Chapter 6
Political power and the complexity of the public sphere

With the advent of the Internet, the collective, mainstream nature of the mass-mediated public sphere became more in tune with the thesis on ‘individualisation’ in modern society (Bauman, 1992; Beck and Beck-Gernsheim, 2002). With interaction and participation enhanced by enhanced by digital media, reception, subjective preferences and viewpoints are more easily articulated and linked to others, re/producing webs of intersubjectivity. The autonomy and self-realisation typically associated with the modern individual ‘fits’ better with a public sphere partly reproduced through Internet-based ‘personal’ media as opposed to mass media. The personalisation of media on the Internet enables the individual to voice opinion directly in social networks, to participate in campaigns and social movements, and to exchange opinions in social media in his or her own ways and language, drawing upon personal experiences, knowledge, engagements, values and judgements (Becker and Wehner, 2001; Benkler, 2006). Because the threshold for speaking up in the public sphere is reduced in online environments, more people take part, a trend that minimises the threshold further. Whereas general mass media, including their online versions, tend to produce homogeneity so as to target mainstream markets, the majority of Internet fora, blogs, Twitter and Facebook produce a heterogeneity that seems to have difficulties in integrating itself reflexively.

An essential question is how this hyper-complex public sphere can ensure legitimacy and stability for the political system. In this chapter, I review research on the political use of Internet-based media, and argue for a differentiation of the Internet-based public sphere. I draw on the example of the EU and claim that there are few reasons to defend a consensus-bearing public sphere. I argue that the current, differentiated political public sphere will provide a less stable platform for political decision-making and there is no European public sphere in sight. This may not imply that the idea of a singular public sphere should be abandoned at a national level. For every representative and formal political institution, such as...
municipal and regional authorities or parliaments, there is a public sphere working as a normative resonance board for its decisions. In relation to national parliaments, there is a circulation of topical communication oriented towards processes related to these institutions. I therefore speak of the public sphere in the singular for one theoretical and one empirical reason. Theoretically, it makes it easier to see the essential role of the public sphere particularly when, as here, the public sphere is addressed as an instrument for formal politics; consequently, I consider the public sphere as a societal domain connecting the private sphere and the state. Empirically, isolated ‘public spheres’ in time and space are highly unlikely phenomena due to the constantly circulating, flowing and leaking nature of communication. Thus, the serious structural challenge I address here is not the complete splitting of public political discourse but the increasing differentiation of groups, topics and styles within the public sphere, which may make it less suitable as a guide to public opinion, and more vulnerable for selectivity and manipulation by formal politics.

IS DIFFERENTIATION A DEMOCRATIC PROBLEM?

It is hardly surprising that media research in the 1990s turned to Habermas’ study of the transformation of the early European bourgeois public sphere, and to later theories of political deliberation, to understand the significance of the Internet in relation to social change and politics. Theories of constitution of public meaning addressed precisely what the Internet offered: a limitless discursive space with dramatically expanded possibilities for productive and enlightening meaning-formation. Research has demonstrated that digital fora of various sorts have the capacity to mediate engagement and critical discussion about issues of common public interest. It has analysed the ability of the Internet to support public deliberation, examining how blogs and fora contribute to the critical public sphere locally, nationally and internationally by reproducing normative conditions for public opinion formation (Becker and Wehner, 2001; Benkler, 2006; Dahlberg, 2001; Räsänen and Kuovo, 2007).

The current astonishing differentiation of topics, styles and participants transforms the public sphere and how we view it in relation to democracy and culture. The Internet plays an active role in the current dramatic differentiation of the public sphere, in terms of topics debated, styles applied and persons involved. The diversity of communication on the Internet is in part caused by (1) anonymity and quasi-oral styles of communication facilitating extreme viewpoints, uncivil char-
acteristics, and unconventional ways of argumentation; (2) diversity of communicative forms and genres (in social media like Facebook, chat fora, Twitter, blogs and homepages with comment functions), and (3) diversity of intertextual connections among online fora (hyperlinks, RSS feeds, social media, search engines).

In their reciprocity and heterogeneity, the Internet and the web complement the mass media. On the one hand, the international mass media enable broad attention around some prioritised public topics ‘of national interest’. On the other, the Internet underpins the individualisation and segmentation of modern societies, with attention and engagement spread among a wider range of topics, making a political focus difficult to trace by those in formal politics. As a modern response to a dynamic democracy, the plethora of digital arenas for debate offers less guidance for politics but more possibilities for personal expression. Compared to conventional mass-mediated journalism, online journalism tends to be more compartmentalised and based upon self-selection and personalisation. Selection criteria are produced by those who communicate. Rather than simply offering carefully edited information, the majority of Internet-based media provide a differentiated space for interaction and user-composed information that tends to be rather specialised – often closer to personal opinion, unconfirmed information and rumour. In general, whereas the mass media tend to work toward the mainstream, the Internet encourages diversity.

