

**Constructing public support: EU communication challenges
for the process of integration**

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Abstract:

This study aims at providing a new perspective on the question of public spheres and the European Union. Previous studies on public sphere and the European Union dealt with general trends and patterns of news reporting in Europe, the national perspective of mass media reporting, or with mass media as vehicle of political participation and as a form of media culture, but few have tried to understand what journalists think about EU information and how media relations could be strengthened in order to increase public discourses. This study is based on findings of a current research project about EU communication strategies in Finland and in Italy. Specifically the statistical data gathered in these two member states shows the necessity to improve media relations between EU institutions and their press offices and national mass media. In this paper I will discuss about the role of mass media in enhancing public debate on EU, the different types of public spheres for the European Union and their implications and EU's necessity to strengthen public debate and citizens' participation to its decision-making.

Introduction

Since the Maastricht Treaty the European Union has increased its power and authority in all member states. EU member states are handing over an increasing number of responsibilities to institutions such as the European Council, the Council of Ministers or the Commission without democratic legitimization by the citizens of Europe of the decisions taken by those in authority (Machill et al. 2006). This is the so called “democratic deficit”. At the heart of EU’s democratic deficit is the discrepancy between its increasing competences over the lives of Europeans and the continuing dominance of national politics as the space for public debates and as the source of collective identity (Statham and Gray 2005). In fact the lack of legitimacy of European institutions has been considered one of the negative effects of the weakness of the European public sphere (Della Porta et al. 2003). The lack of a European public sphere is eroding Europeans’ support on the integration process, with direct consequences in voting rates, EU reputation and public satisfaction in EU policies, in the Constitutional treaty adoption etc. For these reasons the European Union has concentrated its attention more and more in communicating its policies towards its citizens. Its main common objective was to improve perception of the European Union and its institutions by establishing a dialogue with its citizens. This communication strategy aimed as well at increasing EU reputation and support in order to legitimize EU policy and integration process. However, there is a negative trend in EU reputation, which is becoming lower and lower and this negative tendency corresponds as well with little public participation in European debates. Proponents of the civic decline school often argue that these changes are caused, or at least aggravated, by communication. Although there is not a common agreement between scholars of different schools on the weight that mass media have in the construction of values, beliefs and in general in the process of citizens’ acquisition of information, the majority admit the specific position that mass media retain in every society. Mass media role is fundamental for creating the necessary public discourses at the European level, which will legitimate the European Union. On the one hand legitimizing EU

requires involvement and consensus of its publics, on the other EU's publics have the responsibility and the right as well to scrutinize and criticize EU's behaviors. Citizens have the democratic right to express their opinion about EU policies either when it is positive or negative. A European public sphere for them represents the ideal area where they can openly express their opinions and be listened. Hence, the current debates about the European public sphere are regarded as fundamental for the preservation or the realization of democracy in the merging Europe.

The majority of studies on Europeanisation of the public sphere present the tension between a normative transnational approach, assessing the need for the formation of a European public opinion and a descriptive intergovernmental approach, describing the European media system as mainly nationally oriented. Some scholars have studied European public sphere to discover trends and patterns in Europe (Brüggemann et al. 2006; Trenz and Eder 2004), to underline the national prospective of mass media reporting (Statham and Gray 2005; Le Torrec et al. 2001), or they have considered mass media as vehicle of political participation (McLeod et al. 1999) and as a form of media culture (Machill et al. 2006), but few have tried to understand what journalists think about EU information and how media relations could be strengthen in order to increase public discourses.

In this paper my intent is to understand journalists' opinions about EU information, EU perceived visibility in the newspapers/magazines and journalists' perceptions of their role for creating EU discourses. If a European public sphere depends on the quantity and quality of discourses available in all member states, and these discourses depend partly on journalists' reports and partly on people' interests in discussing, then understanding what journalists think about EU information could help to comprehend how EU should establish good media relations in order to develop a European public sphere.

The research methodology includes a literature review of the concept of public sphere in relation to the European Union and the role of mass media in democratic societies. Then the comparative analysis of the data of an online questionnaire will provide information about journalists' thoughts in relations to different aspects. This data is part of an ongoing research project

about EU communication strategies in two EU member states, Finland and Italy. The research project aims at investigating the differences and similarities in the implementations of EU information and communication policies in these countries and the effects of such policies on Finnish and Italian citizens within the general EU goal of improving EU credibility. In this paper the data about Finnish and Italian journalists was used as an instance to support the idea that media understanding is a very important aspect for the creation of public sphere. Finally the data and problem of public sphere will be interpreted according to a public relations standpoint.

