



EU Differentiation, Dominance and the Control Function of Journalism

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Abstract

Differentiated integration in the EU is a challenge to established media organisations and journalism and their function to guarantee broad news coverage of EU affairs and to control EU governance. A well-functioning journalism in democracy needs to be fact-oriented and critical. In the EU differentiated system of expert governance, this means for journalists that they need to be not only experts themselves, but also critical voices. They need to be able to provide both facts and critical arguments to put EU government to the test and allow for an informed judgment of the citizens. A well-functioning Brussels journalism is constrained, however, by the parallel processes of differentiation of the public sphere and the media. The problem here is not only the national segmentation of journalism but also the requirement for journalism specialisation and the retreat of EU journalism into niches, which reduces the overall visibility of EU news and addresses very different audiences from very different platforms and perspectives. At the same time, established news organisations face financial constraints and increasingly find it challenging to build capacities to follow the differentiation of EU governance and to address its arbitrary effects critically. We argue in this paper that the parallel development of EU differentiation and journalism differentiation requires further investigation, in order to determine how these two processes – in synergy or independently of each other – may fuel arbitrariness, unaccountability and expertisation of EU policy-making. Insofar as that is the case, it comes at the expense of EU representative institutions and processes that are meant to hold EU officials democratically accountable. We propose a model or a framework that allows us to analyse the mutual relationship between journalism differentiation and EU differentiation and that draws attention to the role of Brussels correspondents as potential EU public sphere entrepreneurs.

Keywords

Brussels correspondents – Differentiation – Digitalisation – EU – Hyper-complexity – Public Sphere Entrepreneurs

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Introduction

EU differentiation has challenged the capacities of EU actors and institutions to build the type of public understanding that is needed for democratic legitimacy. The language of EU differentiated governance is built on high levels of complexity (Batora and Fossum 2020; Fossum 2015) and cannot easily be translated into public parlance. Communicating Europe poses an epistemological challenge of what could be called a 'meta-translation problem': new concepts need to be developed, but the explanatory force of the new vocabulary still remains uncertain and is often incongruent with the familiar terminology and imagery associated with the nation state and with national democracy. Understanding Europe presupposes reflexivity, which however is inextricably related to unequally distributed social competence, power and opportunities for learning (Kauppi 2008). Communicating Europe further poses a pragmatic challenge of what could be called an 'every-day translation problem': With high levels of complexity of EU governance the language that is used by the EU bureaucratic apparatus in their every-day communication becomes more and more encrypted. Understanding Europe presupposes high specialisation and expertise in various policy fields.

While the overall complexity of the EU institutional set-up and policies increases there is a parallel development that the public communication capacities of the system decrease. Not only has the EU not delivered on its own goal to invest in better and more efficient public communication (Rauh et al. 2019). The available media and communication infrastructures that could provide translations are also weakened by the demise of quality journalism and the various challenges EU correspondents meet in their daily work in Brussels. This weakening of media infrastructures has fatal consequences for the possibilities of creating a public understanding of differentiated EU governance. Journalists are needed, on the one hand, as specialists with expert knowledge in their daily monitoring of the performance of the EU and its institutions and with critical capacities to relate differentiation, dominance and democracy. Journalists, and especially EU correspondents, on the other hand, also play an important role as agents of de-differentiation in the way their news-coverage relies on collaborative schemes and shared interpretative frames that bridge national media systems and languages. With regard to these two complementary functions of European journalism as experts and as translators of the public interest, the expectation has long been that European integration would lead to a de-differentiation of national media and the public sphere allocating at the same time specialised competences at EU level, thus leading to a convergence of journalism and the news media in the service of democracy (Fossum and Schlesinger 2007). What we witness instead over the last two decades is an increasingly tense and opposing relationship between EU institutions, journalism, the news media and audiences (Michailidou et al. 2014). A discrepancy has opened up between EU polity and policy differentiation and the further differentiation (many would claim fragmentation) of the field of news production and consumption with fatal consequences for the public communication capacities of the EU system of governance.

