

Analysing Transnational Web Spheres: The European Example During the Eurozone Crisis

Dennis Nguyen

Conflicts and crises are central drivers of public communication in the political realm with the potential to stimulate transnational discourses, while online media can amplify the formation of border-transcending communicative contexts (Karatzogianni 2006). The Eurozone crisis between 2011 and 2013 is one such chain of events that triggered considerable communicative activity across the European political and cultural landscape (Nguyen 2015). The Internet played a central role in this process and served different stakeholders and observers for dispersing their readings of economic and political developments in a transnational ‘web sphere’ (Schneider and Foot 2006). The economic crisis in Europe—which transformed into a complex network of social, cultural and political crises—became a trigger for convergence and a matter of contention for political online communicators. It is an example of political discourse driven by conflict and polarisation. By debating the same set of issues, public communicators contributed to the formation of an extremely dynamic, erratic and unpredictable transnational public sphere, which was traceable on the Web. Despite similarities in the assignment of relevance to crisis-related developments, European perspectives from the political, social and media sectors tended to perceive, process and evaluate their observations quite

D. Nguyen (✉)
University of Applied Sciences, Utrecht, The Netherlands

differently. They talked about the same issues, but their assessments varied considerably.

The European case serves as the basis for proposing a general theoretical as well as methodological advancement in transnational Web sphere research. This chapter discusses three intrinsically linked components of modern public communication and then goes on to propose methods for the empirical analysis of transnational online discourses: the impact of digital technologies on modes of political communication, the structural features of web spheres and the national–transnational alignment of online discourses. The results of a large qualitative–quantitative study on the Eurozone crisis web sphere (Nguyen 2015) provide empirical examples for the key arguments. It is postulated that the Internet hosts a multitude of transnational web spheres that react to events in society and potentially affect the direction of public discourses. The argumentation is based on a technical, media-/communication technology-centred view of public spheres as mediatised discourses with an observing function that registers and processes irritations of larger societal proportions (Kohring 2006; Luhmann 2009). This does not mean that democratic-integrative functions as proposed in the Habermasian tradition are irrelevant, but it shifts focus to the ‘mediality’ (Grusin 2010) of public discourses.

THE INTERNET’S ROLE IN (TRANSNATIONAL) POLITICAL COMMUNICATION

The Internet has taken on an increasingly relevant dual function in political discourse: it is both a *tool* for producing and sharing political communication as well as a *space* for the materialisation of discursive contexts. As instruments in daily political business online media mainly serve to disperse political content and connect political actors with public audiences, their supporters and antagonists (Karatzogianni 2006: 53; Lynch et al. 2013: 5). Political groups, institutions, media organisations and individuals utilise a constantly evolving set of digital technologies to speak in a public sphere that is based on mediatised communication; all of them share ideologically loaded assessments on blogs, post comments in social media networks and expand their political capital by compiling large follower bases to increase public visibility. They thus provide access to their agendas as well as sociocultural backgrounds, i.e. values, and forge their own networks (ibid.). Political online communication campaigns are windows to the work and worldviews of organisations and movements, while

Web technologies also facilitate the organisation and execution of concrete political actions (petitions, fund-raising, hacking). Following previous definitions, online media platforms, and the larger discourses they are part of, can be described as ‘political’ when they produce ensembles of communicative practices and discursive processes that display attributes of relevance to the field of national or transnational political communication (Hepp et al. 2012: 33). Various subgenres of political Web content cover a wide range of themes and topics (party politics, commercial policy, environmental policy, health policy). When an online platform deals explicitly with European or EU issues, it falls into the subcategory of European political online media. As most political issues have specific moral or ethical implications related to the configuration of society, they always have a normative dimension (ibid.). The various genres of political online media are not strictly separated, and mixed forms exist. However, a classificatory system that takes the fluidity of genres into consideration provides orientation and facilitates the identification of subjects for empirical analysis.

Web technologies provide comparatively cheap and widely distributed tools with manifold practical applications in political communication. A primary motivation for political actors to make use of online media is to share their readings and interpretations of current issues in the form of framing (Entman 1993; Vliegenthart & Van Zoonen 2011): based on a specific ideological view, political communicators define what problems they deem relevant, analyse what they perceive as the main causal relations, express moral judgements and finally recommend or demand courses of action. ‘Premediation’ (Grusin 2010: 38) of ‘often contradictory future scenarios’ for the outcome of a controversial event or development of larger societal proportions is deeply ingrained into these framing processes (ibid.: 47). In the context of the Eurozone crisis, the main EU institutions framed the crisis as solvable and that all necessary steps for improvement were taken, while the German government presented its case for fiscal austerity as the key to a stable economic future in the crisis countries (Greece, Cyprus, Spain, Portugal, Italy and Ireland). Opposing views pointed to the futility or dangers of austerity politics and asserted that they may cause more harm than good to European democracy. Simultaneously, Eurosceptic and nationalist forces made extensive use of online media platforms to mobilise voters to contest mainstream positions that they often deemed pro-European (e.g. Golden Dawn 2015; AfD 2015; Better Off Out 2013). By providing an immediate fast lane to general or specified audiences, the Internet pluralised the set of communicators and opinions

that are publicly accessible on not only a national but a transnational (and global) scale.

