Mediated representative politics in the European Union: towards audience democracy?

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ABSTRACT European Union politics have markedly transformed the framework of formal political representation within territorially confined and fully sovereign nation states, whilst simultaneously enabling an unprecedented surge of informal, asymmetrical and mediated forms of political representation. This complex relationship between representatives and the represented in the EU polity sustains a multi-level contentious field of representative claims-making, largely played out in the mass media public sphere. Unlike the institutional and constitutional set-up of this compound representative political system, the politicised and mass-mediated aspects of the EU polity have only recently started to receive scholarly attention. Drawing on the concept of discursive representation, we propose a notion of the EU as a field of multi-level representative politics which unfolds as a triadic and mediated configuration between political claimants, constituents and the audience. We then discuss how EU representative politics take on traits of an ‘audience democracy’ and whether this constrains or enriches the democratic legitimacy of the EU.

KEYWORDS political representation, legitimacy, European Union, media

The European Union (EU) is arguably a case par excellence of the transformation of political representation currently under way at a national and global level: it comprises a uniquely large and complex body of specialized decision-making, often operating outside the control of formalised and territorially bound systems of representative democracy. At the same time, the EU acts as representative of European citizens, protecting and often actively promoting the
rights of issue-specific groups, seeking equality and recognition under conditions which rise above and beyond what Castiglione and Warren (2008) describe as ‘simple egalitarian and universalistic standards’ of the traditional political representation model. Last but not least, the EU offers unique opportunities to interest groups, advocacy organisations and civil society representatives for lobbying and influence, through more informal structures of representation, also outside the control of its more formal political structures of constituent representation (Kohler-Koch 2009; Trenz 2009). Nevertheless, the EU political system has not shed all aspects of the more traditional model of representative parliamentary democracy, the agent bodies of which (national parliaments, European Parliament) are constantly seeking to safeguard, expand or simply reclaim their decision-making and control powers (cf. Lord and Pollak 2010).

Determining which government bodies can legitimately claim to ‘represent’ the citizens, to decide and act in the name of European constituents, is not only a matter of legal-political evaluation and scrutiny. Political institutions have to respond to the shift of powers from the ‘old’ to the ‘new’ representation system not only by adapting and challenging governance structures, but also because of increased public demands for legitimacy. Consequently, political representation is at the heart of legitimacy contestation of the EU (De Wilde et al 2010). EU representative politics address, in the most fundamental sense, the questions of what European institutions stand for and how and by whom they can be authorised and held accountable. From this perspective, EU representative politics unfold through public discourse relating to all kind of publicly-raised claims for representing interests, identities and values in the framework of EU collective decision-making. Unlike the institutional and constitutional set-up of the compound EU representative political system, its politicised and mass-mediated aspects, i.e the social practice of EU political representation, have only recently started to receive scholarly attention. In this paper, we do not look at the formal
procedural aspects of EU political representation; instead, we shed light on its communicative
dimension and discuss the relevance of ‘audience democracy’ as a concept that can help us
understand the impact of audience attention in shaping the public debate regarding the
legitimacy of the EU representative order.

In order to approach the communicative dimension of EU representative politics, we first
introduce the notion of ‘discursive representation’: Discourses build representative links not
only by enhancing justification and the quality of arguments but also through public reception
and resonance. Discursive representation therefore needs to be discussed in relation to
mediated representation and the audience. We then introduce the notion of political
representation as a triadic communicative act, of which the audience is a central component
and use this to contextualise political representation in a trans-national setting such as the EU.
This allows us in the last part to discuss the relevance of the ‘audience democracy’ to political
representation in the EU context.

DISCOURSE AS AN ELEMENT OF THE EU REPRESENTATIVE SYSTEM
Moving away from conventional notions about representing individuals and groups, Dryzek
and Niemeyer (2008) envision representative democracy as a ‘chamber of discourse’, which is
inclusive to any possible expression of societal concerns independently of the question how
many people actually subscribe to it or not. Equality in the ‘chamber of discourse’ is
guaranteed by the number of different arguments that get represented, not by the number of
individuals or groups that are numerically represented or that subscribe to these arguments.
The notion of ‘discursive representation’ thus entails that democracy can be conceived in
absence of a confined demos. Discursive representation applies when the participation of all
affected by collective decisions is infeasible (ibid.: 481). In the EU context, the debate has
mainly turned around the normative credentials of discursive representation and how it can
meet the democratic standards of legitimation (Liebert in this special issue). Instead, we observe the instances in which the EU relies on ‘discursive representation’ as a means to establish its legitimacy and ask whether these attempts find social acceptance and support by the general public.