With the demise of quality journalism there are fewer and fewer translators available, who master the language of EU differentiated integration and can explain the EU to the citizens. In such a situation, the language of the public and the language of EU bureaucrats and experts become mutually unintelligible. There is an EU parlance of differentiated integration that develops in parallel to the parlance of the people, who prefer easy over complex language, speak the 'vernacular' of popular sovereignty, undivided rule and identity and not the complex grammars of pooled sovereignty in multi-level arrangements. Through segmented Europeanisation, EU institutions lose the capacities to understand publics, and segmented publics do not understand EU institutions. The perverse effect of such a development is that hyper-complexity, which in itself is constituted by an excess of differentiation, might engender even more differentiation. Complexity triggers differentiation because participating actors develop preferences to opt-out, while also publics and electorates will prefer opt-outs, whenever an opportunity arises. In other words, further differentiation might become an escape mechanism from the hyper-complexity of EU differentiation. Once we have such a spiralling effect, the accelerating processes of differentiation risk to spin out of control with fragmentation at both polity and policy level as a more likely result.

How can a study of EU journalism contribute to the examination of the conditions for understanding and acceptance of EU differentiation? Our focus here is the generation of mediated critical discourse about the EU. Focusing on this process includes an assessment of the work of EU correspondents as professional translators of EU differentiated governance. We will assess the available explanations of the EU provided by journalists, and we will assess their reach, their content and their consistency when confronted with the complexity of differentiation. This type of analysis assumes that the legitimacy challenge associated with differentiation involves a translation problem of how to provide an adequate explanation of the complexity of EU governance, apply a critical perspective to dominance, and reach out to citizens as constituents of a democratic EU polity. An explanation involves information and justification: helping people to get the facts right on what EU differentiation is about and helping people to assess and evaluate EU differentiation, and make sense of what it means for them and their communities. This translation task is a fundamental aspect of modern journalism.

By dealing with EU differentiation as a translation problem, we turn our attention to the following set of research questions: what type of media and communication infrastructures are made available and do the available media infrastructures render the complexity of EU differentiation legible or comprehensible to the public? Or to the contrary, do they support escape from complexity, moves to take back control, re-nationalise and negotiate opt-outs? And, last but not least, can such escapes achieve effective de-differentiation to remedy some of the perceived functional and normative shortcomings of EU differentiation or do they, as we have argued above, have the paradoxical effect of increasing complexity and imply the risk of fragmentation, which further enhances problems of dominance and democracy?

To set the research agenda for the study of EU differentiation in relation to differentiated public opinion and journalism, we first briefly outline the notorious

communication deficits of the EU differentiated system of governance. We then historically trace the development of journalism within Western democracies that is firmly anchored both on national differentiation and universal democratic journalism standards. Thirdly, we turn to contemporary challenges for news media and the public sphere, particularly the digitalisation- and globalisation-driven disruptions taking place at the level of news production and news reception. We argue that new fragmented journalistic practices of news-making, distribution and reception have a potential, on the one hand, to break existing media monopolies, spread information and pluralise opinions about government. On the other hand, media fragmentation cannot guarantee the equal spread of information across the population, and disrupts informed public opinion and will formation. Based on this critical account of the contemporary state of affairs of news-making, we turn, in a fourth step, to the specifics of European journalism and its capacity to fulfil its function as the fourth power within the EU democracy. We investigate the corps of EU correspondents and their working practices to mediate between Brussels and the national arenas. The paper, then, sets out a research agenda for exploring this evolving relationship between EU differentiation and journalism differentiation, by laying down three possible scenarios. We anticipate the consequences of each of these scenarios for the ability of journalism to exercise its control function vis-à-vis EU dominance in the fourth part of the paper, while in the conclusion, we outline the implications of each of the three scenarios for the future of democracy in the EU.

EU differentiation and differentiated public responses

Increased EU differentiation may trigger differentiated public responses, but the relationship may also be the reverse: with EU differentiation emanating as an outcome of differentiated public inputs. EU differentiation inevitably results from the nationally fragmented democratic procedures of will formation. (Bellamy and Kröger 2017; Fossum 2015). Electorates also impose on governments to seek differentiated status, to opt out of arrangements, to seek exemptions etc. (Schimmelfennig 2019). The pro-integration preferences of elites often clash with the opt-out preferences of parts of the electorate or calls for national prerogatives. EU Treaty reforms or decisions to further integrate are often contested in national elections and referenda. The Danish government, in 2016, for instance, proposed to opt-in and to adopt the collaboration schemes of Justice and Home Affairs, but was pushed by a vote in the national referendum to opt-out again (Wind 2019). ‘Politicisation’ as a strategy of various actors to raise public concerns and feed them into the political process can be used to propose further differentiation or de-differentiation (de Wilde and Lord 2016). We expect proposals for further differentiation and proposals for further de-differentiation to be politicised to different degrees, and be given particular salience and framed in different and often polarising terms (e.g. along the lines of pro- and anti-European divides).