This turns the Web into a site for the production, distribution, consumption and discussion of political content on issues of societal relevance; it is a multidimensional discursive space in which political identities and their views become manifest via communication. Depending on the participants and issues that cause communicative activity, the Internet provides extended arenas where different frames clash, which corroborates the public sphere's function as a stage for conflict and contestation (Gerhards and Neidhardt 1990; Karatzogianni 2006; Castells 2009); modern public spheres can be understood as networks of discourses that materialise as condensations of related media content on specific topics (Hepp et al. 2012) that serve as shared points of reference for public communicators who often disagree about social, cultural, economic and political challenges. For most organisations, institutionalised ones and those that emerge rather spontaneously (e.g. protest movements), the ultimate goal is often to achieve widespread public visibility, approval and support; public spheres are the most important and heavily contested source for this (Gerhards and Neidhardt 1990; Peters 2007; Castells 2009). Political communicators seek a broad and diverse audience for various reasons, not least to increase their political capital. The Internet facilitates this process by extending the options for attaining public exposure.

The frames that public communicators create and share, as well as the networks that they form, are the content and structure of public discourses. The problems and challenges that lead to their formation determine their alignment along the spectrum between the local, national, transnational and global: for instance, the web sphere on the general election in the UK has a strong national orientation, since the involved political actors, stakes and institutionalised processes and rituals are framed against the background of national politics; transnational or global developments often have an impact on such discourses, but the main addressees are national electorates and the primary point of reference is the domestic political context. An inherently transnational economic and political irritation like the Eurozone crisis transcends national borders and has widespread consequences for an entire world region that shares an enormously complex and at times contradictory common political-economic framework; the lines between the national and transnational dissolve. This does not mean that the national dimension forfeits its relevance; on the contrary, its two main components—nation-states and national narratives—remain

central factors in the outcome of developments that involve a high level of political and economic interconnectedness; one affects the other in a continuous feedback loop. A primary example is the level of exposure to transnational events and external decisions affecting Greece since the sovereign debt crisis started in 2007 (Fouskas and Dimoulas 2013). The national, transnational and global levels are not separate categories but linked and mutually influential on a gradual continuum (Rumford 2011: 41–40). The ambivalent, often tension-filled relations between the national and transnational dimensions resonates in the structure and scope of the entailed debates across online and offline media.

Owing to their technological features, online media have transforming effects on public discourses: they allow one to override the mass media's previous monopoly on public communication and change the rules of public agenda-setting. They also facilitate the exchange of political information across political and cultural borders. Since they are relatively cheap, online media platforms partly liberalise access to public discourse and, at least theoretically, enable non-professionals to share their views with a general public. This may pluralise the spectrum of publicly communicated viewpoints. The openness of most online platforms to a potentially unlimited global public implies that web spheres are always latently transnational/global in scope. However, the materialisation of these potentials depends on a set of socio-economic and cultural variables (i.e. the infamous digital divide) as well as linguistic factors. The actual orientation of an online discourse along the national–transnational–global spectrum must be individually assessed in each case.

Comprehensive analyses of political online communication need to consider the inherent versatility of Web technologies. The differentiation between the Internet as a *tool*, or a collection of dynamic communication devices, and the Internet as a communicative *space* of mediated content further refines the research lens. In the case of political discourses frame and network analyses open access to a better understanding of processes of public communication, i.e. they enable outlining what main fault lines/conflict constellations emerge and what sets of arguments are applied by communicators in a specific context. This enables the 'pathology' of challenges in (transnational) society through the analysis of online media content.

