparison to governmental actors. In this sense, the horizontal dimension of the European public sphere is slightly more participatory. However, the visibility of national governmental actors is still more that 30 per cent higher compared to national EU citizens. Hence, the levels of visibility cannot be considered equal. The gap between national governmental actors and national informal civil society actors is even larger. Therefore, it is still the liberal and discursive public sphere theory that describe the European public sphere best.

Table 3  Horizontal Actor Structure in EU News

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Actor Group</th>
<th>Per cent of EU news</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>National governmental actors</td>
<td>54.60</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>National political parties</td>
<td>29.12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>National formal civil society</td>
<td>7.18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>National informal civil society</td>
<td>4.87</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>National EU citizens</td>
<td>21.06</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The vertical actor dimension of the European public sphere, on the other hand, refers to increased attention to EU level actors in the national media coverage on EU governance. When looking at these EU-level actors separately (Table 4), the picture changes radically. First of all and rather surprisingly, the occurrence of EU governmental actors is slightly higher compared to national governmental actors. Previous research has often criticised that it is not EU level actors, but national ones that are in the center of attention in EU news (de Vreese 2004). Yet, this does not seem to be the case during the 2009 European election. The

---

15 "National" in this table means that the actors included are from the national political arena, but appear in the thematic context of EU news. These actors have been coded for each EU member state.
higher focus on EU governmental actors in comparison to national ones is as such a positive result, since references to actors from the vertical level indicate a more advanced European public sphere. However, when leaving EU governmental actors aside, there are hardly any other actor groups visible on the vertical level of the European public sphere.

The visibility of all remaining actors, namely European political groups, European intermediary actors and European EU citizens is below five per cent. As in the previous cases, European civil society actors are the least visible actor group. It is the European citizens that reach the second highest level of visibility after governmental actors. Yet, on comparison to governmental actors, their visibility is twelve times lower and seems marginal. Based on these findings, the vertical dimension of the European public sphere is clearly elitist. One could even argue that it is too elitist, even from the perspective of the elitist public sphere theory, since political parties are nearly invisible.

Table 4  Vertical Actor Structure in EU News

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Actor Group</th>
<th>Per cent of EU news</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>European governmental actors</td>
<td>59.91</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>European political parties</td>
<td>2.16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>European formal civil society</td>
<td>1.70</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>European informal civil society</td>
<td>0.09</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>European EU citizens</td>
<td>4.62</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>N=12850</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

7. Discussion & Conclusion

This paper has given an account of the empirical relevance of different normative public sphere theories in the context of the European public sphere. More specifically, it focused on one particular dimension, namely the visibility of different actor groups. The results indicate that neither the normative requirements of an elitist nor participatory European public sphere are fulfilled with regard to the overall visibility of actors in the European public sphere. Hence, conceptualisations of the European public sphere based on those two normative theories would derive the conclusion that the European public sphere is currently only insufficiently developed and hence limited with regard to its ability to fulfil its function for the democratic process. The empirical results correspond largely with the vision of the liberal and discursive public sphere.

16 “European” in this table means that the actors included are from the European political arena and appear in the thematic context of EU news. These actors have been coded at the EU level.
However, the results differ strongly when analysing the vertical and horizontal actor level of the European public sphere separately. While the horizontal dimension is more inclusive of civil society actors and EU citizens, the vertical level is clearly elitist and it is nearly exclusively EU governmental actors that are in the centre of attention. This absent link between the EU level governmental actors and the EU citizens might explain why the EU is perceived as a distant institution by the citizens (Follesdal and Hix 2006). Based on the results of this study, one can differentiate between an elitist-vertical and liberal/discursive-horizontal dimension of the European public sphere.