There is, however, a dilemma that the more we have such differentiated democratic designs, and the more opt-outs in place, the more the EU grows in complexity, and complexity might even trigger further differentiation. As we shall argue below, one reason for this likelihood of electorates to prefer opt-outs over integration choices is

related to the biases of public and media communication that inform electorates about the EU. Another reason is the likelihood of domestic political parties to develop preferences for opt-outs and to mobilise electorates against integration choices taken by the EU and their national government. Hyper-complexity might trigger further differentiation, which becomes an escape mechanism from complexity. Such escape routes can be taken by political parties and by journalists. Neither the available infrastructures of interest mediation nor the available media and communication infrastructures support complexity, but rather support the development of escape from complexity, with the perverse effect that all these escape routes only increase complexity.

One aspect frequently overlooked in the study of political differentiation is that differentiation also means less control over the flows of communication. The channelling of information requires some degree of organisation and concentration. It asks for the power of political actors to set the agenda and to reach out with their messages to the electorates. Differentiation dilutes this power of agenda-setting. It multiplies the inputs and the channels of diffusion, which, through the use of new media technologies, can be used more flexibly by bureaucracies to reach out to relevant stakeholders or sectoral publics. The multiplication and flexible use of communication channels often come at the cost of further differentiation of the political system and the capacities of single actors and institutions to manage and influence the political arena. One recurrent problem of EU communication policies is indeed its fragmented character. After Lisbon, earlier efforts to allocate central competences to a DG communication and a single spokesperson of the Commission were abandoned in favour of diversified communication approaches and a de-centralisation of competences (Brüggemann 2010).

The role of political parties in creating public responses to EU-differentiated governance has been widely analysed and is thematised by the growing Euroscepticism literature (Leruth et al. 2017). In the following section, we turn our attention to the under-researched role of journalism as the fourth power in the EU and as the watchdog of EU democracy.

Journalism: Between national differentiation and global standardisation

Journalism is studied traditionally through the lens of the nation-state. Unavoidably so, as it is the particular political culture within which journalism develops (Almond and Verba 1963). Media systems co-evolve in symbiosis with the political system (Hallin and Mancini 2004; Siebert et al. 1956). There are good reasons for this: the work of journalists is state-focused, often journalists and their organisation concentrate in the capital city in proximity to government, parliament and political parties. There are further cultural reasons: the work of journalism is language-based, and their audiences rarely extend beyond the boundaries of their linguistic community. Media systems in Europe have thus differentiated along state territorial lines where journalism and newspapers played a critical role in the process of 'writing the nation into existence' (Anderson 2006).

Broadly speaking, three types of media systems can be distinguished with journalists as: a) fact-finders and critical but distanced watchdogs (the liberal British system); b) partisans (the polarised-pluralist model in Southern Europe and subsequently in some of the post-communist Central and Eastern European countries); and c) defenders of the public good (the corporatist-democratic model in Northern Europe) (Allern and Pollack 2019; Hallin and Mancini 2004; Kevin 2006; Örnebring 2013a, 2013b). These pluralistic media systems are typically inward-looking and national in focus to different degrees: It is somewhat ironic that in covering the EU, the British liberal system has developed the most nationalist journalism, while a critical-distant attitude has been developed mostly by journalists within the corporatist-democratic tradition.

Accounts of unitary, nationally confined media systems often disregard internal differentiation; for instance, in a federal state like Germany, we can observe differentiation of public broadcasting that develops in partial autonomy in the regions. Other countries, such as Belgium or Switzerland, did not even attempt to build a unitary media system and journalism remains linguistically and culturally divided. There are also significant differences between quality and tabloid or between print and TV journalism that are often overlooked when taking the nation-state and national journalism as a unit of analysis in comparative media studies. Internal differentiation of journalism is not only a functional requirement but also corresponds with the normative mandate of journalism of pluralism of information and opinion. Internal differentiation, thus, not only follows a market logic to make journalism viable and profitable, but also functions as a normative safeguard of pluralism and diversity.

Within the existing linguistically and culturally confined and legally protected national media system, one could argue that, for a long time, internal differentiation of journalism has been relatively low or even restricted through media concentration or monopolies, for instance, in the case of the dominant role of public broadcasting. Journalism at a national level is usually well organised and represented by influential organisations. It is also protected in national law and constitutions. Journalists have often internalised this self-understanding, seeing themselves mainly as serving their country, being socialised within that country, writing in the language of that country and defending the national interest of that country.