Indeed, discursive representation’ transforms the EU’s representative system in a number of ways. To begin with, it has been observed how the EU’s compound representative system relies on deliberative procedures to spell out the conditions and terms of representation (Eriksen and Fossum 2011). Discursive representations are useful not only to determine the representatives’ respective mandates but also to deliver accounts of possible principal-agent relationships in a context where clear templates are lacking and organisational forms of political representation remain heavily contested (Trenz 2009). Especially the European Parliament has developed into a ‘chamber of discourse’, which makes ample use of the opportunity to offer and test justifications during the act of legislation (Lord 2011). The EU is also experimenting with various deliberative designs through which decision-makers are required to publicly justify their status as representatives, by seeking legitimacy behind general principles and public good rhetorics. Last but not least, the notion of ‘discursive representation’ can be applied to recent reform proposals of those who want to enrich EU democracy through forums of debates and deliberations among the citizens (Bellamy et al. 2006, Bovens 2006). The legitimacy of such deliberative forums relies frequently on the claim to ‘represent’ the collective will of the people of Europe, not simply by aggregating the interests of the participants but by enhancing ‘the EU citizens’ ability to self-constitute what they perceive as the public good’ (Friedrich 2011: 18).

While research has acknowledged discourse as a constitutive element in the making of political representation, the focus has been mainly to assess the discursive quality of mini publics in terms of equality and respect among the selected participants, justificatory contents
and defense of the validity of arguments (Steiner et al. 2004; Fishkin 2009). Discursive representation through deliberative initiatives is understood in terms of making up a more perfect public sphere. The representative claim is thus grounded in the epistemic value of arguments and its contribution to public reason and the rationality of political decision-making (Bohman 1996).

Less attention has been paid to the processes through which discourses can gain general validity and also mobilise public support or resistances. As has been critically remarked by Simone Chambers, the focus on the discursive quality of deliberative mini publics has led to the neglect of the imperfect broader public sphere and the ways the mass public can be involved in politics (Chambers 2009). In order to represent, discourses need to find public expression of concerns. This means that it is ultimately not the ‘discursive chamber’ (or the ‘strong public’) that grounds the representative quality of discourse. The latter is rather authorised by publicity, i.e. the reference to the ‘general public’ which asserts itself through a process of collective opinion and will formation (Habermas 1989: 102ff). By specifying the conditions of ‘representation through discourse’, we thus need to expand traditional notions of formalised political representation as a dual relationship between the principal and the agent, the constituent and her political delegates.

**POLITICAL REPRESENTATION AS A TRIADIC COMMUNICATIVE ACT**

From the above it follows that political representation is a triadic and mediated configuration between political agents, constituents and the audience. In this section we outline how this configuration functions, drawing on Michael Saward’s theory of political representation (Saward 2006 and 2010). Saward focuses precisely on the dynamic and performative aspects of representative claims-making which operates through public and media discourse. From this perspective, the audience becomes decisive as the wider resonance body of representative
claims-making, which accepts a claim as being representative for something. The process of representative claims-making thus needs to be studied in relation to its capacities to create wider societal resonance and reception. At the same time, Saward (2010) emphasizes the mediated character of a constituent-agent-audience relationship. In modern mass democracies, not only the formal relationship between the principal and the agent but also the informal public reception of a representative relationship is filtered through the mass media. In representative politics, the audience can be conceived either as a dependent variable or as an independent variable of representative claims-making. In the first case, we can identify an audience that is addressed by a representative claim. In this case, audiences are constituted through representative politics. The audience as the addressee of a representative claim is the public that needs to be convinced of the validity of a claimed representative relationship and that is asked to consent an actor’s claim to re-present something. The degree to which this addressee then actually pays attention or even responds is open. In the second case, we can define the audience as the meaningful entity that attends representative politics independently of the question whether it is actually addressed or at all taken into consideration by representative claimants. In this case, audiences are in search of political representation. What varies then is the degree to which representative claimants take into account the interferences of public attention.