Public sphere and the European Union

The origin of the idea of the public sphere can be traced back to ancient Greece (Arendt 1958), referring to a special arena where different interests, views and meaning are presented, discussed, criticised and negotiated among different publics. According to Tobler a public sphere “is to be regarded as an intermediate system which mediates between society or its sub-systems and the political system or its core, the state administration” (2001: 8). The most current discussions about public sphere are influenced by Habermas’s (1962/1989) seminal work, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An inquiry into a category of Bourgeois society*. Habermas defined the public sphere as a virtual or imaginary community which does not necessarily exist in any identifiable space. In its ideal form, the public sphere is “made up of private people gathered together as a public and articulating the needs of society with the state” (ibid: 176). Through acts of assembly and dialogue, the public sphere generates opinions and attitudes which serve to affirm or challenge-therefore, to guide-the affairs of state. In ideal terms, the public sphere is the source of public opinion needed to “legitimate authority in any functioning democracy” (Rutherford 2000: 18). A public sphere began to emerge in the 18th century through the growth of coffee houses, literary and other societies, voluntary associations, and the growth of the press. In their efforts to

discipline the state, parliament and other agencies of representative government sought to manage this public sphere [i]. Habermas understands the bourgeois public sphere as the realm in which unprecedented enlightenment and rationality was acquired. Even though he notes that the identification of property owners with human beings was the origin of ideology, all of these changes were “more than just ideology.” For Habermas, it was an unprecedented and revolutionary progress that reason emerged as a legitimate source [ii]. The “public use of reason” and “the principle of publicity” were established in the bourgeois public sphere and a public and public opinion as rationality were the outcome of that process.

Today this term refers to the existence of different public discourses on different issues, institutions, and policies, generally amplified by the mass media. Public discourses constituted the primary medium for the development of public knowledge, values, interpretations and self-understandings for change and innovation, as well as reproduction or transmission over time in the inventory of ideas and arguments that are available in a given public sphere (Peters 2005: 88). Public discourses should be openly accessible to wider publics, and they should be equally represented by the media. Mass media play a pivotal role in the process of creation of modern public sphere, since citizens depend on mass media’s information in order to determine their opinion and construct public discourses. The existence of a public sphere is on the one hand relying on mass media, on the other hand is considered an essential element of democratic societies.

The term public sphere has gained its exploit in recent years in relation to the European Union. Public sphere at European level is a term which is not yet defined and agreed. Debates on public spheres mostly concern whether the European Union, considered a supranational federation with many similar features of nation-states, has a own public sphere or not and whether it is possible to talk about a pan-European public sphere independent of individual states or a European public sphere as a result of the Europeanization of the national public spheres. Fundamentally it can be observed that the existence of a pan-European public sphere is rejected by the majority of the authors (Sievert 1998, Gerhards 2000) for the fact that a pan-European public sphere requires as the

most important preconditions the existence of a common language in which the EU citizens can communicate with one another (Grimm 1995, Kielmannsegg 1996, Kantner 2002), the existence of mass media with EU-wide reach (Diez Medrano 2003; Kantner 2002), the existence of uniform journalistic and media culture in all EU states (Sievert 1998; Wiesner 1990). All three preconditions fail to be true. Different scholars believe that national public spheres could evolve into a European public sphere (Brüggemann et al. 2006; Trenz and Eder 2004) if different discourses can become the daily agenda of national mass media. A European public sphere intended whether as a pan-European public sphere or as a result of Europeanization of national public spheres directly depends on the quantity and quality of discourses presented in different national mass media.

The role of mass media

The role of mass media in democratic societies is very important since they are the vehicle for informing citizens, they can create public opinion and public support towards administrations and other relevant national institutions. Mass media have the power to create, amplify and dismiss different discourses. They can move public attention from one issue to another, but they can drive government policy by mobilizing public opinion too (Downs 1957). Some other scholars (Erikson et al. 1993; Monroe 1979; Page and Shapiro 1992) document high correlations between opinion and policy to support the assumption.

Mass media are recognised to be forums of political and social discussions and conflicts, since they can either support or disrupt social integration. They shape social identities. Mass media help people to orientate to political events and create possibilities for citizens' political participation, they also as instruments of the political elite, socialize, persuade and work on “public opinion” (Nousiainen 1989). They can question and criticize political decisions and events and, such being the case, serve as gatekeepers and filters between politicians and the media audiences. For De

Fouly the role of mass media is of providers of a “record of events” in society (2005). Democratic societies rely on the mass media to provide citizens with adequate information to make sound judgments about politics, and powerful structural and institutional forces may bias information systems. In a Habermasian paradigm the role of the media is merely to disseminate information and to encourage public reasoning; however public reasoning is generally influenced by the media and by particular interests with access to the public via the media (Holmström 1996:28). In fact considering the media as a passive mirror reflecting society back to itself, it is not more possible because the process of news selection and concepts such as “newsworthiness” constitute agenda-setting.