At the same time, journalism practice is transnational, as journalists are engaged in monitoring activities across the globe to cover world politics (Weaver and Wu 1998). Such monitoring also includes following up on the well-being of journalism in other countries and of press freedom on a global scale. Investigative journalism as well has become increasingly transnational with journalists establishing cooperation schemes across national borders (e.g. Alfter 2016; Grieves 2012; Heft et al. 2017). Moreover, the normative and professional standards of journalism that have evolved over time in Western democracies have come to serve as the basis for a universal standard of journalism, shared by professional bodies and monitoring institutions across the globe. The profession of journalism thus shares some core features and develops shared practices, while at the same time differentiating along cultural-territorial lines (Obijiofor and Hanusch 2011). From a purely normative understanding, there is, therefore, a

tension between the national understanding of journalism practices and the cosmopolitan vocation of journalism as a profession that is based on norms of universality and on universally standardised practices of applying critical standards, and defending neutrality and truth orientation (Christians et al. 2010; Hannerz 2004; Voltmer and Wasserman 2014).

The EU is an attempt to intersperse a system of governance in-between the national and the global. Such a system will necessarily be distinctly differentiated (Batora and Fossum 2020; Fossum 2019), but it is unclear whether and how this distinctiveness of EU differentiation will have bearings on a distinctive European mode of media differentiation. To establish a distinctive European mode of media governance between the national and the global would require at the same time some degree of media convergence: a European way of regulating media and 'doing media' that faces the challenge of global concentration and dispersion of media content and audiences. EU audio-visual and media policies have traditionally been navigating between trade, commerce and culture (Ward 2016). As such, they pursue different and often opposing objectives: the promotion of cultural diversity and of European culture and values, the establishment of an internal media market and the protection of national media industries and their products, media regulation in the public interest and media deregulation in the interest of free trade and global competitiveness (Bondebjerg et al. 2015). While some of these options might be able to sustain an internally differentiated system of Western media, others might rather lead to further dispersion and fragmentation.

From media differentiation to media fragmentation

Despite the internal differentiation of Western media systems, the mass media constellation of political journalism developed some unique features that characterised Western democracies (Habermas 1996). Mass media allowed for a historically unique concentration of media power and unitary journalism that reached broad and nationwide audiences. Filtered through the gates of professional journalism and public broadcasting, which also remained a state monopoly in European countries for most of the 20th century, news agendas could be ranked in importance and accessed equally across the territory. Communication flows were top-down and linear addressing national audiences mainly as passive recipients with pre-fabricated news. Media owners, journalists and audiences stood in a hierarchical relationship. The dominance of the news agenda provided by professional journalists had a positive and a negative side: it supported representative democracy, but that came at the price of disempowering audiences to the role of passive (and some would say often manipulated) newsreaders and viewers. In critical terms, this has been interpreted as a relationship between dominant media producers and dominated audiences (Herman and Chomsky 2010), but from a more institutional perspective, one needs to emphasise that procedures of journalistic gatekeeping were rule-based and guided by established quality criteria of news selection and news making, and, as such, could be also put under public scrutiny. Criticism of media malfunctioning is not only passed on by unsatisfied newsreaders or by unfairly treated political representatives, it is also inbuilt in the work of journalism. Media scandals or journalistic misbehaviour are

often uncovered by other journalists and, as such, become in itself a frequent media story (Bennett et al. 2008; Gershberg 2016).

If media differentiation is not new, and, in a way, can be considered a universal feature of media systems, which internally specialise and externally delimit themselves against others (Marcinkowski and Steiner 2014), the concern now is with the rapid increase of differentiation of media producers, the content they provide and the audiences that pay attention to it. This enhanced differentiation process is partly related to the mediatisation of society, when virtually anyone can produce media content, channels for the diffusion of content multiply constantly and audiences can choose on-demand from a variety of products (Hjarvard 2013). Instead of differentiation, the magnitude of this new challenge seems to be captured better by the term 'media fragmentation', which combines a long-term trend towards commercialisation with the development of new media and the internet.

Media fragmentation is discussed within the context of digitalisation of communications; it comes in different shapes, and it has been found to correlate with the segmentation of media audiences (Mancini 2012), although recent studies (e.g. Bright 2018; Fletcher and Nielsen 2017) do not corroborate the extent of the 'echo chambers' effect that many scholars predicted or adopted in earlier years (e.g. Sunstein 2007). In contrast to media differentiation, which allows for internal divisions of work and specialisation within the media system, media fragmentation comes with various disruptions of the communication flow (Blumler and Coleman 2015). Disruptions take place at the level of news-making and news reception. Media fragmentation is, in particular, a challenge to established journalism as an institution with a distinct identity, established working practices, positions of power and market shares. News-makers lose their professional role models, and their professional field becomes blurred as anyone may lay claim to the title of 'journalist', while the criteria for the quality control of its various products are no longer applied or become questioned (e.g. the salience of false news). Audiences access information randomly or turn away from news altogether. Critical publics disappear from the stage or become marginalised as their feedback no longer finds its way to the public sphere or, if it does, it is met with silence. Journalism, as some have claimed, has entered a death spiral with lower circulation, meaning lower profit, meaning diminished quality, which again damages the reputation of and trust in journalists (McChesney and Pickard 2013; Greenwald 2013).

