

Manuscript

**The European Crisis and Online Media:
Chances and Limits for Transnational Discourse in the Web Sphere**

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Chapter 1: Introduction

Transnational Political Communication in Europe during the Crisis

How the crisis became permanent, its effects on pan-European solidarity, and the role of online media in transnational political discourses.

This book critically analyses the role of Internet communication during transnational political crises and the structure of public discursivity in a digital-transnational setting. The research approach is motivated by two fundamental transformations that gained velocity in the past 25 years and underlie current developments in society: first, web-based, digital forms of communication are an integral part of social life, including politics. Second, against the backdrop of accelerated globalisation, the transnationalisation of interactions in world regions such as “Europe” constantly increased, which inevitably caused frictions with the nationally oriented self-perception of citizens and countries.

This leads to irritations, conflicts, and crises that span across economies, polities, and cultures. The European case in the 2010s is a tragic yet insightful example, since these very developments manifested with drastic repercussions on the “old continent”: in 2016, the European Union (EU) entered its ninth year of a seemingly permanent state of crisis that started with the outbreak of the Eurozone crisis in 2007/08. The “European theatre” of the global financial crisis had evolved into a crisis of its own, which put considerable pressure on the EU’s economic and political stability (Kriesi & Grande 2016; Pfetsch and Heft 2015). It revealed fundamental discord among its member-states over the political, economic, and social configuration of the union. Partners, whose primary goal once was to overcome differences in favour of solidarity and cooperation, took extremely cautious stances towards further integration on a transnational level; the Eurozone crisis highlighted the very limits to European solidarity and political convergence.

Ripple effects soon became observable in other transnational crisis- and conflict contexts, such as the migrant- and refugee crisis, which further fuelled the controversial debate about fundamental questions for the EU and European societies. Reminiscent of the height of the Eurozone crisis, between 2014 and 2016 the European media landscape off- and online was primarily occupied with the accelerating influx of refugees from the Middle East, Central Asia, Africa and Balkans (Eurostat 2015). Willingness to coordinate actions efficiently on a European level was already low before migrant numbers spiked but the situation only worsened: the question of how to handle their arrival on a transnational, European level deepened rifts between partner states that had emerged during the Eurozone crisis and the first major wave of refugees in the immediate aftermath of the “Arab Spring” in 2011 (Peters et al 2012). Even the oldest and most important axis of cooperation, namely France and Germany, often described as the “backbone” of Europe, took damage during both the Eurozone crisis and migration crisis (The Telegraph 2015). On top of this, global terrorism landed traumatising strikes in Europe’s heart –as seen in Brussels in 2016 and twice in Paris in 2015–, while armed conflicts escalated in Ukraine and Syria, both involving an authoritarian Russian government with an aggressive foreign policy. In sum, these events and developments put pressure on Europeans to decide what role they want to play on a global stage. It seems that the feeling of crisis, i.e. to face enormous political and social challenges that

may turn out to be insurmountable, dominated most of Europe's political landscape in the early second decade of the new millennium.

Crisis is everywhere might be the only agreement Europeans can find at the time of writing; crisis is the ‘new normal’ for Europe (Grusin 2010). This led to a rather ambiguous situation: on one hand, communication about the same crisis-related issues increased across the European media spheres, both off- and online; a certain level of alignment is inevitable if problems of historical magnitude affect a region that, despite cultural diversity and fragmentation, still forms one of the most closely interwoven economic and political spaces on the planet. In a hyper-mediated network environment, systemic irritations in society, politics, and economy cause the quick formation of discursive contexts and stimulate intense communicative activities in media-based public spheres (Kriesi et al. 2016). On the other, this heightened level of public communication on “all things European” does not necessarily facilitate genuine transnational collaboration and mutual understanding; to the contrary, a return to the “national” perspective became something of a political trend in times of crisis. In a bizarre contradiction of the democratic ideals traditionally ascribed to public discourses (Calhoun 1993; Habermas 1972), the transnational public sphere often resembled an arena for confrontation rather than a forum for transnational-transcultural dialogue (Karatzogianni 2006). When did this development start? How did the “European project” got entangled in a web of interconnected, mutually affective and yet in their specific configurations very different crises?