The current political public sphere is generally conceived as a ‘space’ produced by communication about public matters as in journalism, opinion and argumentation, in face-to-face communication as well as in mediated communication. Such public discourses in a wide range of places, media and genres may lead to more or less converging views on public matters, i.e. matters that concern all potentially affected, whether in a local community, the nation state or super-national regions like the EU, or for that matter, globally. The interchange is ideally based on argumentation but may also be impulsive, emotional and mediated through various aesthetic means (Papacharissi 2004). The ability and ways to articulate points of view may vary greatly in style and formality, as well as in range of themes. However, the diversity may subsequently enter into a more binding and disciplined form in quality newspapers and parliament deliberations (Bimber 1999; Gimmler 2001; Raphael and Karpowitz 2013).

During the era of the press and broadcasting, the public sphere was split between a minority of speakers and a majority of listeners. The one-way, mass-oriented technologies of print and broadcasting enabled this division, which in many ways contradicted the democratic dictum that all individuals should have the opportunity to express their views, and take part in society and politics as cit-
izens. What neutralised some of this division between supply and demand was the face-to-face interaction in all kinds of associations and organisations in society, which picked up and processed the themes of the mass media. The Internet and the web changed all this in several steps. During the last two decades, the complexity of the public sphere in terms of arenas, styles, genres and themes has exploded. The most significant changes have occurred since the 1990s with the World Wide Web, the smart phone and social media.

What is genuinely novel with the Internet in a democratic perspective is that it has bridged the social division between speakers and listeners of the public sphere, and turned everyone into potential participants in numerous public interactions and debates, without cancelling the possibility of communication in an expanded space. Through blogs, YouTube and social networking sites like Twitter and Facebook, the public has transformed itself into narrators, reporters, editors and broadcasters (Davis 2009). To be sure, the Internet is approached by the population as consumers and private persons more than as citizens. Nevertheless, as we know, the Internet is intensively used by national and international NGOs and civil organisations, ad hoc manifestations, political parties and individual politicians.

SOCIAL ENGAGEMENT ON THE NET

In the 1990s, scholars pointed out the overlapping features of the Internet (its interconnectivity, its hypertextuality and flexibility in time and space, its variability in terms of media forms, etc.) and the model of the open and reasoning public sphere by Jürgen Habermas (1996, 2009). However, only empirical research could assert whether these forms and features of the Internet and the Web were actually empowering individuals and social institutions in their engagement for social and political change. A number of studies analysed online debating fora to see whether they develop towards inclusive dialogue-oriented spheres (Hill and Hughes 1998; Holt 2004; Raphael and Karpowitz 2013).

Every new medium will quickly stimulate new visions and worries about how it may rearrange society. With the advent of the Internet and the Web as widespread communication media in the 1990s, theories of a more involving, including and active democracy were reconsidered. As an example, Peter Dahlgren (1995) made the points that first, the composition of publics changed, most noticeably a growing plurality and heterogeneous composition of communicating individual and collective agents, including counter-publics. From a male, middle class-dominated activity, the public sphere is now increasingly marked by religious and eth-
nic diversity, and also a more balanced representation in terms of age and gender. This fact implies that participants in the public sphere bring with them very different and often contrasting lifeworlds involving heterogeneity of life experiences and expectations towards society and politics. Second, this diversity leads to new processes of identity formation, which evidently include emotional and aesthetic expressions along with contestation and conflict, since the public sphere will be influenced by stratification and unequal social conditions. And third, the probability for actual deliberation remains a topic of contestation itself in the public sphere (Dahlgren 2005; Dahlgren and Olsson 2007).

Another research approach in the 1990s was to analyse the ability of the Internet to increase or erode social engagement. Social capital was then seen as individual resources invested in political communication, deriving from participation in social groups of various sorts. Research indicated that Internet use meant less time spent on other forms of communication, including participation in public associations and other forms of civic engagement (Nie and Erbring 2000). Other studies, however, indicated that time spent on the Internet increased or supplemented civic engagement (Shah et al. 2001; Wellman et al. 2001). Similarly, in a later study in several European countries, frequent Internet use co-varied with civic engagement in the public sphere or in civil society (Räsänen and Kuovo 2007). Internet use proved more significant for social involvement than variables like age and gender. Sociological studies on Internet-based civic involvement indicated that these kinds of social and political practices involving the Internet have been growing (Kahn and Kellner 2004). On the other hand, more Internet-time was also spent on non-civic forms of communication (computer games, entertainment, etc.).