TRANSNATIONAL ONLINE COMMUNICATION: THE WEB SPHERE PERSPECTIVE

Public online discourses take the shape of ‘web spheres’ (Schneider and Foot 2006), which are collections of similar content defined by a common trigger/topic that turn into distinguishable discursive contexts: ‘[w]e conceptualize a web sphere as not simply a collection of websites, but as a set of dynamically defined digital resources spanning multiple websites deemed relevant or related to a central event, concept or theme, and often connected by hyperlinks’ (ibid.: 158). Events that stimulate the formation of web spheres are social, economic, political or cultural developments that cause irritations or conflicts or arouse public attention due to their unusualness. Examples are web spheres on disasters and scandals, wars and conflicts and cultural events, as well as questions of social harmony, political power, economic life and ethics, though they may focus on rather trivial issues, e.g. ‘celebrity news’ or ‘Internet memes’. The authors differentiate between two types of web sphere (ibid.: 160). The first type is an online discourse that is predictable in regard to its emergence, duration, content and involved communicators. Examples are ritualised, pre-scheduled events in politics and culture (e.g. elections or sports events). The second is a web discourse that materialises in an ad hoc fashion; its duration, course and sociological composition are less easy to predict. Examples include online communication on crisis and disasters, such as the German Wings airplane crash or the refugee crisis in the Mediterranean in 2015 (Guardian 2015a, b, c). There is no a clear-cut separation between the two types, and mixed forms exist since complex issues like the Eurozone crisis can entail both predictable and surprising developments that echo differently on the Web. Schneider and Foot (ibid.) provide a flexible and productive methodological ‘tool’ for the identification and empirical assessment of digital public discourses, which is not very different from Hepp et al.’s (2012: 22–23) proposition to define public spheres as the condensation of related communication on specific issues. It is a technical-empirical approach that enables the analysis of public discourses by explicitly focusing on media communication as their foundation. The ‘technical’ integration of communication in web spheres can be accompanied by fragmenting tendencies in public discourse culture; talking about the same issues does not mean that communicators necessarily talk with each other or that they aim for consensus-seeking via democratic-integrative deliberation. The latter

may be part of a web sphere, but it is not some normative goal that public discourses—whether off- or online—need to pursue actively.

Research subjects are not limited to specific types of online platforms, e.g. blogs or social media networks, but may cover various formats, including hybrid forms of digital text (typed, audio, audio-visual). These can be shared across different online platforms that are often interconnected via hyperlinking and in-text referencing; differences on a micro level of communication—e.g. technical features that separate blogging, tweeting, social networking or photo-sharing—do not necessarily become obsolete, but neither do they impede a comprehensive analysis of public online communication across formats under a web sphere. The web sphere model enables the precise definition of the ‘building blocks’ of online discourses and their subsequent operationalisation for empirical analysis. Most importantly, it is combinable with other empirical methods in political communication research and can be applied to transnational online media discourses (e.g. De Wilde et al. 2014; Nguyen 2015): whenever Web communication clusters around a set of issues that affect more than just one national context and involves communicators from different political-cultural backgrounds, one can speak of a transnational dimension to a web sphere. How ‘strong’ this transnational alignment is depends mainly on three factors: the issues that stimulate communication, the set of communicators who step into a digital public, and the social composition of the audiences that these communicators address. The transnational scope of web spheres materialises in different degrees across the individual online platforms that they integrate. For example, blog articles on the Eurozone crisis in the pan-European blog network Euractiv.com may display a different level and quality of cosmopolitanism than analyses and comments on a Eurosceptic Web site that discusses the very same issues. In the former case, the national orientation is less relevant and participating communicators might even try to overcome the perceived limitations of national angles; they discuss transnational issues from a transnational-cosmopolitan perspective (Euractiv 2015). In the latter, the reverse applies, since transnational developments are interpreted and assessed against a nationally oriented background with a relatively specific community in mind (e.g. Golden Dawn 2015). There are no methodological obstacles to the comprehensive analysis of both and the different grey scales between them with the web sphere model. The web sphere perspective enables making sense of manifestations of national and transnational communication flows against globalised contexts without

ignoring either and thus allows circumventing the limitations of ‘methodological nationalism’ (Beck 2007), i.e. it avoids perceiving nation-states and their media landscapes as closed containers.

Since it is postulated that frames and networks determine the sub-structure of political public discourses, analysing both dimensions with a communications-focused method seems appropriate. Content and network analyses can yield the necessary data to draw empirically grounded conclusions on the conflict constellations reflected within a web sphere. Qualitative features of communicative interactions as well as the levels of integration/exclusion, deliberation/conflict and so forth also become ‘measurable’. Entman’s original proposal for a frame definition (1993) and Matthes and Kohring’s (2008) methodological enhancement of the same provide a fruitful approach to identifying mediated frames through empirical analysis. Following this procedure, frames are dissolved into their individual parts, which are problem definitions, casual interpretations, ethical/moral evaluations and recommendations for actions. Each category can be easily operationalised and coded from the source material in accordance with the established rules for empirical content analysis (*ibid.*: 263–265). Matthes and Kohring then propose to group the coded material with a quantitative cluster analysis that puts together those media texts that share the most similarities. The new clusters serve as a basis for the interpretation of whole frames (*ibid.*). This technique makes the entire frame research process more transparent and increases the degree of intersubjective replicability (*ibid.*), while it enables comparative analyses involving different types and genres of text. Though Matthes and Kohring develop a purely quantitative method in their original proposal, it is relatively easy—and sometimes indispensable—to combine the analysis with qualitative research processes for the explorative mapping of categories for frame elements, especially if the literature review does not provide sufficient material in new, under-researched areas. This type of frame analysis enables the precise demarcation of central conflict areas as well as the identification of dominant political evaluations that circulate in a focused web sphere by screening online content for individual frame parts. However, depending on the overall research interest, other forms of frame analysis are available, such as hermeneutic, linguistic, automated and deductive/inductive manual-holistic procedures (Matthes 2014: 36–51).