Each sub-area of Europe’s general crisis has its own roots and origins, of which most are the result of failed communication and cooperation on a transnational scale. Chronologically, one may argue that the economic and fiscal collapses in the Eurozone are the starting point of the recent crisis age; it is here where aside from political and economic imbalances and apparent incompatibilities also cultural differences among member-states emerged, who were supposed to interact as equal and sovereign partners under the roof of the union. It was the political handling and public discourse on the Eurozone crisis, on bailouts and reform programmes that started to have a harmful effect on the state of transnational solidarity. It did not only reveal but also inflict potentially irreversible harm to the EU’s foundation, contradicting the union’s once proud proclamation to be ‘united in diversity’ ([Europa.eu 2016](#)).

Most current and future developments that occupy the political establishments and their opponents in Europe cannot be properly analysed and understood if one ignores the larger context and impact that the Eurozone crisis had on European politics in the present decade. Though some of the major causes can be traced back to the late 1990s and early 2000s –when the single currency union became a concrete political project– it was the years between 2007/08 and 2013/2014 that demarcate the beginning, acceleration, and height of the Eurozone crisis. In these years, the global financial meltdown triggered a dramatic chain of events that tested the very survivability of the single currency union and the EU as such (Dăianu et al 2014).

The sovereign debt crises in the Eurozone initiated a period of economic turmoil that inevitably affected political discourses in the national and transnational dimensions. It forced politicians and publics across the continent to discuss and rethink the state and function of the EU and what it means for them and their national governments to be part of this highly dynamic, extremely complex, and at times self-contradicting political-economic entity. The far-reaching decisions made in “Brussels” are fundamental for the very framework of European societies and frequently challenge national sovereignty. The crisis

led citizens and their political representatives to contemplate and discuss how they want to organise economic and political life in a globalised world where geographical borders continue to lose their relevance, and to evaluate whether the EU provides solutions to current and future challenges or whether it is a major cause of problems. The threat of a collapsing Eurozone, the conflict between necessary integration and the preservation of sovereignty, and a European political leadership that was often perceived as obscure or indecisive, caused many to doubt the sustainability of the EU (NY Times 2015). Though the crisis led to transnational alignment by focusing the same urgent political issues, the various national debates did only to a limited degree connect and form a genuinely transnational, pluralistic discourse. After nearly 60 years of convergence and integration, the fundamental problems in the Eurozone highlighted that political discourses *in* and *on* Europe are still marked by deeply rooted cultural differences, diverging political and economic worldviews, and considerable dissonances regarding the most important questions on what the EU is, what its spheres of competency and responsibility are, and what its future should look like. Idealistic visions clashed with political realities and every potential outcome to the crisis was heatedly discussed in polarizing debates that stretched from pubs to universities, through public squares, and parliaments, utilising all available media formats. The stakes for the EU could not have been any higher: the initial banking crisis quickly transformed into an economic, political, social, as well as cultural crisis, and, finally, a crisis of trust, which caused ‘deep disintegrative tendencies within the European project’ (Fouskas and Dimoulas 2013: 2).

A chain of dramatic events across the continent caused this extremely volatile situation: an enormous public deficit in Greece almost forced the entire country to default and in Cyprus an overblown financial sector nearly busted the island state’s economy; Spain, Portugal, Ireland, and Italy struggled with their weak economies, and fundamental problems remained virtually unsolved. Extensive rescue programmes financed by other Eurozone countries avoided an immediate break-up of the single currency union but it came for a high political price and led citizens to question the EU’s democratic legitimacy. To receive external help, struggling Eurozone countries had to agree to reform programmes that demanded austerity measures, i.e. extensive cuts to public spending, to achieve fiscal consolidation. This was a highly controversial move, since many people in the member-states suffered under bleak economic prospects and soaring unemployment (Huffington Post 2013). In Greece, the most critical case, the implementation of reforms was strictly supervised by an alliance of the EU commission, the European Central Bank (ECB), and the International Monetary Fund (IMF), also known as the “troika”. Net-contributors to the Eurozone, especially Germany, Finland, and the Netherlands, insisted on harsh measures to counter inefficiency in quasi-bankrupt Eurozone countries to somehow ensure that their money was not wasted.