Representative claims as conceived by Michael Saward are not to be misunderstood as strategic action through which political representatives manage public attention and manipulate voters choices. They are rather to be perceived as public communicative acts through which justifications are offered and publicly scrutinised (Eriksen and Fossum 2011). Claims to be representative are in need of public justification. At the same time, each representative claim is a source of disagreement (Lord 2011: 4) and groups of representatives typically align along particular cleavage lines. In seeking to understand the role of the
audience in EU multi-level mediated representative politics, it is necessary to analyse which particular types of audience are drawn to which of the cleavages that structure the field of EU representative politics.

TOWARDS AN EU AUDIENCE DEMOCRACY?

Our understanding of political representation as a triadic communicative act allows us to expand the notion of discursive representation which needs to be conceived as a process of public mediation through which a particular representative relationship (the representative claim) is staged in front of an audience. In this context, formalised representative relationships are conducive to but also constrained by public and mass media attention. The role of the mass media is especially important in the multi-level representative system of the EU polity, where direct links to democratic constituents are harder to establish. Mass media have become the central arena for focusing public attention on the ways the legitimacy of the EU is debated and increasingly contested (Koopmans and Statham 2010; Trenz 2008).

In fact, the role of the mass media in representative politics has arguably become a lot more decisive than merely providing (and controlling) the stage for representative claims. The increasing dependence of the political parties on the mass media and political communication experts has led to the transition of representative politics from 19th-century parliamentarism and 20th-century party democracy formats to ‘audience democracy’ (Manin 1997). Political parties and elected representatives lose control over the management and even control of their constituents and face difficulties to pre-empt the reactions of their voters. The formal principal-agent relationship that is underlying promissory representation based on the mechanism of aggregating interests tends to shift to more informal mechanisms of anticipatory representation (media observation and anticipation of audience attitudes and preferences), gyroscopic representation (media generated images and generalised trust
towards selected representatives) or surrogate representation (the performative and mediatised act of representation, through which a particular person claims to speak for somebody else and the general resonance this performative act creates within the wider audience) (cf. Mansbridge 2003). Representative claims, or any political appeal in general, now ‘depend on the claimed trustworthiness of the principal participants, a claim that displaces institutional trust in favour of trust based on characteristics’ (Manin 1997: 123).

‘Audience democracy’ is not, however, all about the decline of representative politics and its transformation to mediatised opinion markets, spectacle or symbolic politics (Sartori 2007). The fact that audience democracy has signaled the transfer of political debate from ‘the backrooms of parliamentary committees and the central offices of parties and associations’ (Kriesi 2004: 184) to the public (media) sphere widens the possibility of public action, or as Kriesi puts it ‘If the political actors are more frequently going public, they are also much more frequently challenged by the public’ (Kriesi 2004: 185). This makes audience democracy more unpredictable and volatile, as it is significantly more difficult to anticipate public support, but at the same time media communication and mobilization have become core components of representative governance (Kriesi 2004: 185).

This notion of the audience as partly independent from the communication management of representative claimants gains prominence in the era of globalization and transnationalization of governance, where representative claimants and their claimed constituents are no longer territorially confined. The demand of unity between constituents and audiences required by democratic representation (inclusion of all affected parties) is difficult to uphold under these conditions. Transnational governance disempowers formal constituents (e.g. national electorates) as agents of authorisation and control and facilitates the formation of new audiences, which transcend formal constituencies. The autonomy of the audience vis-à-vis political representatives and their claimed constituents is further enhanced by media
transformation, in particular through various forms of activating and empowering audiences through new online media technologies. The new media further disconnect the audience of representative politics from formal political settings, in which spectators are also empowered as voters. This contributes to the disempowerment of political parties which remain anchored in the nation-state framework and neither show much initiative, nor have the capacities to act as interest aggregators in the international / European arena. Collective interest representatives are replaced by common good defendants like international organisations or NGOs and their aspiration to represent global (or cosmopolitan) concerns. Nevertheless, the media (old or new), which constitute the main channel for expressing approval or disapproval with the performance of the political system, in most instances continue to be nationally confined and, thus, serving audiences within formalized national representative systems. This leads to an asymmetry of representation, between its old and new, national and transnational, formal and informal variants.