Internet-based structures of communication, including e-mail, mailing lists, wikis, blogs, chat groups or network sites like Facebook, all base their existence on information and communication from their users, including a wide variety of participants, events, views and topics. Not surprisingly, media theory and Internet-research turned rather quickly to Habermas’ study of the early European bourgeois public sphere and to theories of deliberation. Theories of deliberation addressed precisely what the Internet seemed to offer: possibilities for formation of productive enlightening and public opinion on a much broader scale than previously seen in history. This provided formation of public opinion as a medium between citizen preferences and political institutions. Several studies demonstrated that digital fora of various sorts have the capacity to create engagement and generate critical discussion about important issues of common public interest (Coleman & Gøtze 2001).
Similarly, research has examined the ability of the Internet to carry public deliberation (for an overview see Dahlberg 2001). A number of studies conclude that the Internet increases the number of social contacts and relationships because it generally increases the opportunities for interaction (DiMaggio et al. 2001; Wellman et al. 2001; Uslaner 2004; Cummings & Craut 2002). It is also argued that Internet activity does not take place at the expense of offline interaction but instead supplements it (Frazer 2000; Gershuny 2003; Lievrouw 2001; Shah et al. 2001). For instance, several studies of social capital and Internet use indicate that Internet use increases and supplements civic involvement (Wellman et al. 2001). Voluntary and political work in NGOs and social movements now requires the use of the Internet, and associations in music, sports, the arts, etc. generally use the Internet to communicate internally and to announce their existence on the Web. A general conclusion is that up to 2000, discussion fora on the Internet contributed to the critical public sphere, whether locally, nationally or internationally by reproducing normative conditions for public opinion formation.

A DEMOCRATIC INFRASTRUCTURE?

The lower threshold for political participation on the Internet compared to the mass media was generally seen as positive for democracy. Yet as we know, this fact was not without side effects of more ambivalent character, such as scepticism towards political institutions, and decreasing involvement in types of collective action that require more than simple computer work. People may prefer to enter into visible, if ineffective forms of political engagement, rather than political work that may be long-term and risky (Morozov 2012). Furthermore, against Clay Shirky’s argument that collective activities now can be coordinated more flexibly than ever, Malcolm Gladwell argued that the ability of many Internet media to create weak ties makes them less suited for building social movements that need strong tie organising (Gladwell 2010; Shirky 2009). A plausible conclusion from the interchange between Shirky and Gladwell, we may add, is that NGOs and social movements need to construct themselves through media of strong personal gatherings and meetings, and weak ties to reach a more widely sympathising, if less active, audience.

The wide range of studies in the 1990s and into the new millennium on the relationship between the Internet and political participation in the public sphere (involving qualitative interview data, surveys, focus groups and observation) pointed in different directions. Just like studies on social capital and civic partici-
pation in general, it was difficult to agree upon a general tendency. The impasse in research reflected the variety of different methods used, different national cultures and technological situations. Also, research was aimed at a rapidly moving target: The proliferation of Internet services diffused quickly throughout western societies, if with an uneven pace.

More importantly, the enquiries did in fact not address comparable phenomena. A variety of media (web, Internet Relay Chat, Internet messaging services, e-mail, etc.) was lumped together under the label of ‘Internet use’ (Rasmussen et al. 2010). However, in the first decade of the new millennium, it became quite clear that the staff in informatics departments were quite right in insisting that the Internet is not a medium at all, but an infrastructure much like railways and roads, which (according to its protocols or traffic signs) carries various media and genres like e-mail, file transfer, blogs, micro-blogs like Twitter, telephony, video, networking sites and more. The natures of these media vary greatly in the ways they present and mediate communication, and invite different kinds of use. Therefore, they must be kept separate in an analysis of their role in the public sphere. Following the now elementary insight that the Internet is an open infrastructure for many different media, a change of Internet research took place that differentiated between media and addressed them in the light of political public sphere theory. This closer connection to the political agenda also originated from the fact of the uneven growth in Internet use. Around the new millennium, the proportion of individuals using the Internet was around 50 percent in the OECD countries, but with considerable variance between the Scandinavian countries and southern Europe. With the continuing growth, the differences have been minimised.