It is here where economic and political challenges transformed into tangible cultural conflicts, as the bailout terms were interpreted as transgressions into national sovereignty and citizens in the so-called “crisis countries” felt left out from fundamental decisions on their own future. This heavily affected domestic politics in various member-states and catalysed the formation of protest- and anti-establishment movements. The creation and subsequent success of the Spanish left-wing party PODEMOS in early 2014, which has its origins in the previous 15-M protest movements, is one example (Guardian Online 2016); the rise of ethno-nationalist Golden Dawn in Greece another. Achieving political stability became a precarious gamble; the political establishments in Greece, Cyprus, Spain, and elsewhere in Europe

faced harsh criticism and a loss of support among citizens. Many sought new perspectives at the political fringes, both on the extreme left and right.

Transnational fault lines materialised almost co-evolutionarily in different areas of cultural, social, and political contestation. Southern European countries were either portrayed as heroic underdogs exploited and suppressed by their more powerful Eurozone partners or described as lazy, corrupt, and inefficient foul players that lived off the hard-earned savings amassed by more disciplined member-states (European Institute 2012). Germany, the main contributor to Eurozone bailouts, received an equally ambiguous depiction as either a role model or oppressive hegemon who aspired to dominate Europe through economic prowess. Fundamental differences between political cultures and economies put the Union's cohesion under a stress test, which was symbolised in the rhetoric division between the EU's "North", represented by Germany, and "South", consisting of the so-called GIIPS, i.e. Portugal, Ireland, Italy, Greece, and Spain (WSJ 2011), which for some observers reflected the economic reality of the Eurozone (Guardian Online 2012). *Framing* the crisis and its main actors from specific political perspectives determined the tone and direction of the transnational crisis debate.

Another line of division separated member-states that favoured more integration from those who argued for a retrieval of power from the EU to national governments. This conflict formation gained urgency especially in the UK, where the obscure and multifaceted phenomenon of Euroscepticism secured a mainstream position in British politics, particularly among the political right. The debates on economic decline and national independence put the blame for various transnational and domestic problems on the EU, ranging from fishing policies to migration, and steered up emotions among an electorate that appeared to be overwhelmed by the sheer complexity of the consequences of globalisation for Europe. In 2016, the British voted to leave the EU in an extremely controversial referendum that was at several levels directly or indirectly influenced by the events that took place during the height of the Eurozone crisis and the migration crisis. However, the rise of Eurosceptic sentiments and nationalistic discourses were not limited to "Tory backbenchers" and the infamous UKIP; all over Europe similar movements gained public attention, as illustrated by the rising popularity of political parties such as Golden Dawn in Greece, Front National in France, or the Alternative für Deutschland (AfD) in Germany. Though migration always was a central issue for most of these parties, who benefitted from stirring fears of losing national identity and foreign domination, their rise cannot be explained without taking the Eurozone crisis into consideration. The crisis triggered heated debates in traditionally "Euro-friendly" circles, too, where defenders of the status quo clashed with voices that demanded a complete overhaul of the union (Guardian Online 2015a).

The discourse on the EU crisis and its various sub-sections produced stereotypes and oversimplifications that might prove harmful for EU integration, since they can have a direct effect on the degree of mutual understanding and solidarity among citizens across the 19 Eurozone countries and 27 EU member-states. Political and material interests, mostly determined by specific ideological (national) viewpoints, fuelled a dynamic transnational debate across member-states and beyond. However, it seems that few of the recurring antagonisms and dichotomies could grasp, process, and communicate the actual complexity of the crisis, i.e. they usually failed to explain its true origins or scope, affectivity, and potential consequences. They tended to ignore that most current problems are not confined to specific nation-states or regions but that they are the result of frictions and transformations along 'global fault lines' (Fouskas and Dimoulas 2013: 188) and that they have a historic dimension. The conflicts

materialised and evolved in a globalised world in which social, cultural, political, and economic flows frequently overcome conventional boundaries, may they be of legal, cultural, or linguistic nature. At best, the various interpretations, attributions of responsibility, and suggestions for future actions –i.e. framings (Entman 1993; Kohring and Matthes 2008)– are simplified answers to far more complicated problems of much larger proportions.