It is this asymmetry that has thus far conditioned the strategic attempts by the European Commission to identify and to involve particular target groups through its public communication policies. These attempts are hampered by the inability of the Commission to connect to the traditional channels of representation and the routines of mass media communication within national political systems (Brüggemann 2010, Meyer 2009, Michailidou 2008).

Moreover, EU representative politics have long been characterised by an attitude of disregard of possible public attention, often deviating from formal political representation through electoral accountability and relying instead on acclaimed representative relationships to various constituents. For instance the European Commission or European civil society organisations are found to frequently act as surrogate representatives of such groups without a direct voice in the political process: minorities, future generations, or even humanity as a
whole. In these cases of surrogate representation, the representative can no longer be expected to be held directly accountable or even be responsive to the represented (Mansbridge 2003). Legitimacy, in the sense of broad social acceptance, depends instead on public accountability, in turn achieved through the media-controlled reception of the representative claim by a third part: the audience. At the same time, there are also democratic mechanisms usually linked to mobilisation from below, elections or referendums that compel representative claimants to adjust their representative claims to the conditions of publicness, which, however, remain confined within national public spaces.

We can, therefore, expect that as an element of EU representative politics this asymmetry in the audience-constituents-representative relationship is further increased. EU representative agents are creative in constructing principal-agents relationships and staging them in front of various audiences. Public attention and resonance, however, remain restricted and mainly confined to the political spaces that are served by the national mass media. Furthermore, empirical research on media performance and impact in EU representative politics has highlighted the numerous ways that the media act as selective amplifiers of political information about the EU and turn selected outputs into news that shape the political reality of Europe (de Vreese 2001; Koopmans and Statham 2010; Wessels et al. 2008). One important bias of EU representative politics is the emphasis national mass media put on the role of national executives, while downplaying the role of other actors like members of the European Parliament or the Commission (Koopmans 2007). This further add to the frequent mismatch between strategically targeted claims for public attention and media resonance. National governments within the Council framework of cooperation often disclaim demands for EU representation, sometimes preferring to remain unobserved or other times focusing on exclusive national representation. Supranational institutions, instead, become increasingly
engaged in strategic communication management trying to place themselves as general EU representatives but systematically missing their targeted audience.

EU representative politics are often characterised by such disconnections between policy agendas and public (media) agendas. Media autonomy is reaffirmed by their selective amplification of EU issues and debates (or by their ignoring these issues altogether) (Gerhards 2000, Trenz 2005). This disconnect of the formal EU representation procedures and political institutions from the mass media leaves the EU polity increasingly exposed to audience democracy.

EU representative politics present a mismatch between ‘new’ constituencies and ‘old’ constituencies which coincide with nationally-confined media audiences. The EU speaks for particular stakeholders, for professional groups, for minorities or in the name of the general interest (the EU constituencies) while ‘the people’ of Europe are rarely envisaged as an addressable entity (and if so, in the negative form, in the sense that the ‘people of Europe, the European demos, does not exist) (Greenwood 2007; Kohler-Koch and Finke 2007).

The problem is that this redefinition of formal constituents into stakeholders becomes only effective at the level of EU policy-making, while EU constitutional politics are still entrusted to the national electorates as the principals of authorisation and control. The ‘principal’ of EU representative politics is thus divided into the new EU constituents with the mandate to improve the input legitimacy of EU governance and the old national constituents with the mandate to legitimate the broad lines of European Union politics. This results in a particular structuring of the EU multi-level representative field not only along organisational and functional lines, but along a more fundamental cleavage between new elites and old electorates, the former supporting the evolution of a stakeholder democracy at the level of EU governance and the latter an audience democracy at the level of mass politics. The creative moment of representative claims-making in inventing new constituents is restricted by the
rather limited options for audience formation and mobilisation of public attention. The repertoire for public evaluation and scrutiny of the representative claim still remains bound to conventional schemes and traditions. While representative politics are rapidly transforming with new agents and constituents coming to the fore, the audience remains more static for the double reason that even in a ‘politically Union’ public attention is to be considered a scarce resource and that audiences remain institutionally, territorially and often also culturally confined.