Four main factors that influence mass media

Because of mass media’ role and power in mobilizing public opinions, many are the factors which attempt to influence them. Divergent and sometimes controversial are the opinions within the academic field about what and who influences the mass media. Some scholars (Herman and Chomsky 1988) believe that governments have substantial power to shape interpretations of events. They have access to and control over information; they direct resources and maintain organizational structures to disseminate information. As Yudof (1983) warned, the influence of government may have a profound impact on democratic processes. It may show the observed relationship between public opinion and policy in new light. Public opinion may not influence policy; government officials may shape public opinion instead.

Others see the mass media as promoters of the interests and wishes of media owners. Owners may exercise their authority cautiously and subtly, but they have numerous opportunities to express their preferences and ensure that they are reflected in news coverage. They can set editorial policy and intervene directly in news decisions; they can choose like-minded editors who suggest

the tone and substance of stories to subordinate and alter the content and significance of stories that reporters submit; they can shape the ideological perspectives of reporters through their power to hire, promote, and fire (Chomsky 1999).

Another group of scholars think that the media have a different role in the distribution of information. Mass media do not depend on government/media owner interests, but have the possibility to control the information considering their business profits. They have distorted the political process also by turning politics into a market like game that humiliates citizens' dignity and rights and ridicules political leaders' words and deeds (Entman 1989; Jamieson 1992; Patterson 1993; Sartori 1997). Critics argue that the media's presentation of politics in the United States as well as in many other countries—as “show-biz” based on battles of images, conflicts between characters, polls and marketing, all typical frenzies of a journalism that is increasingly commercial in its outlook—has diminished if not supplanted altogether debate about ideas, ideals, issues, and people's vital interests and has debased voters by treating them not as citizens but rather as passive “consumers” of mediatized politics (Mazzoleni and Schulz 1999). Mediatized politics is politics that has lost its autonomy, has become dependent in its central functions on mass media, and is continuously shaped by inter-actions with mass media. However it is truly recognisable that the mass media are not mere passive channels for political communicators and political content. Rather, the media are organizations with their own aims and rules that do not necessarily coincide with, and indeed often clash with, those of political communicators. Because of the power of the media, political communicators are forced to respond to the media's rules, aims, production logics, and constraints (Altheide and Snow 1979). One of the most significant results is that politicians who wish to address the public must negotiate with the media's preferred timing, formats, language, and even the content of the politicians' communication (Dayan and Katz 1992). Some even hypothesize that legitimacy of the exercise of power increasingly might lie in the ability of rulers to communicate through the media (Cotteret 1991).

Finally the cultural studies scholars believe that the recipient of the mass mediated message is more and more seen as playing an active role (Thompson 1995; Ang 1991) and thus the receiver can influence mass media content to certain extent too. According to this definition, viewing is, first and foremost, an active and social process. Television audiences actively and creatively construct their own meanings rather than passively absorbing pre-packaged meanings imposed upon them (Ang 1991). Viewers' active interaction with television texts turns reception into a site of struggle and not simply a site of domination. As Thompson (1995) says, the interaction between the media and the public always includes a creative process of interpretation by which the recipients make sense of the message, using the resources available to them. This process can have effects in the short or in the long term, and may be intentional or unconscious. In addition, every mean of communication acts in a different way. That is why it is also important to consider the combined effects of different types of communication working together.

The link between the European Union, mass media and public sphere: why is it so important?

The media have crucial roles in the process of "Europeanization" and in the development of a new European identity (Kivikuru 1996) for different reasons. They influence Europeans social interaction and everyday lives by providing topics of discussion, a European agenda. This European agenda is one of the pre-requisite of a common public sphere. They produce flows of information and public discourses that integrate society and provide a sense of community and commonality, which is very important for the European integration. In fact a well-functioning democracy requires an electorate that is aware at least to a certain degree of social issues and topics. To form such an electorate and to keep it up-to-date, mass media should critically study and debate the plans, decisions and measures of decision-makers at the European level. It is this process of discussing and analysing different issues by different mass media in different countries that determines the

existence of a European public sphere. According to Brüggemann and others scholars (2006) if the European Union fails to create a European public sphere, it risks of depriving citizens of a constitutive feature of democracy: the possibility to inform themselves, reason about, scrutinize, criticize and eventually influence policy-making. In fact a successful European integration requires more than the implementation of efficient institutions and the harmonisation of national and European policy making. It involves processes of communication and the emergence of a public sphere that allows citizens to get involved in public discourses about European politics. In the discussion on the democratic deficit, it is widely acknowledged that European integration from above must be accompanied by a Europeanisation of public communication in order to overcome the EU's lack of legitimacy and popular involvement (Koopmans and Pfetsch 2003). By informing and educating people about EU's activities and promoting common policies among all the member states, the European Union hopes to improve citizens' participation to the creation of a supranational democracy. Citizens' participation is one of the key factors of functioning democracy. Moreover the public role of mass media in modern complex societies acquires special significance due to the fact that the citizens are essentially dependent on the information provided by the media (Neidhardt 1994: 10). Hence, it is very important to understand what journalists think is newsworthy, what idea they have about EU information and how they transfer European discourses at national/ regional levels. These aspects are essential in order to create a European public sphere intended either as a pan-European public sphere or as a result of Europeanization of national public sphere. A European public sphere is an essential prerequisite of democratic societies and it is regarded as the missed tool for EU legitimacy and integration.