This shaped the crisis discourse, which was highly mediatised, i.e. extensively covered by off- and online media of all political colours (Doudaki 2015). Most European voters learned about the crisis’ unfolding via daily headlines that focused on e.g. the troika’s inspection of reform programmes in bailout receiver countries such as Greece (EKathimerini 2013) and by reading commentaries that asked “[i]s Germany too powerful?” (Guardian 2013) or argued in which of the GIIPS country the future of the Euro would be decided (SPON 2012). Mass media and online media platforms played a central role in the circulation of different frames and the ‘premediation’ (Grusin 2010) of any thinkable outcome to the crisis. Modern communication technologies are the foundation of contemporary public life and provide windows to the conflicts and contests in the political realm (Karatzogianni 2006; Kohring 2006; Peters 2007; Luhmann 1998). The EU crisis is no exception and a wide spectrum of voices commented and influenced its development. Against this background, some political actors postulated that a common discursive platform was the best option to overcome divisions and rekindle faith and support for the European project, as, for example, voiced by Germany’s federal president Joachim Gauck in his “Europe speech” in 2013:

We need an agora. It would transfer knowledge and help to develop a European citizenry; but it would also form a counterweight to national media when they report about their neighbours from a nationalistic angle, without adequate sensitivity and subject knowledge (SPON 2013).¹

This vision echoes the Habermasian notion of the public sphere and identifies in transnational deliberation a key element for EU integration as well as a remedy to division and conflict; if it is the right type of transnational discourse, formed and carried by the right type of media with an emphasis on participation, public support, and democratic legitimacy. However, past attempts to create such an idealised European agora largely failed (Lodge and Sarikakis 2013). The statement above also ignores that the crisis already caused the formation of a transnational communication sphere (Kriesi & Grande 2016), though it did not meet the democratic-inclusive criteria some wish it had.

Due to its complexity and manifold impacts on economic and political life in Europe, the EU’s crisis triggered a multifaceted political discourse that involved EU politicians, representatives of national governments, national and transnational political parties, actors from the private sector, think tanks, NGOs, social movements, and mere individuals who shared their thoughts online. From the assessment of the EU’s political and economic foundation, through to the premediation of possible crisis scenarios, to the interpretation of specific programmes and decisions on a micro-level of economic governance: the EU crisis discourse involved a diverse set of communicators who produced a cacophony of political messages that thematised potential consequences for all stakeholders and reproduced potential futures, primarily via different framing strategies.

This implies that a basic awareness for a shared socio-political context for citizens in the EU exists and that public political communication potentially condensed into a discursive context, i.e. a

transnational public sphere (Hepp et al. 2012); one that was driven by conflict and competition and not so much by deliberation or consensus-seeking, which are no ‘strong features’ (Risse 2015: 23) in the European context. In fact, one could argue that the EU’s economic and political crisis led to the formation of a transnational arena in which different opinions and evaluations in form of opposing frames clashed (Gerhards and Neidhardt 1990; Castells 2009).

Media technology is crucial for the formation of such communicative contexts, as it enables stakeholders and observers to distribute their viewpoints in a public space that is based on media communication. Aside from traditional mass media channels it is the Web that served as a digital space for communicative activity about the crisis. Websites, blogs, social media, and various cross-formats have been integral to political communication and public discourses for almost two decades, with increasing relevance for the mediation of social and political life. The Eurozone crisis is no exception and vast amounts of online media content focused on EU bailouts, EU reforms, the crisis’ affectivity, and the future of Europe.

The Web is an important tool and site for political communication and it is this dual function that the present book aspires to analyse in more detail for the Eurozone crisis, both theoretically and empirically. The guiding questions are: Did online communication on the EU and its crisis condense into a digital public sphere or ‘web sphere’ (Schneider and Foot 2006)? What discursive devices in form of framing did communicators apply? Only by answering these main research questions a deeper understanding can be gained about how modern technology “moulds” transnational communication (Hepp 2013) and how the crisis was perceived and experienced in Europe.