Following this view on politics as omnipresent information, Elmer et al. addressed how the Internet, WWW and social media like Facebook and Twitter have entered and redefined the ‘permanent campaign’ through new spaces of communication like social media platforms, new roles, political actors, and through the circulation political communication, what they call ‘issue-objects’ (Elmer et al. 2012, 5). Political communication, they argue, must now include the ever-expanding capacity for information storage and retrieval, new entry point of communication, and expanded sites and modes of self-expression. With social media platforms, particularly, the actors, places and topics in political communication are multiplied (Elmer et al. 2012, 6). The network of political communication is more open-ended and distributed; has thus fewer central nodes, gatekeepers and agenda setters; and depends more on visibility and uses of time. It opens the field for non-professional political actors on Twitter, Facebook and blogs, such as partisan bloggers (Elmer et al. 2012). Overall, they present an image of a more stra-
tegically organised public sphere, although stressing that the permanent campaign remains a contested terrain where all statements are continually called into question and potentially destabilised.

**EPISTEMIC DUALITIES**

The discussion so far suggests that the increasing differentiation of communication in society has turned the public sphere into a realm that cannot be understood non-dimensionally. As an effect of complexity, the public sphere has developed an internal division of labour. This fact has been addressed by several observers of public communication in historical and political contexts. I would like to comment on this and subsequently connect this to the Internet and personal digital media.

The deliberative approach distinguishes sociologically between the *formal* parliamentary public sphere, and the *informal* public sphere or spheres. The latter is here thought of as 'composed of a plurality of publics overlapping and abutting one another, rather than as a unitary public idealised perhaps in the ancient Greek agora…' (McBride 2005, 508) McBride concludes that ‘If citizens are to enjoy political autonomy, then democratic institutions must ensure that communication flows freely between these publics, the realisation of democracy not being confined to the formal parliamentary sphere alone.’ This sociological two-track model between the formal and the informal public sphere serves to highlight the importance of the informal public sphere as a context of discovery, ‘in which social criticism can serve to problematize social practices and institutions and in so doing make them a theme for deliberation within the formal public sphere.’ (McBride 2005, 508, see also Habermas 1996, 307). In the two-track model of deliberative politics, inclusivity is not met satisfactorily by democratic representation in the parliament, but must be guaranteed through equal, broad and active participation in informal publics, and equally important, that ‘the lines of communication between formal and informal publics are kept open despite the attempts of elites to control them.’ (McBride 2005, 508)

A former collaborator of Habermas, Bernard Peters, pioneered in doing empirical studies of the political public sphere and suggested ways to operationalise the concept (Peters 1997, 2004). He distinguished between a wide public sphere involving journalism, public performances and other public events, and a narrower public sphere involving justification and argumentation, explanations, openness for objections and recognition of fallibility occurring in political meet-
ings, seminars and workshops, as well as in quality newspapers and broadcasting programmes. In its wide version, the main value of the public sphere lies in the ability and possibility of expression, if experimental, expressive and transitory. Such events express and provide vitality and colour to the public sphere. The narrower kind of public sphere would rather provide deliberative convergence of views based on argumentative reason, right to the doorstep of political decision-making.

Habermas himself follows Bernhard Peters’ idea that processes of communication and decision-making lie along a centre-periphery axis as a system of ‘sluices’ in public discourse and generally involve two modes of problem-solving: The periphery of groups and associations of many sorts that supply and receive ideas and opinions for political decision-making, and formal political procedures in the core system. Peters (1997) distinguished between public communication involving the mass media and public events, demonstrations and happenings, and a deliberative public sphere involving rational argumentation. The first kind of public communication includes experiments, expressive, affective and aesthetic expressions including transitory and issue-oriented controversies, and demonstrations. The latter kind specifically includes the justification of arguments and statements regarding public affairs, which the political system relates to in their parliamentary and legislative processes. The first kind injects vitality, provocation, fresh ideas and new arguments into the public sphere. The second deliberative public sphere provides reasoning and rational justification, and is located ‘between’ the political system and the wider sphere of expressive public communication. These two forms of public communication are also called public communication and public discourse. The latter consists of a smaller segment of the first, as it is oriented towards deliberation with arguments and facts. In *Between Facts and Norms*, Habermas (1996) makes a distinction between the informal public sphere supported and protected by citizenship and universal civil rights, and a formal public sphere of political bodies, formal will formation (argumentation, justification) and decision-making. Habermas’ version of a deliberative model of democracy relies on a conception of the interplay between informal opinion formation and institutionalised formal will formation. As we have seen, and unlike conventional political theory, Habermas argues that regulated procedures of debate need the underlying informal communication as not only a legitimation process but as a process of improving the quality of decisions.