The other central element of web spheres is networking, which materialises in two dimensions: first, through hyperlinks between related Web resources embedded in online texts; there are various methods for retriev-

ing this type of data and visualising the shape of Web discourses based on hyperlinked networks. Web crawlers or data scrapers can collect hyperlink targets from large amounts of online texts; the data sets can then be further processed with tools for data visualisation (e.g. Gephi). Mapping hyperlinked networks enables the assessment of levels of openness and ideological seclusion of individual Web platforms, and they reveal the—technical and political—substructure of web spheres. Aside from the hyperlink-based networks, it is also possible to scan web spheres for networks based on references and sources named within a text without an actual hyperlink. One can focus on different categories of reference, such as political communicators, news media sources or experts, and entities like nation-states, governments, social groups and so forth. It all depends on the research interest and the definition as well as operationalisation of these in-text references for empirical analysis. The results allow one to draw empirically grounded conclusions on the structure of a web sphere and the network of dominant actors in a public discourse. First, mentioning the same political actors, media observers and other references links different platforms to the same discursive context and reveals convergences or differences in the attribution of responsibility for political developments. Second, it creates a discursive link between platforms and their sources (e.g. when the Guardian Online cites El Pais without integrating a hyperlink). A network analysis that considers both hyperlinking and in-text referencing reveals the social dynamics on the communicator side and traces the political hierarchies reflected in a discourse.

To sum up, a transnational web sphere is definable as the condensation of communication on a specific topic provided by communicators with different cultural, linguistic or geographical backgrounds. The relationship between the national, transnational and global dimensions appears ‘onion-shaped’: each one is another, successive layer (Rumford 2011). The issues and events that cause communicators to produce content is the main factor that determines a discourse’s alignment within this spectrum. The political-cultural backgrounds of participating online communicators further determine how they perceive and evaluate transnational issues. Frame and network analyses refine the research lens in a web sphere analysis while being particularly useful for political contexts since they enable empirical exploration and mapping of content as well as the sociological composition of online discourses.

THE EUROPEAN EXAMPLE: THE EU CRISIS WEB SPHERE 2011–2013

The EU crisis discourse between 2011 and 2013 is a prime example of a transnational web sphere driven by a seemingly never-ceasing competition of polarising frames (Nguyen 2015). This is a direct result of the inherently controversial nature of ‘the crisis’, which covers multiple fault lines and hot spots: the austerity/anti-austerity debate, the discussion on transnational solidarity/integration and national sovereignty, disputes over bailout programmes, the taxation of the financial sector, challenges posed by migration and the configuration of the EU’s political structures and processes. The economic, political and social conflicts triggered intensive communicative activity across Europe, and the crisis—as a label for a network of intersected fields of contestation—became a shared reference and context for a transnational set of public communicators. Events and developments in a local dimension had a tangible effect on the transnational one and vice versa. For instance, Greek media outlets covered the German government’s position on Eurozone politics—which had a direct impact on domestic politics in Greece—frequently, while political developments in Athens left a tangible impact on domestic political debates in their European neighbour states and Brussels; the crisis unfolding in Spain, Portugal, Ireland and Cyprus, the French elections in 2012, but also the debate about Britain’s EU membership are further examples. While exerting pressure on the EU as a functioning transnational democratic institution, the crisis simultaneously revealed the unprecedented level of interconnectedness of political and economic systems on the continent. This inevitably resonated on the Internet, where the various involved political stakeholders and observers provided their views on crisis-related developments. The main difference to a global or national web sphere was the focus on a specific world region, in this case Europe. Political organisations, governmental institutions, protest movements, the news media and individuals contributed to a torrent of information on the crisis, primarily in the form of specific interpretations and readings of related challenges as well as problems that often included the formulation of various conflicting future scenarios with precise recommendations for political actions. Online communicators perceived, processed and evaluated the crisis and its entailed developments differently from their political and socio-economic positions; different ideologies and views on the organisation of (transnational) society and especially economics were basically at the root

of the main conflicts. Still, European commentators shared and interacted in a common communicative context that was mainly framed by the political and economic framework of the EU and Eurozone.