Most obviously, media fragmentation correlates with a loss of unitary representation, it does not support the equal spread of information across the population, and it blocks public opinion and will formation. Media fragmentation poses some severe challenges to democracy, potentially threatening 'the common meeting ground ensured by the mass media and putting at risk the very cohesion of the nation-state' (Mancini 2012: 45, referring to Katz 1996). Niche providers of information meet on niche audiences; they might draw the attention of selected newsreaders for some (short) time, but they rapidly switch topic and address different audience segments another time. It also needs to be noted that media fragmentation and further concentration of media power are not mutually exclusive. Big media players like Google or Facebook have developed a unique dominance and are at the same time responsible for the fragmentation of

media content and reception. At the same time, there is a wealth of research that confirms the firm grip that global news agencies or algorithm based news aggregators have on national public spheres, whereby a lot of the content that national media outlets provide is either directly bought or copy-pasted (in often poor translation/language) from transnational news corporations (Chadwick 2013; Simpson 2014). Consequently, on the one hand you have increase of political polarisation and sharpening of the national political/partisan angle, but for all other non-national political news, one gets very similar news feeds whether they are in Athens, Oslo, Washington or Sydney. This is partly due to monopolies of digital news feeds and personalisation of home pages according to algorithms that are based on general human traits and not just on national sphere characteristics. But it is also largely due to these literally mass-produced news items, covering foreign affairs, international sports events, social news/crime and entertainment/celebrity topics, that most news outlets bulk-buy or just copy from a handful of news giants.

On the other hand, differentiation has the potential to break with media power and dominance. Media differentiation 'increases the number of available sources of information and may represent a more diffuse instrument of control' (Mancini 2012: 44). The process of audience segmentation has also replaced the – much-derided in critical media studies – mass audience.

Journalism differentiation and EU differentiation: A complicated relationship

What are the implications of this digitally-driven dual process of journalism differentiation and homogenisation for EU democracy and the potential of journalism to fulfil its role as a critical controller of the EU polity? The first implication is predictably that there cannot be what we would call a genuinely European journalism. Such an institution would presuppose not only a state-like organisational structure that supplies it with regular news but also an audience with linguistic and cognitive capacities that demands such news (Statham 2010). In lack of the latter cultural prerequisites, a European journalism sphere is thus non-existent (Baisnée 2003; Gerhards 2000). Yet the would-be drivers of such an institution, the EU correspondents, are present, if not well-institutionalised through the EU Press Corps. How can we approach their capacity, or lack thereof, to control the holders of power, to inform and potentially also to empower EU citizens? How do EU correspondents perform in light of the classical functions of journalism in democracy (McNair 2000)? From our public sphere perspective, such a democratic-integrating function of journalism would include the following (Michailidou et al. 2014):

- 1) Information: EU correspondents are translators that provide the facts, select what is relevant and make EU governance transparent.
- 2) Control: EU correspondents are sensors of dominance – they detect arbitrary forms of rules, abuses of power or pathological forms of differentiation.
- 3) Democratic empowerment: EU correspondents enable citizens to assess the performance of the EU, they allow for critical judgement, and they shape opinions

that may be more or less informed, but that are nevertheless decisive when people vote. EU correspondents are promoters of democracy, but the question is open whether their news coverage empowers EU institutions or rather expresses preferences for the re-delegation of competences to national institutions.