Methodology and Sample

This study aims at discovering the journalists' point of view in reporting EU discourses in their daily work and their opinion on EU information and on media relations between EU

institutions and national mass media. The countries selected for this study are Finland and Italy. The sample includes N= 54 interviewees of which N= 14 from Finland and N= 40 from Italy. The method of investigation was an online questionnaire sent in Finnish and Italian languages between December 2005 and April 2006. The aim of this questionnaire was gathering statistical data to understand the role that mass media have in the process of European integration. It was addressed to journalists reporting EU information working at regional/ national newspapers/magazines in Finland and in Italy.

The majority of questions were closed-answers (N= 32), some of them were open (N= 12). The questionnaire is divided in three sections plus a fourth optional. The first section (7 questions) deals with some general information about the interviewee; the second section (11 questions) deals with media training for journalists and intend to discover what journalists think about media training in terms of utility, efficacy and learning. The third section (25 questions) considers different aspects such as EU agenda in relation to national agenda, the national media coverage of EU issue and the journalists' possibilities in gathering EU information. The fourth section (1 question) was open to comments and remarks.

The method was rather qualitative than quantitative. Journalists were pre- contacted by telephone in order to establish whether they write or have written articles about EU and whether they were interested in participating to the survey or not. Only journalists who write about EU affairs were interviewed. Additional selection criteria were gender, area, political view and coverage of the journal/magazine and quantity of readers. The Finnish sample was composed by journalists working for *Aamulehti*, *Helsingin Sanomat*, *Ilkka*, *Kainuun Sanomat*, *Karjalainen*, *Kauppalehti*, *Keskisuomalainen*, *Lapin Kansa*, *Suomen Kuvalehti* and *Turun Sanomat*. The Italian sample included journalists working for *Avvenire*, *Corriere della Sera*, *Il Campanile Nuovo*, *il Foglio*, *il Giornale*, *Il Giorno*, *Il Mattino*, *il Messaggero*, *il Sole24ore*, *L'Espresso*, *l'Unità*, *Panorama*, and *Venerdì di Repubblica*. The answers of the open questions were classified according to the definitions used by the participants themselves (Patton 1990). All open questions, a part for

the last question on comments and remarks, implied very short answers, typically to name either three adjectives of a specific issue asked in the question or to name three important topics of national agenda or three personal opinions on their job and on EU information. These answers were classified according to common patterns (for example similar meanings and/ or similar associations) and then analysed.

Journalists' opinions about EU information

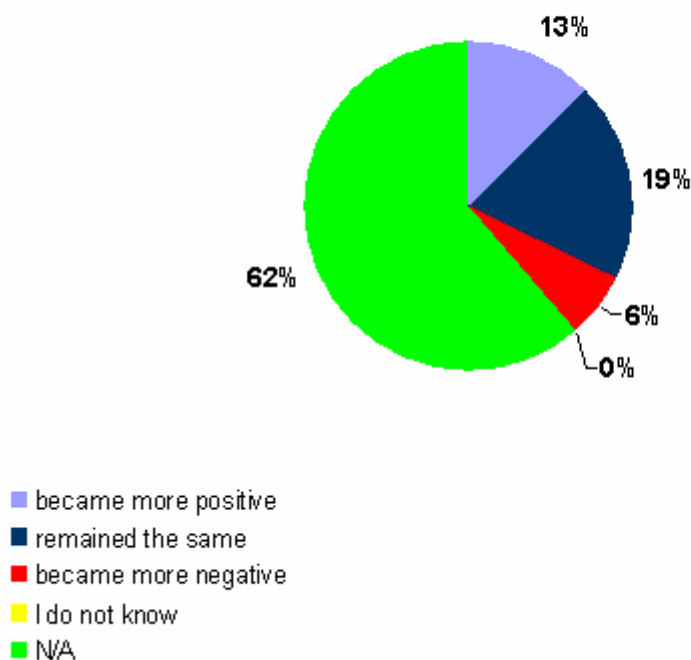
Although the pre-contact conversation the journalists who answered to the online questionnaire were at the end N= 30, of which N= 10 from Finland and N= 20 from Italy. The rate of responses was 62,96% of the sample, of which 71,42% of the Finnish sample and 50% of the Italian sample. The findings tell us that the majority of journalists who write about EU are male, between 40-50 years old (50%) and with generally master degree level of education (40%).