There are two possible explanations for the elitist character of the actor structure of the vertical dimension of the European public sphere, one being a structural problem, the other one being related to the media itself. The low visibility of EU level political parties can be easily explained since there are no “real” political parties at the EU level, but groups of likeminded national parties. Especially during the election campaign, national political parties are more relevant since it is them (or rather their MEPs) running for seats in the European parliament. The weak structure of a civil society at the EU level has been discussed by previous research (e.g. Trenz 2004). In the context of the discussion of the European democratic deficit, the EU aimed to create a framework for participation of civil society groups in the 1990s (Eising 2012). Furthermore, EU level civil society organisations have received financial support by the EU (ibid., p.842). Even though civil society organisations are consulted in the EU’s decision making process (Trenz 2004 p.301), the European civil society structures are currently still underdeveloped, at least with regard to their visibility in the European public sphere. Hence, it might also be the media themselves that primarily rely on intermediary groups from the national level. A reason might be that contacts at the national level have already been established for a longer time period. But also EU correspondents often depend on information provided by sources that have the same nationality so that “European information remains (…) within the national framework” (Terzis 2008 p.544). This “national framework” might also explain why the supranational EU citizens are less visible in the media coverage than national EU citizens, who simultaneously establish a reference to the national level.

The visibility of actor at the vertical level of the European public sphere reflects some of the issues the EU has been criticised for in the debate of the EU’s democratic deficit, namely being driven by elites while lacking civic support. Especially the lack of European intermediary actors ought to represent the citizens is striking and since supranational EU citizens are not visible themselves, there is hardly anyone who is able to speak on behalf of or
represent the interests of the EU citizens as a whole. As a consequence, governmental actors are hardly able to hear the voice of the European people, which impacts the ability of EU governance to be responsive to citizens’ will. The higher visibility of national intermediary actors as well as national EU citizens might be able to diminish this deficit to a certain extent. Yet, it potentially lets the EU appear as a rather elitists institution and contribute to the fact that citizens perceive the EU as distant. This (among other things) might contribute to the EU’s democratic deficit, while hinder the development of a truly European citizenry at same time.

In conclusion, this paper has contributed to the discussion of the European public sphere by highlighting that there is not only one normative model of the public sphere, depending on which results regarding the development state and health of the European public sphere vary. Additionally, differences on the vertical and horizontal actor dimension of the European public sphere have to be taken into account. Yet, the presence of different actors in the public sphere is only one normative criterion of the public sphere theories. Further research is needed that considers the development of visibility over time and across different topics of the news coverage. Additionally, research might conduct content analyses with more detailed actor schemes and account for more specific criteria postulated by the public sphere theories, such as a discursive structure of conversations from the point of view of the discursive theory or direct quotations of citizen required from the participatory public sphere.

Nevertheless, this research was able to highlight the need to specify normative theories of the public sphere when talking about its European framework. These specifications will help to develop the theoretical concept of the European public sphere further and contribute to our understanding of the image of EU democracy that becomes visible to the EU citizens via the European public sphere. In the long run, a European public sphere that is more open for European civil society as well as EU citizens might contribute to more responsive and more democratic governance at the EU level.
Reference