These key functions of journalism in the differentiated system of EU governance are often in conflict, for instance, when EU correspondents seek neutrality and distance, but, at the same time, need to apply criteria of newsworthiness to make the EU relevant for their audiences. EU-correspondents would, first of all, be expected to explain the EU to the citizens. Explanation requires, however, more than fact-finding and information. This is so, because the experience of EU dominance is often related to fact- and expertise-based political decision-making without public justification (Eriksen 2019). The EU relies on expertise and procedures of fact-finding but is a weak transmitter of justification and often withholds from making itself accountable to the public. This, in turn, is a challenge for the work of journalism, which is impaired by the lack of a script for the building of public accountability relations to the EU (Fossum 2019), which also makes their daily work of 'holding the EU to account' notoriously unreliable, arbitrary and fragmented. Media coverage of the EU is found indeed to reproduce this dominance of facts, as it often reports on policies or procedures without commentary or in-depth analysis (Trenz 2004). It provides necessary information about decisions and regulatory policies, but it does not engage in broader normative and critical debates about the underlying rationale of such decisions or potential alternatives. Facts without justification cut off an instrumental technocratic discourse from the lifeworld of the citizens. By inflicting this dominance of facts over justification, EU differentiated governance can be perceived as a threat to traditional ways of life and identities (Fossum 2019). Identifying these forms of dominance and re-coupling them to normative and ethical discourse is typically a function of journalism. Deficits of journalism in fulfilling this translation function can be seen as increasing the likelihood of irrational public responses. What then ensues is a spiral of politicisation against perceived dominance, which recurs to strategies of fundamental opposition against the EU (the salience of Euroscepticism) and is encountered by de-politicisation and a further retreat of differentiated governance from the public arena (Palonen et al. 2019). This would result in a form of EU dominance, which takes the form of a withdrawal from both facts and normative arguments. EU governance remains functional but deprived of both factual and normative justification (i.e. 'there is no alternative').

A rupture with EU dominance would require the building of capacities both for fact-based and critical journalism that asks for justification. This is a double challenge for EU correspondents, who are faced with increasing EU differentiation and the negative effects of media differentiation (i.e. media fragmentation). To become a member of this professional group of translators requires accreditation as an EU correspondent, which gives access to press conferences organised by the Commission, the Council and the Parliament. This accreditation does not mean, however, that EU correspondents are pre-selected based on their education in EU studies. Often, they have changed resort within the media organisation that employs them before coming to Brussels. Being sent to Brussels is also not necessarily their first choice, and their daily work rather requires them to have broad competences, instead of being specialised (for instance,

Brussel correspondents are often also asked to cover Belgium politics). When attending press conferences organised by EU institutions, they look for stories of general interest, and will not have the time and patience to look at the single dossiers that are offered to them by EU officials. Consequently, there is a mismatch of expectations between the EU and its press corps (see the ethnographic study of the daily work of EU correspondents by Sobotova 2018).

Nevertheless, the Brussels Press Corps remains a firmly established institution, providing for a constant flow of news about the EU, its actors and institutions (Preston 2009; Raeymaeckers et al. 2007; Terzis 2008). Early findings point at significant socialisation effects of correspondents, who work and specialise in Brussels and develop pro-European attitudes (Meyer 2002; Meyer 2010; Siapera 2004). This socialisation process has changed, however, with the entry of new member states since 2004 and the development of a new pattern of quick correspondence: shorter stays of journalists in Brussels and a new generation of younger correspondents who use their time in Brussels as a whistle stop for career planning, but not to get settled. With the crisis of quality journalism and the economic and financial crisis, also the number of EU correspondents has decreased for the first time for decades, since 2008. Overall, EU correspondents have become more critical with the EU, but also less committed and knowledgeable (Lecheler 2008; Martins et al. 2012; Sobotova 2018). The EU financial crisis and the crisis of media and journalism might boost each other in the sense that fewer resources are put into public communication, public attention is increasingly dispersed through various digital and social media channels, and major media organisations withdraw from Brussels, instead of intensifying their efforts to cover the complexity of EU governance.

Yet, rather counter-intuitively, some of the most recent studies of the EU Press Corps and of journalists covering EU affairs more broadly (e.g. Nitoiu 2015; Hepp et al. 2016), point to a 'Brussels' political journalism culture that cuts through national lines. Hepp et al. (2016) posed in their very informative study (*The Communicative construction of Europe*) the following question: 'How come, within the multi-segmentation of the European public sphere, national cultures of political discourse continue to exist, while at the same time new cultural forms of specific transnational political discourses emerge?' Their main premise is that '[c]ultures of political discourse are re-articulated in an ongoing process through journalistic practices'. Cristian Nitoiu (2015) has looked at the Brussels bubble of EU correspondents in relation to climate change reporting and found that transnational media are very supportive of EU institutions' narratives regarding the role of the EU in leading climate change actions. Is the latest trend because of or despite EU differentiation and what would the implications be for either possibility? For example, if it is in spite of differentiation, we could argue that we could expect coverage to be more critical. On the contrary, if it is because of EU differentiation, it would potentially mean that EU institutions have thrown a lot of resources in maintaining this press corps and the journalists socialised within it are more likely to be positive (possibly biased) in favour of EU institutions and their narratives. This could have the effect that the coverage produced by these journalists is dismissed back home as Brussels propaganda; or it could help slowly legitimise EU institutions precisely because these are endorsed by national journalists.