The majority of journalists (67%) have not attended any media training or course for reporting EU information but there is a wide discrepancy between the two countries. Only 15% of the Italian journalists attended media training for reporting EU information in contraposition of the Finnish group whose 70% did participate at least once. The majority of those who did not attend, declared they would have liked to participate to such courses, since they could be useful for learning more background research/information (21%), for acquiring more knowledge about EU institutions, history, economic and policies (20%), and for learning abilities/ tools/ tips/ methodologies for writing (19%). Although their expressed interest in media training for reporting EU, the majority of all sample (47%) believes it is necessary for a journalist to have such course in order to write about EU issues.

Those who attended at least one course said that it was generally useful (26%) and they felt more prepared in reporting EU news (33%). A great number of this group of journalists considered

as well quite important to attend a media training for reporting EU for their job and they expressed the desire of further courses (40%). 19% of the people interviewed who had attended a media training confirmed that his/her opinion about EU institutions and policies has remained the same, 13% said it became more positive and 6% more negative (see Table 1).

TABLE 1. Your opinion about EU policies and institutions after this training has.....



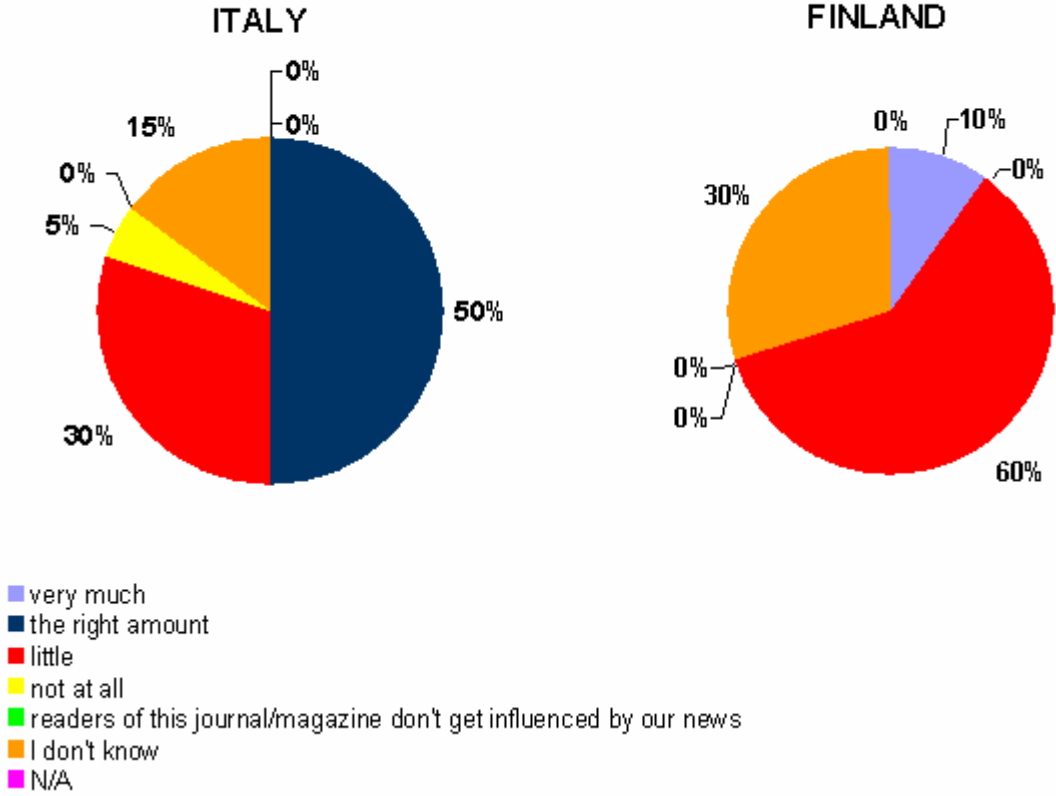
Nevertheless it is not possible to demonstrate that the media training for reporting EU has necessarily direct links on journalists' changed opinions. Frequently journalists who had a positive opinion (39%) or neutral position (45%) switched their perceptions on EU affairs after attending media training mostly because their opinion was affected by their previous little knowledge on EU affairs. The data shows that there is a direct correlation between those who found useful a media training and are willing to attend another course and those who have a positive opinion on EU institutions and policies. In addition it shows that more journalists learned about EU and more their opinion became positive, although few have expressed a different trend; more they learned from

this type of course and more their opinion became negative (6%). It seems that a good level of knowledge on EU is an important prerequisite in helping journalists to define their own position either positive, neutral or negative in regards of EU.