The results of a quantitative–qualitative web sphere analysis illustrate this ambivalent situation for twenty-one different European online platforms (Nguyen 2015). The quantitative mapping of general genres and crisis-related Web content implies how ‘discursive convergence’ (Hepp et al. 2012: 26), i.e. the simultaneous observation of largely the same issues and topics, materialised across European political Web sites. The sample covered six types of online communicators with diverse cultural and political backgrounds, including transnational as well as British, French, German and Greek platforms: EU institutions, national governments, national news media sites, think tanks, non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and independent bloggers (Nguyen 2015: 60): the EU Council, the EU Parliament, the EU Commission, the now defunct Eurozone Portal, the British *Guardian Online*, German *Spiegel Online*, French *Le Monde*, Greek *EKathimerini* (English version), the British Gov. uk, German Bundesregierung.de, Greece’s government site (English version), Open Europe, Bruegel, Team Europe, Social Platform, Better Off Out, Europa Union Deutschland, Wirtschaftswurm.net, Protestsilaos.blogactiv.eu, Hungaryineurope.blogspot.co.uk and Derekbennetteu-sceptic.blog.spot.co.uk. The sample was selected with the intention of including a diversity of viewpoints on EU and Eurozone politics.

The actual research subjects were typed online texts published on these platforms within the twenty-four months between March 2011 and March 2013. The results support the claim that crisis-related developments triggered the formation of a distinguishable web sphere of transnational proportions. They were discussed by a relatively diverse spectrum of communicators who implemented online platforms to share their views: of the 13,080 analysed online texts (i.e. news articles, blog posts etc.) published across the sampled platforms, over 64 per cent dealt specifically with the Eurozone crisis or a related aspect (Nguyen 2015: 58–59).

However, due to different foci and specialisations, the individual platforms tended to place emphasis on interconnected yet distinct partial areas of the crisis discourse. Economics-focused think tanks placed emphasis on the critical discussion of the fiscal and economic policies that were applied to solve the crisis (e.g. bruegel.org 2015, openeurope.org.uk 2015, wirtschaftswurm.net). NGOs with an emphasis on social issues commented on the impact of crisis politics on transnational solidarity and the

consequences for the economically weak, such as migrants, the elderly and young, or unemployed people (e.g. [socialplatform.org](#)). The EU institutions prioritised their roles and plans for solving the crisis, as did influential European governments (e.g. EU Commission 2013; EU Council 2013; EU Parliament 2013; Bundesregierung 2013). Eurosceptic positions presented their arguments for dissolving the EU, referring to the crisis as primary evidence for why it had failed as a political project (e.g. Team Europe 2011; Derek Bennett 2012; Better Off Out 2013). Pro-European online platforms did the exact opposite by discussing the benefits of EU integration and why more cooperation was the answer to current problems (e.g. Europa Union Deutschland 2012). Specific political perspectives and interests were key factors that decided on the style of EU reporting on independent blogs, too, which included politically active or at least interested individuals; their cultural and social positions defined their angle on transnational issues. One Greek blogger extensively criticised prevailing crisis policies (Protesilaos Stavrou 2013), while a British Eurosceptic blogger evaluated European politics against the background of a potential UK referendum on the country's EU membership (Derek Bennett 2012).

News media sites provided the broadest coverage of the crisis (Nguyen 2015: 213–220). This is a result of their communicative and economic procedures: since their main economic driver is to maintain a constant output of information, the spectrum of covered issues inevitably exceeds that of most other online platforms. Despite ideological propensities that may tangibly balance the style of reporting applied by a specific news media outlet, quality newspapers tend to integrate a wider scope of viewpoints into their coverage of current issues in the European context—at least when they are directly compared to online platforms utilised by political organisations, groups or movements. However, there are several important differences in the scope and style of reporting between mainstream news media Web sites that are largely determined by each outlet's 'discourse culture' (Hepp et al. 2012), their general business models and linguistic factors. For example, the British Guardian intensively covered EU politics— and Eurozone crisis—related issues and developments while maintaining a strong focus on the potential impact of these on British domestic politics, especially against the background of a referendum on the UK's membership in the union (Nguyen 2015: 88–89). Since the site's operating language is English, it is open to a global audience and frequently served as a public stage for a variety of European politicians and economic experts who commented on the crisis, such as Jürgen Habermas, Yiannis

Varoufakis, Wolfgang Schäuble or Sigmar Gabriel (Guardian 2011, 2013a, b, 2015a).

From a linguistic perspective, *EKathimerini*—the English version of the popular conservative Greek newspaper *Kathimerini*—offered the same degree of general accessibility, though it displayed an even stronger adjustment of its news agenda to crisis-related developments and their impact on the domestic level for a variety of almost self-explaining reasons (Nguyen 2015: 95, 215): Greece was one of the main crisis theatres where the lines between transnational and national irritations blurred the most; virtually no aspect of Greek political, economic, social and cultural life remained untouched by the sovereign debt crisis. This inevitably boosted the topicality of crisis-related issues for Greek news media outlets, presumably even more than it already did for other nationally oriented mass media platforms. Their French and German counterparts, *Le Monde Online* and *Spiegel Online* covered crisis-related stories in considerable volume as well and outlined the implications for their primary (home) markets.