When situating EU correspondents within the differentiated system of journalism, one could argue that the system of journalism is under-differentiated to accommodate the Brussels correspondents. For instance, journalism has not sufficiently developed into a multi-level structure but instead requires EU correspondents to act as 'nationals', limiting their level of specialisation. It further means that correspondents mainly communicate vertically and not horizontally. They cover the EU from the top back to the bottom, from Brussels to the readers back home. In observing how EU correspondents deal with the complexity generated by EU differentiated governance, we can distinguish two mechanisms of media news-making: selection and framing.

The first mechanism is media gatekeeping through filtering and selecting news. There is a trade-off between complexity and limited capacities to channel and process information. Information and mediation capacities of media systems are limited and become even more restricted in times of financial recession. An increase in complexity generates a necessity to invest in even narrower filters. At the same time, a decrease in audience attention and of journalistic capacities makes filtering even more essential. These two processes are mutually reinforcing. The more EU governance grows in complexity, the more under-complex EU news coverage becomes.

The second mechanism is media framing: One approach of journalists' role is as that of professional translators, but journalism as an institution carries specific biases. In that connection, media not only contribute to shaping public debates; they may also instil their own distinct biases. We are interested here in the selective mechanism applied in mediated debates about forms of EU dominance, and how journalism selectively brings EU criticism to the attention of European publics. For instance, journalists are often found to be professional nationalists, they dramatise, and they tend to give a cynical twist highlighting, for instance, Euroscepticism and easy solutions over complex problems (Galpin and Trenz 2017; 2018). We could argue that there is a correlation between complexity and media negativity. The more complex EU governance, the more negative the EU news framing. At the same time, the more newspapers compete for the attention of audiences, and the fewer audiences are willing to pay attention to EU news, the more negative EU coverage (de Vreese 2007). Again, these two processes are mutually reinforcing: The more EU governance grows in complexity, the more negative EU news coverage becomes.

In light of the above, we propose three scenarios – mimicry, fragmentation and decoupling – as to how journalism differentiation and EU differentiation are related and what the possible legitimacy impacts of such a relationship are.

- 1) Mimicry: One possibility is that journalism differentiation is an adaptation to EU differentiation in a way that journalists professionalise and specialise as experts of EU governance. This scenario would potentially enhance the control function of journalists who could carefully follow sectoral developments and monitor functions and malfunctions of EU-policy making. Specialised EU correspondents could closely follow the activities of EU agencies, institutions and differentiated cooperation schemes in particular sectors (e.g. monetary policies, agrarian policies, environmentalism). The capacities of the Brussels corps of EU correspondents to monitor

EU governance would be enhanced by socialisation, professionalisation and specialisation. They would act as a body with an established system of work division. The legitimacy impact would be focused but specialised agendas, and difficulties to aggregate public opinion. There would be monitoring capacities of EU differentiated policies, but difficulties to articulate a targeted critique of EU dominance.

- 2) Fragmentation: Another possibility is that journalism differentiation distracts from the emerging dominance of EU governance and does not provide any overarching framework of critique. Differentiated journalism would lose sight. It would focus on random details but not provide the overall story or narrative of European integration. Besides, it would only be able to speak to dispersed and fragmented audiences with no power of control. The capacities of the Brussels corps of EU correspondents to monitor EU governance would diminish, and their work would be systematically undermined by media logics to focus only on negativity and scandals or to invent stories altogether. Ultimately, EU correspondents would become irrelevant, as neither their home office nor national audiences pay attention. The EU legitimacy impact would be loss of focused attention and randomised agendas.
- 3) Decoupling: A third possibility is that journalism differentiation and EU differentiation are unrelated and do not speak to each other. Such a scenario is possible, because journalism differentiation follows mainly territorial lines, while EU differentiation follows sectoral lines. As a consequence, the distance between the two would continue to grow. Journalists would become more nationalists with less economic and professional capacities to monitor EU governance, and EU institutions and actors would find it more and more difficult to respond to news criteria and make it into the news. The capacities of the Brussels corps of EU correspondents to monitor EU governance would thus diminish over time, while their national segmentation increases. The EU legitimacy impact would be an overall increase of Euroscepticism as promoted by journalism styles and user responses.