When it was asked which aspects they thought were necessary to report EU information, the majority of interviewees considered good writing skills (38%) as very important, then a good understanding and knowledge about EU and other countries' issues (28%), while another group of people believed that both the ability of giving detailed and correct information (9%) and of providing a national perspective of EU policies (9%) are important aspects. The first choice made by journalists is quite obvious, since it is related with their job, while the other three options are all linked to each others. It is quite difficult to report EU affairs in detailed and correct manner if a journalist does not comprehend EU affairs and other countries' issues and this knowledge is necessary in order to give a more national perspective to the news too.

At the question what their readers want to find in good quality news about EU issues, the majority thought good writing skills (52%), local perspective and proximity to readers' interests (14%), national perspective of EU debates (10%) and EU perspective of the debate (10%). According to Finnish and Italian journalists 53% of their readers are interested in EU affairs while only 20% are not. They assume that the way they report EU information has little influence (40%) on public opinion, but for others (33%) their news affects the right amount of general opinion. The difference on public opinion's influence is more a country related question (see Table 2). Almost all of those who presume they influence the right amount of their readers' opinions are from Italy, while the Finnish journalists think they have little power in general opinion's formation. However 50% of journalists perceive themselves as somehow responsible of possible changes in the country's opinion about EU. More Finnish journalists acknowledge this responsibility than Italians.

TABLE 2. How much does your way to present EU issues influence readers' opinion about that issue?

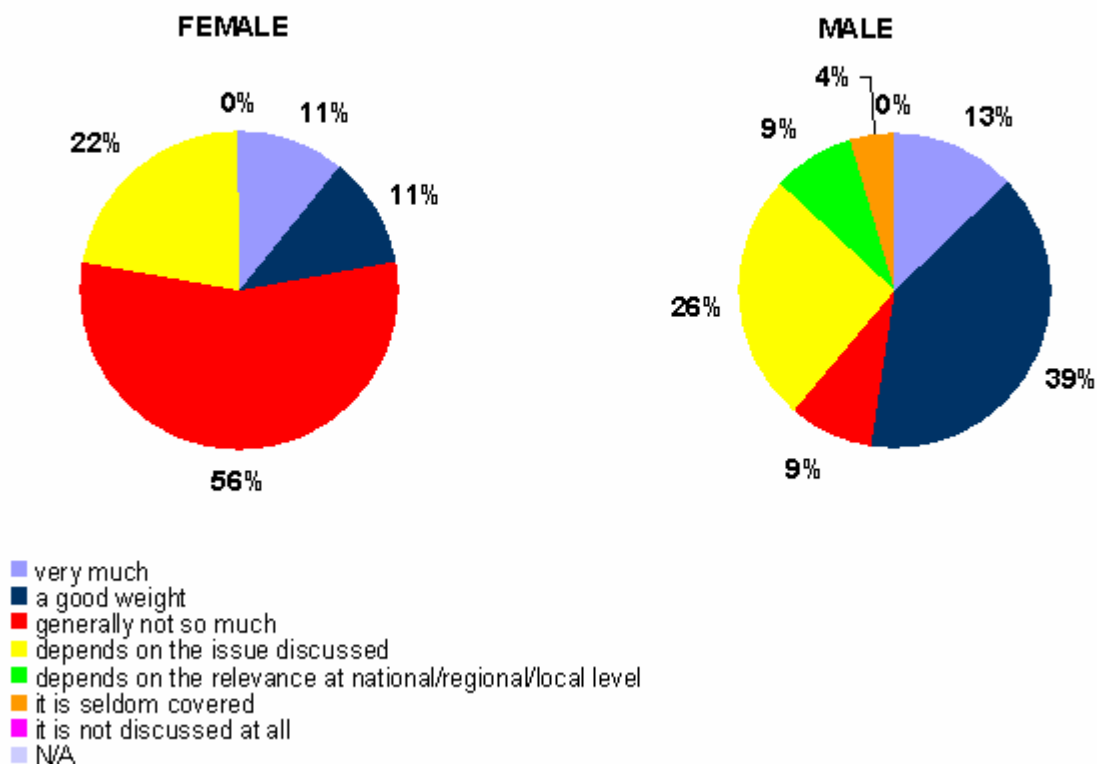


Since mass media has such important role in the society and it has the power to move public opinions, some questions dealt with aspects of influence on news selection. At the question “Do you feel some external authorities/organizations have influenced or are influencing your choices in presenting EU issues ?” 93% of the interviewees of both countries do not feel any external pressure for presenting EU issues. Half of the sample (50%) believe that EU institutions have little influence on national media agenda, while 23% gives to EU institutions the right amount of power to influence. Among those who agreed somewhat on EU institutions’ influence on national mass media a great number was from Finland. Differently Italian journalists feel almost no pressure from EU institutions in their EU reporting job. According to journalists of both countries EU’s influence on national mass media has not effected their profession, although the profession itself has changed. Almost all sample (97%) thought that in the last 10 years the journalism regulations and rules have

changed, but this is not directly connected with the increasing power of European Union and its regulations in media policies (83%).