Nancy Fraser (1995) makes a similar distinction between soft and strong versions of public deliberation. The strong version influences the public debate, whereas the softer versions have influence that is more indirect. Similarly, Van de
Steeg (2002, 508) distinguishes an empirically specific concept of public discourse from the wider concept of the public sphere, where the first constitutes the aggregate of texts and media debates, and the latter constitutes its potential and reference background. Public discourse refers to a finite number of issues that circulate between media and communicative contexts, and where some form of public opinion formation emerges on the background of the reservoir of the public sphere. Eriksen (2005) distinguishes between a general public sphere with free access to opinion formation processes, transnational-segmented publics of experts and policy-developers dedicated to distinct topics, and strong publics such as parliaments, in the political system. Eriksen thus includes will-formation of the political system in the public sphere. Also, the EMEDIATE project at the European University Institute made a distinction between the hard public sphere as the dimension of a political public sphere that is directly relevant for a democratic society, and the softer, non-institutional public sphere (Schulz-Forberg, 2005). These ideas indicate an internal functional duality within the public sphere, as they distinguish analytically between a ‘thick’ and a ‘thin’ dimension of that sphere. The thick dimension includes the vast universe of cultural, expressive, pseudo-private statements, whereas the thin dimension includes deliberation in a stricter sense. The question then is how the mass media and the personal media of the Internet position themselves vis-à-vis these distinctions.

Along these views, but emphasising the digital dimension, I distinguish between two dimensions of the public sphere, related to both topics, style and participants, and with reference to different functional emphasis. The representational dimension refers to the heterogeneity of topics, styles and groups that take part, and which reflects culture and everyday life, only seen before in everyday conversations and more or less peripheral social settings (clubs, parties, unions, therapy groups, etc.) With the expansion of this dimension through digital media, the public sphere is now becoming increasingly differentiated and diversified with regard to people, issues, styles and attitudes. In a numerical sense, it is becoming more democratic and inclusive, and also far more complex. This dimension is oriented towards culture, sports, science and everyday life, as well as politics. In the representational dimension, extensive differentiation of themes and styles is not balanced by generalisation. Internet-based media plays a vital part in this dimension.

The second dimension – the presentational dimension – refers to the deliberation over common issues by central figures acting as voices of the people. It presents a public agenda and an expression of public opinion to politics as a resonance for rational decision-making. Its procedural ideal is rational discourse of
argumentation and reasoning. It is primarily oriented towards homogeneity, focus and the political system. This dimension is at the centre of Habermas’ concern. Historically, the mass media has been a vital cause and effect of this differentiation of communication. In this context, they represent increasing complexity and contingency. However, equally important, the mass media generalise communication by allowing variation within certain standards or common denominators that transcend singular contexts. By applying recognisable genres and referring to a limited number of issues, communication and understanding becomes ‘less improbable’, to use the sociologist Niklas Luhmann’s phrase, by stabilising expectations. In this way, they reduce contingency, and in relation to political democracy they enable mutual observations between the public sphere and politics. This function of generalisation is predominantly effectuated in the presentational face of the public sphere.

INTERCONNECTIONS?

How the Internet is involved in these two dimensions is an empirical question, and empirical research indicates strongly that the Internet so far serves the representational dimension more than the presentational. Increasingly, the political system examines the possibilities of the Internet as a forum for political will formation and deliberation, but such attempts are risky. Due to the proliferation of personal media among individuals, they are used mostly as channels for citizen activity in the civil sphere and everyday life. The heterogeneity of Internet communication stands in a dynamic relationship to the homogeneity of the mainstream mass media, through a wide range of mechanisms of selecting, filtering, styling, formalisation and restructuring. If such integration occurs, reciprocity emerges between the presentational and representational dimensions. More precisely, in such a dialectic process, the mass media present mainstream issues (and mainstream positions to those issues) to the broader audience, as well as to the central powers of politics, economics, courts, sports, entertainment and social movements. On the other hand, substantial information and communication on the Internet is produced and consumed by segments of the public that are differentiated culturally, demographically and politically.

A dynamic relationship between the presentational and representational faces would imply that the public sphere serves its purpose as a political and cultural institution. Both dimensions serve basic functions to a democracy that depends on and appreciates both efficiency and diversity, both a strong public opinion, which
motivates politics on main concerns with the help of journalistic and entertainment techniques, and pluralistic and direct dialogue among its citizens. Diversity is increasingly important, not least because the mass media in most countries tend to be subject to concentration in large-scale media cartels. Conversely, a focused and mainstreamed public sphere could compensate for the complexity, extremity and intransparency of partial, issue-oriented, public contexts. Could we hope for such a mutually beneficial division of labour between the two dimensions?