Based on this observation of a mismatch between representative claims-making and audience attention in the European arena of representative politics, we can discuss the possibility that disempowered audiences as national electorates develop a particular way of contesting the EU not on the substantial policy issues at stake but in the form of polity opposition. If policies restricted to expert arenas and epistocracies are hard to challenge, a more fundamental EU resistance is mobilised (della Porta 2009). Audiences might thus favour a shift of EU representative politics from the restricted possibilities of authorisation and control to system opposition that challenges the fundamental legitimacy of the EU (Mair 2007). These latter dynamics are best illustrated in the self-defeating dynamics of European referendums or EP elections. Elections, which put the representativeness of the EU at test, lead to the formation of audiences, which reject their ascribed role as constituents of the EU polity and recur to a particular form of opposition that questions the EU as a legitimate framework for democratic representation. In the following, we collect some evidence from EU media research that indicates the contingent effects of audience formations on the legitimacy of the EU.

AUDIENCE DEMOCRACY AND EU LEGITIMACY
Taking the media autonomy seriously and recognising its power of knowledge formation and public opinion-making, the assumption of a uniform opinion and will formation process that makes political actors and institutions directly accountable to their various constituents becomes questionable (Trenz 2008). EU representative politics increase the principled uncertainty with regard to who can claim to be representative in the EU context and how these claims can be addressed to and received by the audience (Crum and Fossum 2009). In particular, the constitutional reform process has provided the background for a particular form of representative claims-making that is about the allocation of popular sovereignty on an emerging transnational polity (Trenz 2010). In the recent literature, this trend in the polarisation of public opinion and popular contestation about the ideational components of the EU political system has been described in terms of the enhanced politisiation of the EU (Fossum and Trenz 2006b, Zürn 2006, Hooghe and Marks 2009). More specifically, the politicization of the EU is held responsible for a new salience of collective identities and of identity conflicts, through which European integration is approached in principled terms, expressing support and opposition not with particular policies or political agents but with the system as a whole (Checkel and Katzenstein 2009).

Mediated representative politics might further accentuate this shift of the agenda from representative politics within the EU to representation of the EU, from interest politics to identity politics and from partisan contestation to EU-polity contestation (Mair 2007; Trenz and de Wilde 2009). In the compound system of political representation of the EU, partisan contestation along ideological cleavage lines is only one of many ways through which representative politics unfold. The EU audience democracy rather accounts for the increasing salience of pro and anti European cleavage lines at the intergovernmental level, within the parliamentarian arena and as a structuring element of public discourse (Marks et al. 2006; Statham 2008; Szczerbiak and Taggart 2008a and 2008b).
In this respect, representative claims-making in the EU audience democracy concerns less single actors’ strategies and more the building of broader discursive coalitions with the media, where the aim is to set a ‘moral agenda’ that resonates within a wider audience. In the newly politicised EU, the tendency has largely been for such media-constructed moral agendas to appeal to national visions and conceptions of Europe (e.g. Wodak and Weiss 2004). Political representation is then primarily structured through the polarisation of identitarian projects, which help people to interpret the EU and allocate their preferences. This is in line with research findings that a noneconomic or cultural, new-politics dimension has become salient in allocating voters’ preferences along the poles of green/alternative/libertarian (Gal) and traditionalism/authority/nationalism (Tan) (Hooghe and Marks 2006: 157).

The new identity dynamics of European integration do not simply operate on the basis of a distinction of political projects, they also divide and polarise populations, in winners and losers, movers and stayers, Europeanists and national sovereignists. It is, however, telling of the unpredictability of the media public sphere that the tension between ‘Europe’ or the EU and the nation-state, consistently recorded in several empirical studies (Fligstein 2008, Fuchs et al. 2008), temporarily vanished when the ‘right’ trigger event came along (the crisis of the Mohamed cartoons in 2006). At that point, the concept of ‘Europe’ as reported and debated in the national media public spheres went from a potential enemy or adversary of the nation-state to a unifying ‘bearer’ of common values for most European states (Krzyżanowski 2009). Similarly, during the 2005 referenda on the EU’s Constitution, common attention structures and discursive configurations emerged across national media spheres - albeit not always positive towards the EU polity or process of European integration (Vetters et al. 2009).