At the question “How important is EU agenda in your daily/weekly news reporting ?” 31% said that EU agenda has a good weight in daily news reports, 25% said that it depends on the issue discussed, 22% believes that EU agenda has generally not so much importance, while 13% gives very much importance. 56% of women journalists believe that generally EU agenda does not have so much importance while only 9% of the men sample said the same, and the most negative remained the Italian female journalists (see Table 3.).

TABLE 3. How important is EU agenda in your daily/weekly news reporting ?



When it was asked to quantify the media coverage that the journals they work for usually give to EU issues, 53% think that their journal gives enough space. However, at the question “Do you think your journal/magazine should give more space to EU issues?” 53% of sample said yes,

20% no, and 27% don't know. The data from the open questions shows as well that the majority of journalists believe that their journal/magazine covers enough EU but it should increase. This is the dilemma between personal considerations of the importance to present specific topics and the restriction and limits of the journal/magazine's structure. Among the most quoted reasons for not covering enough EU information in national news media there are: EU issues do not attract so much readers as the local issues do (31%), EU issues are not sensationalistic (17%), most of the topics are not interesting (13%) and nobody is interested in procedural aspects related to EU decision-making (13%). In addition, 57% believes that the national agenda of his/her country frequently clashes with EU agenda, especially in the cases related with the European arrest warrant, agricultural/environmental policies and Turkey membership.

Another aspect investigated was journalists' opinion on EU information and their perception on media relations with EU institutions. Frequently journalists prepare their news reports with the information obtained through EU institutions and their press offices. Hence great impact on news selection and quality depends on the journalist' perception of availability and quality of EU information. When it was asked how they would characterize EU communication, 40% believes it's informative, 17% promotional, 11% educational and 23% gave other answers, such as frequently inefficient, bureaucratic, complex and confused, not enough and different from one country to another. On the other hand when it was asked to express their opinion in what their readers think about EU communication there is a slightly negative increment in the answers: 35% of journalists believe that their readers consider it is informative, 26% propagandistic, 23% gave other answers such as distant, irrelevant, complex, boring, insufficient and not clear. Only 6% gave promotional and 6% educational connotation. Finnish journalists perceive that a great number of their readers consider EU communication as propagandistic (50%), while a little number of Italian journalists said so (14%). Journalists of both countries said that the quality of EU information is very poor and the media relations between sources of information and national mass media are quite difficult and not sufficient established.

The last question of the questionnaire was completely open to comments and ideas about EU information, journalism values in both countries and personal opinions. Only N= 6 journalists over N= 30, who replied to the questionnaire, expressed their judgments on the question, N= 5 of these were Italians. The most remarkable notes were related with the lack of EU attention to national journalists in their information services. Some journalists expressed their dissatisfaction with EU media relations, they found difficult to get in touch with EU officers for interviews and to obtain any type of contact information, to receive information material for preparing news reports in their journals/magazines. Nevertheless they believe there is a lot of information available but it is very hard to get when a journal/magazine is not located in Brussels or surroundings. Another important issue discussed was the readers' interests on EU. Some journals have tried to give more space at EU affairs but with not positive effects on the readership. Especially for Finland it will be quite difficult to increase the space for EU news if Finnish journalists' perception on public opinion is true, that is if a great number of Finnish readers really perceive EU communication as propagandistic. Nevertheless, many expressed the readiness to risk a bit more in the writing format for reporting EU issues with a hope to make it more attractive to readers. A possible solution proposed was to treat EU news as if it was national politic news and presenting quarrellings, arguments, debates and gossips that are going on in Brussels.

Discussion

The findings of this study underlines the necessity of improving media relations between EU institutions and their press offices and national mass media, since mass media is the starting key of a complex mechanism generating public discourses which are preliminary elements of a possible European public sphere. Journalists have shown their interest to become the starting keys, but they need the support of politicians, media owners and firstly of the European institutions. The findings

show as well a general tendency in preserving traditional national mass media format which may clash with the new European news format. The way the EU media system functions is an issue seen, for instance, in the tendency of journalists to use traditional categories instead of perceiving the novel aspects of the European enterprise; the lack of a common language and a unified public, the dominance of national networks among journalists, the prevalence of national agenda even in the disseminating EU news, and the prevalence of intergovernmental and elite-driven images of the EU conveying an image of weakness on the part of certain European institutions, for instance, in the prevalence of the European Commission over the Parliament (Gerhards 1993; Le Torrec et al. 2001). Media training for EU reporting could be a solution for acquiring knowledge and understanding on EU and other countries' issues, but there are some practical problems on this option. Frequently journalists do not have time and finances to invest in such courses, especially if the journal/magazine they work for is a local/regional one. There is a tendency – dictated by marketing rules- to count more on quantity of journal/magazine copies sold and on space limits than on qualitative and educational information. Journalists seem to be ready to invest in such type of information but they do not have the means to do. Some journalists admitted that readers' interest on EU will not change if the EU reporting format does not modify and if the profession itself does not recognize the importance of EU coverage and increase space for EU news.