It may sound like a contradiction in terms to say that the public sphere both increases and reduces complexity of social interaction, but indeed this is the paradoxical effect of handling differentiation. As topics move interferentially and transcontextually between the presentational and representational dimensions of the public sphere, the increasing complexity that results from new topics, styles and participants is kept under control through its ability to concentrate the wide audience among some focused themes and vice versa – the focused and generalised agenda of the public sphere continuously receives fresh meaning from the open-ended, partly non-institutionalised diversity of Internet media and small mass media.

The criterion of quality of such a new public sphere is derived, therefore, not simply from the relationship between the mass media and politics (which is a focus in contemporary political science and media research). Nor is it only a question of (the lack of) diversity in the mass media due to concentration and competition (another heavily researched problem within the area of political economy). Empirical research on the quality of the public sphere needs to consider the Internet as a functional complement to big mass media and face-to-face interactions, as well as consider the effects of this complementary relationship. A vibrant public sphere depends on its internal composition and dynamics, particularly where the two dimensions are integrated with one another through networks of media, themes, opinions and knowledge crossing in various ways and shapes between its ‘compartments’ and realms.

In order to understand the interrelationships between the two faces of the public sphere as well as their connection to political democracy, Habermas’ two forms of discourse – the moral and ethical-existential – may be instructive, if we do not push it too far (Habermas 1996). The public sphere possesses two faces of similar kinds, which can be assumed analytically in order to understand its functions. We should see the public sphere as a medium between individual voices of a public on the one hand, and the political apparatus on the other. The public sphere transforms and transfers individual opinion into public opinion for the political system to take into account. Realistically, it is hardly a question of a voluntas becoming
transformed into a *ratio*, a consensus about what is practically necessary in the interest of all. It is rather a question of communicative selection according to the prevailing power relations. To carry out the task of providing an agenda for formal politics, the public sphere must front both the people and politics, by addressing problems and issues as both moral and ethical-existential, and juggling issues between the two. Whereas the moral discourse is directed to politics and common problems and alternative solutions, the ethical-existential discourse constitutes its social and cultural foundation, its reference background and test bed, its source for ideas and fresh thinking, with less conformity and fewer constraints – discourse that is marked by open controversy, drama, agitation and passion. The ethical-existential discourse is more characterised by religious values and convictions, that tend to be selected away in more political contexts.

**THE CASE OF EUROPE**

In the light of the emergent interdependent world society, a question is whether a corresponding public sphere may emerge which can illuminate global problems, suggest ways out and legitimate political strategies. The Vietnam War was probably the first example of an incident that achieved global awareness, which contributed to bringing the war to an end. In the essay ‘The Post-National Constellation’, first published in 1998, Habermas argued that legitimation of a European Charter and its institutions could only come into being through a European party system, and then also, by a ‘pan-European political public sphere that presupposes a European civil society complete with interest groups, non governmental organizations, citizen’s movements, and so forth’ (Habermas 2001, 103). Then, Habermas argued that only transnational media could organise such a legitimising multivocal context. At this point, Habermas believed that the nation-specific public spheres could expand into ‘overlapping projects for a common political culture’. After all, Habermas argued, the citizens find themselves in a century-old common European culture with specific European experiences: ‘These experiences of successful forms of social integration have shaped the normative self-understanding of European modernity into an egalitarian universalism that can ease the transition to post-national democracy’s demanding contexts of mutual recognition for all of us – we, the sons, daughters, and grandchildren of a barbaric nationalism’ (Habermas 2001, 103).

Later, however, Habermas modified this, and acquired a less ambitious understanding of a European public sphere. Habermas considers a Europe-wide politi-
cal public sphere, ‘a communicative network extending across national boundaries and specializing in the relevant questions’ of high importance for generating a sense of European identity (Habermas 2009, 87). There is no reason, Habermas argues, why a sense of political solidarity should stop at the nation state borders and not fill the current empty shell of European citizenship with ‘an awareness that all European citizens now share the same fate?’ (Habermas 2009, 87). The challenge is that the European decision-making process must become visible and accessible nationally. Thus, a European public sphere can be established only in so far as the 28 national spheres become sensitive to one another. This means that the national mass media need to cover politics in other countries and in Brussels through reporting and commentary, in a way that citizens experience themselves as European citizens. Also, deliberative decision-making processes in a Europe-wide scope can only take place if arguments and opinions can be exchanged across national boundaries between public arenas. In this way, numerous publics can establish fluid networks of communication as a legitimising sounding board for European will-formation and governance. Also genuine European organisations (interest groups, parties) need to be established through mutual openness between the nation states.