Our assumption about the effects of a shift of the agenda in mediated representative politics on audience reception has been confirmed in experimental designs where audiences were systematically exposed to different news formats on the issue of EU enlargement. In de
Vreese’s (2004) audience experiment a television news story about the enlargement of the EU was produced in a strategy version (polarised framing, focusing on ‘winners and losers’ script) and an issue-framed version (framing focused on the specifics of an issue), which were embedded in an experimental bulletin of a national news program. Results showed that exposure to strategic news fuelled political cynicism and activated negative associations with the enlargement issue, with politically knowledgeable participants displaying higher levels of cynicism and expressing more negative evaluations (however, strategic news did not suppress policy support). Longevity of these effects was also tested, with the researchers concluding that such media effects can persist if audiences are exposed to additional news framed in a similar way.

European Parliamentary election campaigns provide the obvious test case for corroborating these assumptions about a shift of mediated representative politics from partisan competition to a more fundamental contestation of the legitimacy of the EU political system in a true-to-life situation. Our own analysis of online public debates in mainstream news media and popular political blogs in 12 EU Member States and at trans-national level during the 2009 European Parliament elections has shown that the audience plays a key role for turning election campaigns into a fundamental debate on the legitimacy of the EU representative order (Michailidou and Trenz 2012). We were able to show this by implementing a three-dimensional conceptual framework of mediated representative politics which captures a) a temporal and spatial reconstruction of conflict and cleavage lines across the European space (when and where EU representative politics are staged); b) agency/participation in the sense of who claims to represent what, addressing what type of audience and who attends EU representative politics (new and old constituents, addressed and attentive audiences); and c) substance, which encompasses both the targets of representation and the justificatory patterns (interests versus identities).
What emerged from our analysis was that a ‘Eurosceptic’ agenda is set, not so much by Eurosceptic parties but by audience formations and citizens’ voice. Citizens make use of the participatory journalism facilities and commenting functions provided by their preferred online news sources to challenge the legitimacy of the EU and to accuse EU actors and institutions for misrepresenting the popular interest.

EP election online debates were found to be not so much dominated by representative claims of political agents, who stand for elections, but by counter claims of citizens, who critically debate the legitimacy of the EU and of their representatives. Crucially, in terms of who constitutes a representative (claimant) in the EU elections, there was a turn from formal institutional representatives to what can be classified as ‘voice representation’ (Castiglione and Warren 2008) – individuals acting in their capacity mostly as constituents (electorates), but also as affected third parts (non-constituent audiences). These ‘voices’ often claimed to represent the wider ‘we, the people of X EU country’, but more importantly refuted the EU polity’s right to claim representation of them (Michailidou and Trenz 2012).

The self-defeating effect of EU representative politics thus becomes manifest in the anti-system opposition of parts of the audience, which instead of acting as a principal of authorisation and control within the existing framework of political representation, challenges the fundamental legitimacy of the EU. The general validity of these findings drawn from ‘voice representation’ in political blogs still needs to be corroborated by more systematic comparative analysis. But the consistent over-representation of opposition parties and Eurosceptic protest vote as a logical outcome of EP elections strongly supports our hypothesis of the impact of audience democracy on the transformation of representative politics in the EU.

**CONCLUSION**
The dynamics of EU mediated representative politics highlighted in this paper promise insights into the justificatory resources that European integration currently draws on, as well as an understanding of the type of social constituents and media audiences with which legitimation relationships are established (Fossum and Trenz 2006a). The proposed research focus on mediated representative politics is primarily meant to contribute to the understanding of the ‘making of’ political representation not to its normative evaluation. Political representation is reconceived as a dynamic communicative process which takes place in the public sphere, filtered and shaped by the media environment. This expanded notion of political representation as a triadic configuration between representatives, constituents and the audience opens a new perspective of empirical legitimation research, which entails identifying the sequence of representative claims and the scope conditions and directions of legitimation.