However, though both are internationally renowned news media sites, they cannot compete with the *Guardian Online* in terms of international scope and reception since their English content is limited to only a fraction of their overall daily output; the majority of their content is still produced in their respective national languages (ibid.). Their level of transnational openness is therefore of a different quality than in the cases of the British *Guardian* and even *EKathimerini*. So-called quality news media seem to play an ambiguous role in transnational contexts: on the one hand, they are central stages for public debates and provide access to transnational aspects by critically reporting on the different involved stakes, actors and arguments and commenting on the same. Owing to their production processes, they seem to provide a more diverse news menu on specific issues such as the crisis. On the other, they are compelled to maintain a strong focus on their main audiences, which they still perceive through a national angle (language and emphasis on domestic context). Their individual business models and cultures appear to further determine their actual transnational alignment, i.e. the level of visibility and accessibility in a transnational dimension.

Similar factors determine the modes of hyperlinking and referencing applied by individual online platforms. Web sites can differ vastly in the way they make use of hyperlinks. In the cited study, some political online platforms in the EU crisis web sphere integrated a diversity of links into their content, mainly to provide examples or to contextualise an argument

(e.g. the British think tank Open Europe or Eurosceptic commentator *Wirtschaftswurm*). Other Web sites included links to a less diverse spectrum of sources that seemed to share a similar political outlook (such as NGOs Better Off Out and Europa Union Deutschland).

The majority of sampled Web sites tended to link to on-site content and rarely established hyperlink connections to other Web sites; this especially applied to news media platforms and political institutions (*ibid.*). Some platforms included no hyperlinks at all (e.g. national government Web sites). Different political motivations, styles of reporting and e-business strategies are important factors to consider in the assessment of hyperlinking on individual platforms, which in turn help explain why networking within a web sphere form seems fragmented or takes a particular shape. Many larger online platforms adjust hyperlinking to the latest trends in search engine optimisation to promote their own content and to gain an advantage in the competition for public visibility on the Web, for which major search engines and their algorithms are decisive factors (e.g. Giomelakis and Veglis 2015).

The situation looks no less ambivalent in regard to referencing political actors, media commentators and observers and other sources (e.g. academics, artists).

The study on the EU crisis web sphere implies that a converging outlook with local differences seems characteristic of transnational discourses, at least in the European context: most platforms mentioned, cited and commented on the actions of largely the same set of key actors in EU and Eurozone politics (Nguyen 2015: 174). Central political actors and organisations turned into shared references across different European online platforms. Further hints for convergence in the attribution of responsibility beyond the observation of the same issues and themes emerged in the transnational public sphere: despite partly fundamentally different perspectives on the definition of the main challenges and how to solve them, online communicators in the sample seemed to agree, at least implicitly, on who was mainly determining the overall course of political actions in the EU and Eurozone during the height of the crisis.

Each platform integrated references to political actors, organisations, experts and others located in specific cultural or political areas; despite referencing the same set of key actors in their EU crisis coverage, the different European new media sites in the sample included numerous political voices with weight in local or regional contexts but who are of limited relevance in the transnational sphere. That means the British *Guardian*

Online included more UK politicians, the German *Spiegel Online* more German politicians and the Greek *EKathimerini* more Greek ones. Other examples are the think tank and NGO platforms that tended to include references relevant for their partial area of expertise, i.e. economic online platforms tended to cite other economists, while Web sites maintained by social organisations cited actors in the social sector (ibid.). Specialisation on a particular area of political, social or economic life and the general cultural alignment of an online platform are decisive factors for their perception of the relevant political and social units within a context. Though this may seem obvious, it is an important aspect in understanding the complexity and apparent contradictoriness of transnational discourses. In any case, analysing the dimension of soft linking reveals the political hierarchies that determine and drive a political discourse, while it may also point to structural deficiencies. This eventually enables the formulation of normative criticism and the development of countermeasures.

The qualitative–quantitative frame analysis of the same platforms revealed what central ‘fields of contestation’ (ibid.: 161) accumulated in the crisis discourse. Crisis developments and policies, negotiating the EU’s general political framework and migration and racism emerged as the dominant conflict areas. Political communicators tended to define quite differently what the crisis was actually about, and subsequent incongruences in the attribution of responsibility, the assessment of decisions and proposition of solutions emerged. One of the most pronounced areas was the clash of proponents and opponents of austerity politics. To receive financial assistance, struggling Eurozone countries had to agree to considerable cuts to their public spending as well as market reforms, which basically meant expanded privatisation schemes; these were the conditions set by their lenders, who were mainly conservative European governments in stable Eurozone economies and the International Monetary Fund (IMF). Austerity politics became a highly controversial issue that made a tangible impact on political debates across Europe, where proponents of extensive spending cuts clashed with their opponents who regarded such cuts as counterproductive to economic problems.