The continuous democratic deficit in the EU is apparent and is followed by a number of crises that such a quasi-democracy is not equipped to deal with. The European parliament, particularly with extended powers, is not in the position to bring public scrutiny to the processes and policies of the Commission and the Council. The European parliament elects its representatives on the basis of national issues, and certainly, legitimacy of national government cannot be extended to their decisions in Brussels (Habermas 2009, 182). The national public spheres simply do not pay attention to international and EU issues. Therefore, when EU directives are received in member states for implementation, they tend to appear as interventions from another political power. Habermas no longer argues for an overarching European public sphere in one language, with its own media (Habermas 2009, 88). This notion, Habermas now admits, is misleading and unrealistic. Rather, the aim is a process of transnationalisation of public spheres. What is needed, according to Habermas, is not another multi-lingual layer of communication on top of the national public spheres. Rather, Habermas thinks, the way ahead is a transnationalisation of the current national public spheres, where each becomes more responsive to one another (Habermas 2009, 183). Habermas seems to have quality newspapers in mind when he stresses the international exchange journalistic content to expose and compare the treatment of issues in different member states.
Research by Bernhard Peters (2004) showed that national newspapers increasingly cover EU politics, European institutions and the EU in general, but the increase is slow. In relation to a common European identity, ‘we’ references are modest. When it appears, we may add, it seems to be in connection with economic and social crises. All in all, national public spheres resist Europeanisation. Peters concluded that, in fact what occurs is more Americanisation than Europeanisation, suggesting that the presentational dimension of a European public sphere is underdeveloped. Although a broad representational dimension has emerged through a multitude of local media and digital fora in this wealthy corner of the world, the EU as a singular political project will have major problems as long as a European public opinion cannot be identified through a presentational dimension to balance and synthesise the representational diversity.

The need for a unified sphere of legitimacy for European political power was only a distant vision until supra-national power based on democratic principles was introduced in Europe. With the establishment of the European Union, supra-national power addresses, so far without success, supra-national legitimacy. Politically and culturally, Europe remains a space of nation states, nations and regions, each with its national public sphere and, as Habermas argues, a European public sphere can only emerge if these become responsive to one another (Habermas, 2008: 87, 183). Indeed, economic and scientific integration (as well as integration of arts, sports and religion) have hardly, since the Second World War, been accompanied by the constitution of a common European public opinion. Rather we have seen a number of new regional political territories and their corresponding environments of political communication. Add to this a mixture of media types, media organisations, languages, themes and conflicts, and we have a rough sketch of extremely complex networks of public communication. Although there are overlapping agendas, international circulation of some quality newspapers, coverage of international events and international NGOs, a contemporary European public sphere can hardly be imagined, not even in a soft, weak-tie sense. European public opinions can, at best, be detected as occasionally overlapping complex networks of topics and viewpoints circulating as multiple voices on local, national and international scales.

True enough, diversity itself does not prevent an international public sphere from realising itself because the term ‘public’ refers not to media technologies nor to language – but focused, political communication. In spite of the necessity of a converging and unifying presentational dimension of a public sphere, the absence of common European media and a lingua franca may not be an absolute obstacle – it only means that a limited number of national media may serve the presenta-
tional function for the EU political elite. It also requires more cultural and linguistic effort for issues and viewpoints to circulate and converge through the multitude of mass media and digital media. Nor is a community with unifying values an absolute requirement. Habermas (2008) has argued that a post-national discourse is possible, which takes difference into account. Contrary to communitarian perspectives associated with a strong notion of community, a deliberative, network-oriented public sphere consists of a multitude of interconnected webs of communicative flows, reproduced by different groups, issues, genres and media, indirectly laying a foundation for solving mutual problems (Bohman and Rehg, 1997).

In a Habermasian view of a deliberative public sphere, issues, solutions and problems are confronted with each other and tested through a self-improving process of open opinion formation. The distinction between public and not-public communication is reproduced by deliberation itself. Potentially, a minimal, but sufficient sense of collective identity, a sense of ‘us’, emerges from such communication, supporting and reproducing further deliberation. Legitimacy is produced not so much by the quantity of participation as by the diversity and integration of meaning. That is why an essentially male-dominated and bourgeois public sphere could serve progressive reform (Habermas, 1989, 2005).