The findings of this study presented another problem of EU reporting, that is its proximity to local interests and to national perspective, two elements that determine readers' interest. Some scholars (De Fouloy 2005; Grayson 2003; Fishkin 1995; Entman 1989) believe that civic journalism could help to solve this problem. Civic journalism is considered a fresh approach to newsworthiness and news gathering, but, like other elements of democracy, it is not easy to implement. Civic journalism brings citizens together around a particular issue by setting up structures within which they can deliberate without domination by powerful interest groups, vociferous individuals, bureaucrats or institutions. This new approach of newsworthiness requires that media organizations are willing to meet the costs of establishing the process and making

available space of time to fully report the deliberations. On the other hand it guarantees an increment of circulation or audience, and surely a more credible perception of the press and electronic media by its critics. Regional and local media are particularly well placed to conduct civic journalism because of their closeness to their readership or audience (Glasser and Campbell 1999). In addition, civic journalism offers a sense of influence and belonging to participants, an innovative and new role for media organizations, for journalists and editors and the development of new skills.

Conclusions

Especially in the last ten years, the European Union has increased its power and influence among its member states and outside as well in the international arena. The process of integration is just at the beginning and it promises to include many more features and countries. Since its establishment the European Union has defined itself as a democratic supranational authority with many characteristics of national states, and thus it should include as well a public sphere or multiple public spheres with a European connotation. The existence of public sphere is not only a prerequisite of democratic societies and essential tool for citizens to make their voice heard, it is a sign of recognition and legitimation of EU institutions. The European Union cannot continue its integration process without appealing to the consensus of its citizens. On the other hand citizens need to know more about EU institutions, its policies, its processes of decision making etc. It is through this knowledge that some public discourses may generate among certain people (not only the elite group) and determine public spheres. Thus, citizens need to be informed and involved in matters that concern the European Union.

The Directorate General of Press and Communication of the European Commission has tried through different communication actions to involve Europeans, but the results were not so good,

since generally Europeans do not trust so much EU institutions, they instead trust more their national governments and even more their mass media. In this study the role of mass media as transmitter of EU information has been regarded as central key for the creation of a European public sphere. It has been said that more EU coverage on national mass media will effect readers' information and involvement on EU matters and it will provide those public discourses for the creation of a European public sphere. Furthermore this study has proved the necessity of increasing the quality and quantity of media relations between EU institutions and the national mass media in each country. The quality of relationships with journalists generally determines the quality and quantity of information available at national level.

Further studies are necessary to discover how to improve such relationships and how to provide to journalists the necessary tools for reporting EU. Studies on media relations in this specific EU theme are extremely important since they will help to clarify EU current situation and help to find a better solution to manage journalist's needs in different countries. At the same time a process of rethinking must take place in editorial offices to ensure that the European Union also acquires the importance in the context of journalism which it has long had in the political and economic spheres and to do justice to their public duty in a merging Europe of increasing significance of its citizens. As Jürgen Habermas has put it "the democratic deficit can only be resolved if a European public sphere emerges in which the democratic process is embedded" (Habermas 2001 quoted in Brüggemann et al. 2006: 1). A European public sphere is not a natural transformation of national public discourses into European ones; it is a construction, as many other aspects of the European Union. It requires dedication and work from different players until it can run by itself. When the process of public discourses has started, a European public sphere will follow.

Endnotes:

- [i] Since the German *Öffentlichkeit* has been translated into its English counterpart, the public sphere, the term acquired the spatial connotation. However, the meaning of *Öffentlichkeit* is not different from the concept of publicity; openness and access. Habermas himself played a role in creating this misunderstanding by situating the public sphere between the state and civil society in his diagram.
- [ii] In this context, Best & Kellner (1991, pp. 233-240) suggest that *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere* not only provides important clues as to what aspects of modernity he wishes to preserve, but also serves to explain why he would oppose later post-modern theories which totally reject modernity. Habermas, they argue, finds the historical matrix of a valuable legacy of modernity including democracy, communicative action, and rational consensus in the earlier bourgeois public sphere.

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