The crisis quickly ‘spilled over’ from a purely economic–fiscal field into political, social and cultural dimensions. Bailout negotiations evolved into clashes between political-cultural worldviews with an alleged North–South divide at the root of the crisis (e.g. *Guardian* 2012); the manner in which European lenders and the IMF, represented by the so-called ‘troika’, tried to spur reforms in struggling Eurozone countries not only sparked protests in Greece, Spain and Cyprus but also triggered a broader discussion

on the fundamental organisation of the EU, not least concerning its perceived democratic deficits (e.g. EKathimerini 2011).

In particular, observers in countries at the centre of the Eurozone crisis pointed to this problem (Protesilaos Stavrou 2012). Austerity politics were not only perceived as economically unsustainable but even undemocratic and dangerous for European solidarity. Supporters of austerity measures and fiscal discipline argued the exact opposite, as illustrated in an interview with German Finance Minister Wolfgang Schäuble published on the German government Web site in 2013 (Bundesregierung 2013, translated by the author):

Germany supports growth with moderately balanced fiscal policies. I do not share the view of many Anglo-Saxon economists that sustained growth can be generated with debt-financed economic stimulus programmes. That may be possible in an economic crisis but makes little sense in a sovereign debt crisis, which needs to be overcome through trust.

The austerity/anti-austerity conflict was linked to a string of subconflicts, such as the debate on Eurobonds (i.e. the de facto mutualisation of debt in the Eurozone) or the terms as well as execution of bailout programmes, which accumulated in the main field of contestation—‘crisis developments and policies’—in the EU crisis web sphere (Nguyen 2015: 149–154). These triggered further disputes about the political infrastructure of the EU, which both pro-European and Eurosceptic commentators on the Web described as systemically flawed and inefficient. Subsections of this second field of contestation included more precise debates on, for example, European integration, the shared EU budget or the so-called two-tier EU that separates the Eurozone from the rest of the union (ibid.). A smaller yet distinct field of contestation dealt with questions on migration and increasing problems with racism across Europe, which are both developments that were influenced by the general economic as well as political crisis (ibid.: 160).

These general fields of contestation influenced how public communicators evaluated the EU, the crisis and individual nation-states, which in sum left an impact on the main frames that were reproduced on the sampled online platforms (ibid.: 198). Different ideological perspectives antagonised each other, with defenders of the status quo, critical pro-Europeans and genuine Eurosceptics as the three dominant streams. The first group implicitly supported an intergovernmental approach of limited integra-

tion to solve current problems, the second one deemed prevailing policies as outdated and inefficient, while the last group saw the EU, the single currency and transnational integration as the cause of all problems and a genuine threat to national communities (ibid.: 189–190).

These observations imply that convergences and a differentiation of viewpoints do not seem to be mutually exclusive in transnational web spheres; on the contrary, a pluralism of perspectives on the central themes form one of their inherent features. Further examples from the study's frame analysis highlight this ambivalent situation: the *Guardian Online's* EU crisis coverage between 2011 and 2013 was dominated by eight larger frames, which were mainly concerned with the crisis' economic and political impacts: *The crisis is worsening/intensifying, the EU is responsible for crisis management, migration and racism problems, the crisis affects the EU's political framework, the crisis affects all member-states, the EU faces a crisis, the EU crisis strategy is inefficient and the EU's political framework/UK referendum* (Nguyen 2015: 213–214). Compared to most other Web sites, it offered one of the broadest scopes in its reporting, which is somewhat characteristic of news media platforms owing to the structural features of professional media organisations outlined earlier. The Eurozone Portal, a digital information platform provided by the EU and somewhat exemplary for most of its Web sites, limited its focus to three discernible frames: *the EU/Eurozone faces a crisis, the EU will overcome the crisis/provide stability and the EU institutions lead the crisis management* (ibid.). These frames also topicalised the crisis but emphasised the EU institutions' positive role in solving current challenges; this underlines its specified outlook as an element of the EU Council's and EU Commission's digital public relations or political marketing campaign (Smyrniotis 2014).

Eurosceptic blogger Wirtschaftswurm discussed the crisis in five frames in which he argued that the EU and Eurozone suffered from systemic inconsistencies in an economic and political respect: *the crisis is worsening/intensifying, the EU/Eurozone have systemic flaws, the EU is incapable of solving the crisis, the EU's political framework is contested and the EU is undemocratic and cripples national (economic/fiscal) sovereignty* (Nguyen 2015: 209). European leaders were incapable of finding real solutions to the problems which they had allegedly created themselves. Despite agreeing that there were general economic and political problems, pro-European NGO Europa Union's leaders came to very different conclusions by pointing to further integration and EU federalism as a solution; these recommendations were communicated within four frames in its web content

(ibid.: 207): *free travel is under threat, the EU has a crisis (of trust), the EU has structural problems and EU integration and federalism are the solution.*

These examples illustrate tendencies that formed the overall EU crisis web sphere: each platform represented another socio-economic and political unit in European political life; they contested for the same resources, i.e. public attention and potential approval, and debated the same entities, actors and problem constellations but differed considerably in their selection of partial issues that are of particular relevance to their individual areas of activity or expertise. These observations correspond with previous research on offline transnational media discourses in Europe, where the contrast of convergence, i.e. sharing a common reference point, and a pluralism of political as well as cultural perspectives appears to cause a ‘multiple segmentation’ of the European public sphere (Hepp et al. 2012).