From dis- to re-connections: Journalists' role as EU public sphere entrepreneurs in a differentiated EU

In this paper, we have argued for an intrinsic relationship between EU differentiation and journalism differentiation. Recent public sphere transformations indicate the disconnect of publics from established institutions of the media and of politics (Bennett and Pfetsch 2018). Such disconnections are well researched from a perspective of digital media use and audiences, pointing, for instance, at the risk of the emergence of echo chambers of political discussions (Flaxman et al. 2016). As such, digital public sphere disruptions undermine traditional patterns of sectoral and territorial differentiation of journalism in the form of nationally confined media systems and point towards a new segmentation and dispersion of audience attention (Mancini 2012). While historically speaking, media and audience differentiation could be seen as a prerequisite for the building of a well-functioning public sphere in the service of democracy, the fourth age of (digital) political communication is characterised by growing complexity, communication abundance and a diversification of content,

voices, and audiences (Bennet and Pfetsch 2018: 244). Ample evidence is collected for media malfunctioning in so-called digital democracies (Dahlgren 2013; McChesney 2013; McNair 2009; Papacharissi 2010; Stanyer 2009). What is less understood, however, is the interrelation between media differentiation and differentiation in legal, institutional and policy terms, which has equally raised substantial questions of cohesion, governmentability and democracy (Fossum 2019). It is here that we turn to a discussion of the EU differentiated system of governance and its notorious public communication deficits to illustrate some of the current challenges but also opportunities for the redefinition of the role of journalism in our globalised and interconnected world.

The role and self-understanding of journalism in support of national, European and global democracy is currently redefined. This re-orientation is not only driven by different forms of journalism entrepreneurship – like, for instance, constructive journalism or environmental journalism (Hermans and Drok 2018; Tandoc and Takahashi 2014) – it is also driven by new (digital) communication strategies of institutional actors and by demands of critical publics for specific media services and content. The question is how such new forms of journalism entrepreneurship, needs for public feedbacks by political institutions and demands by critical publics can be met in a political setting that is incongruent with the established spaces of political communication constituted by the nation states. The EU is therefore an emblematic case for the re-organisation of journalism and the possibilities of re-coupling differentiated offers of political communication with equally differentiated demands of audiences. In normative terms, and in response to the perceived EU democratic deficit, this regards the question of the possibility of the emergence of journalism entrepreneurship for a democratic public sphere as a counterweight to EU dominance. Drawing on relevant literature (Briggs 2012; Heft et al. 2017; Ruotsalainen et al. 2019), we can anticipate three types of EU journalistic entrepreneurship: profit-driven; access-driven; and values-driven. These are not mutually exclusive, but where the weight is placed will also determine which scenario will materialise as regards the role of journalists in the EU differentiation process. Journalism entrepreneurship was borne out of the need for news-producing endeavours that can precisely survive the effects of media differentiation, and particularly of media fragmentation. Although profitability has been the main driver, maintaining (or reclaiming) quality of news and the safeguarding of professional journalism as a crucial component of democracies have also been main concerns. Heft et al. 2017 have already shone the light on the little-studied cases of transnational entrepreneurial journalism within the EU. Seeking to increase profitability and visibility by maintaining a negative stance towards the EU (as is the case with the effect of the spiral of negativity; Galpin and Trenz 2017, 2018) could also mobilise publics across borders against the EU but it would not bring them together in this critical stance, thus leading to further differentiation. Defending EU decisions in all cases and circumstances (i.e. rescinding their critical control function) would perhaps maintain their status in Brussels (entrepreneurial spirit of survival) but would isolate them from the publics they are meant to inform, and again lead to further EU public sphere differentiation.

By turning the attention to the news products of EU Brussels correspondents, further analysis is needed to test the possibility of EU journalists to function as public sphere entrepreneurs who target and identify EU dominance and bring EU publics together in support and/or opposition of EU differentiated governance. The alternative scenario is one of an arbitrary journalism, which is increasingly detached from the sources of knowledge that inform EU differentiated governance, fails to form any kind of unitary coverage, does not bring publics together, hence assuming the role of catalyst in public sphere fragmentation. In this research paper, we need to leave this question of a re- or disconnecting journalism in an interconnected world empirically open, but we can nevertheless stress that experiences of fragmentation and dominance can provide strong incentives for such a re-organisation of journalism. The EU differentiated system of governance is in this sense not simply to be held accountable for its public communication deficits, but might as well become an experimental field for the generation of critical discourse that is demanded by critical publics.

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