The Web as a Space for Political Communication

The decision to focus on the role of online communication during the crisis may seem obvious due to the omnipresence of Internet technology as a primary means of communication and source for information for a constantly increasing proportion of society (e.g. World Bank 2016). Still, the question why it is worthwhile to investigate web-based communication for the European case can be answered by pointing to a concrete lack in understanding how online media affect the complex relationship between the national and transnational dimensions in political discourses –if they do so at all. As inherently globalised communication technologies, the Internet and World Wide Web catalyse the disappearance of distances and promote the emergence of new spheres of communicative interaction. This applies to all areas of modern ‘networked societ[ies]’ (Castells 2001: 116).

Digital communication triggered considerable transformations in the ways individuals and groups from different cultural and political backgrounds can interact. These encounters may cause the formation of global or transnational discursive contexts, in which individuals and collectives express different affiliations. Borders blur and traditional interpretations of public discourse need re-thinking. This does not mean that conventional ways of political communication, identity formation, and existing socio-political constellations forfeit their relevance; they are constantly reproduced in online media content, e.g. on news websites, in political forums, or blog networks. The Web displays an immanent ambiguity: it can stimulate the creation of transnational spheres by facilitating communicative

interactions beyond national contexts. Simultaneously, online media serve for the construction of nationally oriented communication spaces. The challenge is to make sense of the complex relationship between these two closely linked dimensions.

A first important step is to understand that the Web is neither a mere extension of the “offline world” nor an isolated digital realm. Both the off- and online dimensions are intrinsically linked and Web technology contributes to the formation of complex, multi-layered social environments based on perpetual flows of communication. The Internet does not only reflect on societal discourses, but shapes them and produces new spheres of interaction, which are influenced by contradicting tendencies that exist in parallel: Mass communication vs. individual communication or ‘mass self-communication’ (Castells 2009; 2012), authoritarianism vs. open source, control vs. resistance, political activism vs. capitalist consumption, or transnationalism vs. nationalism. The Web is not one united, holistic space for communication but consists of a multitude of rhizomatic network-conglomerates that display ambivalent qualities (Karatzogianni 2006: 49-50). The modes of online interactions are as versatile as societies and their scopes range from the local to the global.

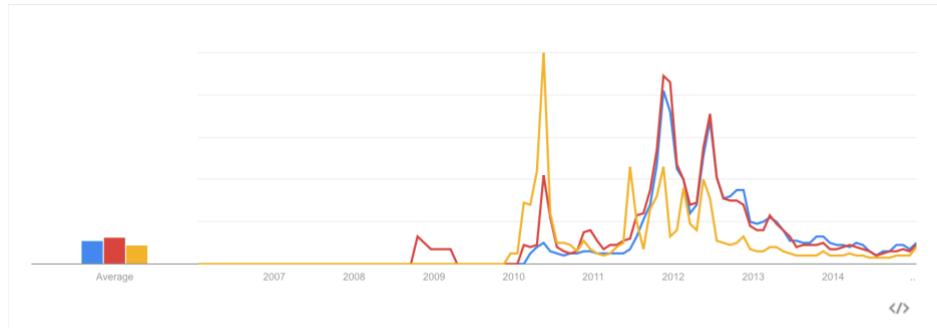
The implications for political debates in both national and transnational dimensions cannot be overlooked, as the Web inevitably changes manifestations of public discursivity. Individual users, professional media agencies, and political organisations have access to a constantly evolving set of technical devices, which facilitate public communication (Castells 2012: 1-11). Online media expand the spectrum of public speakers and available content, and fundamentally transform the fabric and dynamics of public spheres. The Web consists of an infinite number of ‘web spheres’ (Schneider and Foot 2006: 175), i.e. context-bound discursive networks that emerge on specific issues or events. These online discourses are not strictly delimited yet become distinguishable based on the concentration of related content with a common focus. Examples are web spheres on elections, political scandals, climate change, terrorism, the financial crisis, protest movements, or cultural issues such as art and trivial subjects (e.g. “celebrity news”). Though these topics are very different from each other, the respective web discourses display similarities in their communication-sociological dynamics and structures: they are based on networking and the context-dependent differentiation of content, participating communicators, and addressed audiences. The duration, coherence, and societal relevance of web spheres depend on the issues that cause their emergence and a complex conglomerate of social and political factors; the same applies for the balance between their national and transnational orientation. Each issue, topic, or theme provides the involved communicators with a shared context for producing content and distributing related statements that are accessible to a potentially infinite audience.