Appendix 1

Overview of actor coding

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Actor</th>
<th>Operationalisation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Governmental actors</strong></td>
<td>(see below)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>National governmental actors</td>
<td><em>National executive actors</em> (e.g. governments, head of states, ministers), <em>legislative actors</em> (e.g. parliaments, MPs and MEPs(^1)), the <em>political administrations</em> (e.g. civil servants and diplomats) and the <em>judiciary</em> (e.g. courts, judges) of the EU member states</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(horizontal)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>European governmental actors</td>
<td><em>EU executive actors</em> (e.g. Commission, Council of the EU, Council of Ministers), <em>legislative actors</em> (e.g. European parliament, MEPs(^1)), the European <em>political administrations</em> (e.g. EU civil servants and diplomats) and the <em>judiciary</em> (e.g. Court of Justice)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(vertical)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Political Parties</strong></td>
<td>(see below)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>National political parties</td>
<td>National political parties of the EU member states</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(horizontal)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>European political parties</td>
<td>Political groups of the European Parliament</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(vertical)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Formal Civil Society</strong></td>
<td>(see below)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>National formal civil society</td>
<td>National “<em>professional groups</em>” (representing e.g. the interest teachers, framers etc.) and “<em>interest organisations</em>” of the member states</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(horizontal)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>European formal civil society</td>
<td>EU level “<em>professional groups</em>” (representing e.g. the interest teachers, framers etc.) and “<em>interest organisations</em>”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(vertical)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Informal Civil Society</strong></td>
<td>(see below)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>National informal civil society</td>
<td>National “<em>activists</em>” and “<em>experts</em>”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(horizontal)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>European informal civil society</td>
<td>EU level “<em>activists</em>” and “<em>experts</em>”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(vertical)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>EU citizens</strong></td>
<td>(see below)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>National EU citizens</td>
<td>National “non-organized ordinary citizen(s), non-organized population groups or the population of a country as a whole” (e.g. voters, people or the public; for television, e.g. country's ordinary citizens being interviewed) of the EU member states</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(horizontal)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>European EU citizens</td>
<td>EU-level “non-organized ordinary citizen(s), non-organized population groups or the population of a country as a whole” (e.g. Europeans, European voters, European citizens, European population, European public)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(vertical)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

\(^1\) At the member state level, it is unfortunately not possible to differentiate between MEPs and MEPs candidates. Hence, both are included in the category “governmental actors”.

\(^18\) At the member state level, it is unfortunately not possible to differentiate between MEPs and MEPs candidates. Hence, both are included in the category “governmental actors”.

35
### Overall Actor Structure by Public Sphere Theory

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Actor</th>
<th>Elitist Public Sphere</th>
<th>Liberal Public Sphere</th>
<th>Discursive Public Sphere</th>
<th>Participatory Public Sphere</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Governmental actors</td>
<td>87.44</td>
<td>87.44</td>
<td>87.44</td>
<td>87.44</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Political Parties</td>
<td>30.53</td>
<td>30.53</td>
<td>30.53</td>
<td>30.53</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Formal Civil Society</td>
<td>13.67</td>
<td>13.67</td>
<td>8.63</td>
<td>8.63</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Informal Civil Society</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>28.90</td>
<td>5.72</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Citizens</td>
<td>24.76</td>
<td>24.76</td>
<td></td>
<td>24.76</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Horizontal Actor Structure by Public Sphere Theory

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Actor</th>
<th>Elitist Public Sphere</th>
<th>Liberal Public Sphere</th>
<th>Discursive Public Sphere</th>
<th>Participatory Public Sphere</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>National Governmental Actors</td>
<td>54.60</td>
<td>54.60</td>
<td>54.60</td>
<td>54.60</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>National Political Parties</td>
<td>29.12</td>
<td>29.12</td>
<td>29.12</td>
<td>29.12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>National Formal Civil Society</td>
<td>11.47</td>
<td>11.47</td>
<td>7.18</td>
<td>7.18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>National Informal Civil Society</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>24.58</td>
<td>4.87</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Citizens</td>
<td>21.06</td>
<td>21.06</td>
<td></td>
<td>21.06</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Vertical Actor Structure by Public Sphere Theory

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Actor</th>
<th>Elitist Public Sphere</th>
<th>Liberal Public Sphere</th>
<th>Discursive Public Sphere</th>
<th>Participatory Public Sphere</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>European Governmental Actors</td>
<td>59.91</td>
<td>59.91</td>
<td>59.91</td>
<td>59.91</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>European Political Parties</td>
<td>2.16</td>
<td>2.16</td>
<td>2.16</td>
<td>2.16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>European Formal Civil Society</td>
<td>2.54</td>
<td>2.54</td>
<td>1.70</td>
<td>1.70</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>European Informal Civil Society</td>
<td>2.54</td>
<td>2.54</td>
<td>5.45</td>
<td>0.09</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>European EU Citizens</td>
<td>4.62</td>
<td>4.62</td>
<td></td>
<td>4.62</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>