DISCUSSION

The web sphere analysis of online communication on the EU crisis presented here has shown how the irritations and problems in Europe sparked a transnational discourse across the EU, i.e. how it became a mutual point of reference for a variety of stakeholders and electorates with different cultural backgrounds but who share a common political and economic framework. Hence, one could argue that the crisis revealed the advanced degree of convergence between member-states in Europe, especially among Eurozone countries. At the same time this transnational public discourse did not reflect the democratic-integrative qualities as proposed in the classic Habermasian interpretation of the public sphere. On the contrary, the crisis, which consisted of a string of mutually affective subconflicts, triggered the emergence of political-cultural fault lines; the heatedly debated controversies that materialised throughout the Eurozone crisis were largely determined by three underlying major fields of contestation: how to solve the crisis, how to organise political life under (or outside) the roof of the EU and how to deal with increasing challenges related to migration and racism under the shadow of the economic crisis.

The EU crisis web sphere between 2011 and 2013 served to put the theoretical reflections and methodological proposals in the previous sections on an empirical basis. It has shown how the web sphere model enables the identification of transnational political online discourses for empirical analysis. Schneider and Foot’s (2006) original approach is easily combined with previous media-centred definitions of transnational public spheres as

condensations of public communication across several cultural and political contexts (Hepp et al. 2012). It provides sufficient flexibility to integrate a variety of other methods for political communication research. Frame and network analyses appear particularly useful for comprehensively describing and understanding media-based political discourses: the content and direction of public discourses is largely determined by the issues that public communicators emphasise and how they portray them; the underlying processes can be summarised as framing with specific contextualisations, including precise evaluations, i.e. frames, as their primary results (Entman 1993; Matthes 2014). A diverse spectrum of political communicators compete for societal influence, and alternative groups and organisations challenge established hierarchies, possibly increasing the potential for contestation and conflict. Thorough web sphere analyses should place emphasis on frame analyses, i.e. assess how different perceptions and interpretations of related political and social issues circulate and have an effect on each other, if the overall aim is to understand their impact on critical developments in society.

Networking is an equally fundamental aspect of modern public discursivity; communicators establish social/political links with like-minded individuals as well as organisations and seek a connection to a general public; through conflicts they have connections to their antagonists in specific disputes. In web communication one can differentiate between two types of networking—hard linking via actual hyperlinks embedded in online text and soft linking via referencing/citing public communicators. Analysing networks in the hyperlink dimension reveals the level of discursive openness of online platforms and provides insight into the degree of fragmentation in a web sphere. Doing the same for soft linking provides data on ideological seclusion or openness, while it also makes it possible to identify dominant actors in a political context by revealing who is most frequently mentioned across a diversity of (potentially antagonising) online platforms. Knowing who links to whom and what public actors are mentioned in a web sphere provides hints on the sociological composition of a public debate. Since the web sphere perspective makes no assumptions about the national context, it is easily applied to transnational communication and allows one to elucidate the complex processes that trigger public discourses across various cultural and political borders. The data yielded from both frame and network analyses then enable differentiation between participating communicators, their self-understanding and their political attitudes, which opens access to the perception and processing of current issues by political stakeholders and the publics they aim to address.

This includes the identification of public communicators, i.e. who is initiating a discourse, and an assessment of the level of accessibility as well as visibility. It is important to precisely define two general dimensions of analytical inquiry that concern the infrastructure of web spheres. These are inseparable, as they are mutually dependent, yet highlight different aspects of online discourses and facilitate the development of analytical categories. First there is the technological level. This dimension covers the set of available communication technologies used by public speakers. Second is the social level. This dimension covers the set of relevant speakers within a predefined meta-context, which happened to be the European crisis in the previously discussed example. Both the technological and social areas determine the borders, i.e. shape, and content of public online discourses and their networks; hence, they provide starting points for sampling adequate subject matters of consideration. Finally, the briefly summarised results of the study on the EU crisis web sphere imply that especially transnational discourses are shaped by an ambivalent and dynamic relation between tendencies towards convergence and integration on the one hand and a simultaneous differentiation as well as potential fragmentation along cultural and political lines on the other (Hepp et al. 2012).

A multitude of empirical examples could be examined through this research lens, as significant developments and events inevitably resonate on the Web: one may think of the growing challenges posed by global migration, the ongoing conflicts in the Middle East and Global South, the clash of secularism and religion throughout the world, the effects of the global financial crisis or the extremely controversial debate on global warming and other ecological issues. Understanding how these conflicts are debated online can help to understand their causes, further development and potential impacts.

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