At the same time, our research focus on mediated representative politics helps to delineate possible asymmetries in the complex configuration of political representation in the EU. In particular, we want to draw the attention on the tension between the more dynamic and creative processes of representative claims-making among transnational elites and their self-appointed constituents and the rather conventional patterns of audience formation. This tension underlies the discrepancy between new representatives and constituents that move within a multi-level representative field and traditional media audiences and content that remain confined to the national public spheres.

In this context, the traits of audience democracy constrain rather than enhance EU representative politics. The EU audience democracy needs to be understood not only in terms of the media salience and news coverage of EU representative politics but more broadly, in terms of the general transformation of representative politics and its impact on the generation of political legitimacy of the EU. In order to understand the legitimacy impact of media communication on European integration, we need to look beyond the instrumental use of
media by political actors/institutions or political parties and develop a more encompassing approach of the public sphere. With this widened focus, the public sphere can be reconstructed not merely as the infrastructure for the mediation of EU representative politics but as the place where the representative claims-making of the new transnational elites resonates, meets with national (or other) counter claimants and informs public opinion and will formation.

In further extrapolating our findings, the EU audience democracy also sheds new light on the proclaimed shift from partisan politics to identity politics as part of the new politicised dynamics of European integration (Hooghe and Marks 2009). Representative politics shift from an attention on formal political representation through political parties to a form of polity contestation that questions the fundamental legitimacy of the EU. At the same time, we do not want to suggest that the EU audience democracy is symptomatic of a paradigmatic change from Parliamentarian to post-democratic political representation. The audience democracy does not replace or supersede conventional forms of parliamentarisation or even partisan contestation nor does it exclude alternatives of citizens’ representations and deliberations. For the time being, the empowerment of the direct voice of the people remains restricted to single, though decisive, moments (like referendums), at which the legitimacy of the EU polity is subject to heavy contestations and public and media debates. The problem of the EU is that such politicised moments of popular mobilisation and resistance remain decoupled from the institutional structures and procedures of political representation in place, which turns their expression sometimes even more violent. While the intention of this paper was mainly descriptive, enumerating the various ways the mass media constrain the functioning of political representation in the EU, further assessment of the EU audience democracy also needs to take into consideration its potential for enhancing mass media attention and thus broadening the scope of EU representative politics.
On the one hand, EU audience democracy was found to be linked to frequent disinformation, a preference of emotional over factual content, unequal chances of political representatives to access the media sphere and an inbuilt nationalism of media frames and interpretations. The problem here is not so much that EU audience democracy unfolds mainly through emotions and symbolic side politics but rather that it results in a populist and nationalist backlash. The politicization of European integration has in this sense thus far rather endorsed the renationalisation of EU representative politics and strengthened those actors, who oppose delegated authority to the EU.

On the other hand, the EU audience democracy also has a potential to enhance what can be called accountability through publicity. The staging of EU representative politics for a mass media audience turns the EU more accessible, more relevant and also more understandable for the citizens. At the same time, it is a challenge for EU actors and institutions to anticipate public support and resistance (anticipatory representation), to generate images, emotions and trust (gyroscopic representation) and to invest in the performances of what they claim to stand for in front of a mass media audience (surrogate representation).

The challenge for the EU audience democracy is to turn the enhanced publicness into democratic publicity, i.e. a form of public mediation that empowers the collective will through informed opinion-making of the citizens. Through audience democracy, the EU has a chance to correct its ‘elitist bias’ and to foster Europeanisation also at the level of mass democracy. If governments and political parties have thus far failed to Europeanise the masses (Majone 2009: 2), the mass media might step in and focus public attention on the relevance of Europe. Filtered through the mass media, EU representative politics will be more emotional and less rational, but also more popular and less elitist (Chambers 2009). This simple lesson that media language is different from expert language still has to be learned by many EU representatives. Mediated representative politics is not necessarily geared towards
overcoming the gap between EU representatives and the citizens, but it certainly turns it more salient, tangible and applicable.

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