However, web spheres are more than mere reactions to developments and events in society, though they mirror selected aspects of social, cultural, and political life; they can produce their own connecting factors for further discursive interactions, i.e. shape the course of discourses. Web spheres, and the individual social units they consist of, expand the spectrum of both accessible sites for public debate and available sources of information. From this perspective, the Internet hosts a multitude of smaller and larger web spheres, which are public in terms of their accessibility, visibility, and potential modes for discursive participation. German sociologists and communication scientists coined the term *Teilöffentlichkeit* –“partial public”– to describe public sub-discourses that are separated by specific contexts or themes (Peters 2007a). Yet they are often embedded within wider discursive networks that form the broader communicative environment of a society. They are not necessarily isolated from each

other, but display reciprocal communicative relations, condensing into discursive networks of varying sizes. Partial public spheres existed long before the ascension of Internet technology but the dissemination of online media catalysed the expansion and differentiation of media-based “publicness”.

Due to their technological propensities, modes of Internet communication are an integral aspect in political discursivity, especially during crises (Karatzogianni 2006; 2016). In the case of the Eurozone crisis there are plenty of examples: Most national and international news media websites covered crisis-related stories daily; the British Guardian regularly offered “live blogs” on summits, while comment pieces dissected political decisions and tried to forecast the potential outcomes for nation-states and the EU. The same type of online content was produced in considerable quantities and frequencies by their e.g. French, German, Spanish, Italian, and Greek counterparts; Le Monde Online’s editorial staff closely and critically observed the crisis’ unfolding, as did German Spiegel Online or Greek Ekathemerini. Across Europe’s media landscape the crisis quickly became a priority item on the news agenda. Where possible, the respective articles usually stimulated follow-up discussions in the comment sections, where users reacted to events, developments, and opinions. Journalists, lobbyists, politicians, academics/intellectuals and “mere” users talked about the same issues across social media and blog networks. Postings from key players, such as former Greek finance minister Yannis Varoufakis, triggered considerable communicative activity in these discursive spaces (Guardian Online 2015b). Political organisations used the same technologies to distribute their viewpoints on the latest crisis developments. The EU itself provided access to its own perspective(s) on bailouts, public debt, and stagnating economies in the Eurozone via the Web, as did think tanks, NGOs, and protest movements.

Figure 1: Spikes in Searches on Eurozone Crisis related Key Words in Google between 2006 and 2015²



There is need for empirical examination of platforms, content, and networks, before one can draw conclusions on their structural features, internal communicative logics, modes of selection, and political and societal relevance –especially in transnational contexts. The transformations caused by web-based communication flows are of considerable relevance for a Europe that has become increasingly smaller in an economic, legal, political, and social dimension. New contexts for interactions across conventional borders frequently emerge, stimulating different forms of online communication. The web sphere perspective enables flexible analytical approaches on public discourses and the comprehensive assessment of potentially transnational digital public spheres in a European context.

Analytical Goals and Research Questions

The main purpose of this book is to provide a methodological toolset for the empirical analysis of transnational web discourses that considers structural and content-related factors. The Eurozone crisis period serves as an example for the case study, which critically assesses whether a transnational, web-based communication context emerged and what modes of communication participants applied (i.e. dialogue oriented or conflict oriented).

To achieve this, the critical observer needs to embrace the fact that nothing related to European politics and culture is ever “clear cut” but boundaries are blurring. The same applies to European online media, which have ambiguous qualities: in some contexts, cultural and political borders are brought down, while others reinforce them. One may think of a blog for “PanEuropean” professionals who work and travel across the continent as an example for the former (Euractive 2016), while a forum for “patriots” and nationalists represents the latter (Bloggers4UKIP). Ambiguity adequately determines the continent’s general state, as tendencies towards closer integration under the roof of the EU clash with demands for preserving national sovereignty. The political handling of the Eurozone crisis illustrated this strikingly. The profound challenges demanded transnational cooperation in a political respect; simultaneously, plans to tie decision-making processes and regulation closer together amplified nationalistic sentiments and even evoked urges for total withdrawal. As catalysts for public communication, events linked to EU- and crisis politics turn into suitable empirical examples for fruitful research on the contrast between both dimensions against the background of political discursivity on the Web.