CONCLUSION

I have argued that the ‘political public sphere’ should be understood as referring not to ‘who’ but to ‘how’ – in other words, to a distributed space that is the medium for, and produced by, public communication, where the public more or less overtly dedicates its statements and arguments to specific political institutions. A public sphere can be understood as circulations of public issues; as interconnected topics and debates with some collective value and consequence. To examine the European public sphere, research needs to focus less on participation and more on the translations, interconnections and conflicts between media and agendas in Europe. The question is whether what I have called the presentational dimension can be fulfilled satisfactorily through such inter-media responsiveness. It is not likely that genuine ‘European media’, will emerge on any significant scale, and a European public sphere cannot rely on the development of such overarching arenas. There will be no BBC for the EU. Only traces of a European public sphere can be identified in an indirect, network-oriented sense – not as a supra-national sphere, but as a multitude of mediated and unmediated discursive processes aimed at opinion formation at various levels, interconnected directly and indirectly.
What could be a “European public sphere” in the future is currently a complex network of observations of discourses, media and audiences. It is the very complexity of all these connections that potentially informs various discourses with new insights and possible solutions. In such an indirect and contingent way, European publics receive and contribute to international opinion formation. But how formal politics can steer this public ‘will’ without a common and focused media remains a central challenge for democratic politics. For the present, the primary references for communication will probably remain close to immediate concerns about lifeworld issues like employment, personal economy, children or the local environment. What can be identified through media analysis is a secondary self-reference concerning the conditions and future of Europe, just as we can see even stronger secondary references to global concerns of climate change threats. Citizens of the EU have only national, segmented and topical zones of what may be elements of a more robust European public sphere in the future. And thus far, despite growing and widespread concern about the current crisis (and hence increasing debate about common concerns), these zones form fragile and unstable European publics, only indirectly and unintentionally oriented towards an integrated will formation in Europe. One realistic way ahead for a multi-mediated European public sphere is to encourage Internet-based interconnections between non-commercial organisations, movements and associations of all sorts in order to make circulation of meaning in Europe more dense and robust. Such a public sphere must also recognise the existence of conflict and disagreement as being productive for a common political frame.

ACCOUNTABILITY DEFICIT

The main obstacle for a European public sphere is however political and institutional. For social media and mass media to supplement one another, they must function as resonance vis-à-vis accountable, linguistically understandable, and locally relevant formal responsibilities. National (and municipal) governments and parliaments are therefore critical for functioning public spheres – given that they are not emptied of too much of their authority. National elected bodies provide public debate with topics, attitudes and motivations, since their existence and logic depends fundamentally on a national cultural, historical and political context. If one thinks that public opinion plays a significant role in the formation of democratic politics, the point would be to enhance the capacity national parliaments to make legitimate judgements and decisions on national and European
matters. Because public opinion operates on a national (and local) level, European cooperation can only operate on the same level in order to benefit from political opinion-formation in all media. For a Europe of sovereign nation states, a viable public sphere is possible in a loose or weak sense. Because of liberalist visions of the EU elites, that is however not a likely development in the near future. The shift towards ever-growing transnational commitment in all sectors of society requires not more democracy, understood as participation from below. Rather it requires stability through a variety of hard and soft measures. Today, Europeans are stuck with a neo-liberal and quasi-democratic empire that mobilises culture and science in inventing democratic narratives about itself. The allocation of funding to research (such as Horizon 2020) and arts for ideological purposes has been considerable, although the effect is unknown.

For the union to survive and to integrate further according to the visions of the elites, it prefers to be narrated (through social research, culture, political rhetoric) as a democratic project, at the same time as its central institutions (Council, Parliament, Commission, Central Bank, Court of Justice) are protected from legitimacy tests. Public opinion and its media play a significant role in generating legitimacy as well as in limiting the absence of legitimacy. Massive protests have targeted national governments and yet they rarely disturb the policies of Brussels. The political need for input legitimacy through a public sphere and representative channels is often overrated, and so also in the relation to the supra-national European democracy. Whereas a social-democratic view in the 1990s was that EU needed a ‘social dimension’ to ensure EU economic policies, this social-democratic alibi is no longer credible and has long since been thrown overboard. Policies adapting to neo-liberal market thinking can without too many complications be linked to central EU institutions, provided basic questions are out of range for electoral and discursive action.

The problem of the European project is that it escalated its ambitions from the Europe of nations and the corresponding national public spheres. The idea of national unity and national citizenship was seen as an obstacle more than a foundation for a greater European constellation. Rather to some, the national in cultural and political contexts was either a recent (and therefore trivial) innovation, a Mythos, or an expression of reactionary nationalism. The idea of Europe as a constellation of national democracies had to undermine itself because it could not be harmonised with an even more powerful idea: the liberalist idea of the single market. Due to such flawed ideas about the European nation and its languages, cultures, democratic ways and currencies, the European community was faced with an acute and enduring problem of not only how to bear various crises, but how to
legitimise its centralised ideas about the European construction. The EU’s endemic legitimacy problems – considerably enlarged with the series of crises since 2008 – are not a problem that was created or could be solved in the public sphere, but it is a mirror of how legitimacy and delegitimacy appear and magnify themselves.