The content and form of Europe-related political online debates are as diverse as the set of involved communicators, who can have professional or amateur backgrounds. The question is whether the various communicators contributed to the formation of a European ‘web sphere’ (Schneider and Foot 2006). The underlying technological and social structures are of interest; the same applies for modes of communicating and framing Europe, the EU, nation-states, and the crisis. It is assumable that forms of cyber conflict (Karatzogianni 2006), i.e. the contest of different political ideologies in online arenas, dominated political online communication on these issues, due to their controversial nature as well as the social, economic, and political risks and stakes. Since the public realm always is a source for political capital and legitimisation, it forms the central stage for contestation between opposing stakeholders. Framing issues from specific political perspectives is the primary mode of public political communication, as different speakers ‘struggle for meaning’ (Vliegenthart and van Zoonen 2011: 105) and political influence. One concrete example for competing frames in the Eurozone crisis context was the austerity vs. anti-austerity dispute: dominant European leaders in e.g. Germany reiterated that the Eurozone crisis resulted from over-spending and inefficient fiscal and economic policies; mismanagement was the root of current economic problems and only reforms, spending cuts, and privatisations could provide effective solutions. The exact opposite frame described austerity politics as an insufficient if not down-right counter-productive strategy that ignored the systemic flaws in the EU’s and Eurozone’s political and economic infrastructure; the crises in e.g. Greece or Spain were symptoms not causes of the economic malady that had befallen the EU and austerity caused even more suffering. Instead, member-states should rethink the union’s overall framework.

The economic crisis and the entailed cultural, social, and political tensions and conflicts confronted the EU with unprecedented challenges that threatened its very existence. Re-thinking Europe and formulating plans for its future were central items on agendas across the political spectrum. Not consensus-seeking but competition seemed to determine debates on the supranational project, which revealed the ‘[...]volatile political standing of the union [...]’ (Thiel 2011: 2). The years between 2011 and 2013 were particularly decisive, since they saw an intensification of the Greek debt crisis, the collapse of the Cypriot banking sector, a struggling Italy, both politically and economically, an uncertain situation for Spain, and a string of bailout packages tied to controversial reform programmes.

Based on these observations, a critical examination of the strongly interwoven dimensions of *structure*, i.e. discursive networks, and *content*, i.e. communicative actions that accumulate to specific frames, enables the comprehensive analysis of a potential European, crisis-related web sphere. Three main research questions guide the analysis in subsequent chapters. Each question is closely connected to the other and approaching answers to all of them allows to draw conclusions on the communicative dynamics and societal impact of the Eurozone crisis debate on the Web:

Research question 1: What content areas did political online communicators cover who focused on the EU/EU-crisis and what discursive networks did they form during the height of the crisis between 2011 and 2013?

Research question 2: What frames dominated political online communication in the context of the crisis and how did communicators evaluate main stakeholders (EU and nation-states)?

Research question 3: How did political online communicators differ in their communication strategies to approach transnational issues?

The present book attempts to identify a transnational web sphere that emerged on the current EU crisis, to analyse its scope by examining the communicative networks on which it is based, to analyse its content by examining the mode of framing applied by the various communicators involved, and, based on the previous analytical steps, to evaluate the complex relationship between the national and transnational in contemporary political communication. Only after this descriptive process it becomes possible to voice empirically grounded, normative criticism on inclusion, solidarity, and transnational identity.

It is argued that the Eurozone crisis indeed triggered the formation of a transnational web sphere. However, its degree of structural coherence and discursive features need further evaluation, as different communicators constructed discursive sub-spaces of varying transnational-national orientation. The goal is not to find indicators for a single integrative European public sphere; the available findings and theoretical reflections force the critical observer to question the existence of such a broad, inclusive, and uniform transnational social space (Hepp et al 2012). It appears to be more suitable to look for networks of public, media-based discourses that can display transnational characteristics. This scepticism also applies to normative expectations linked to the modernist notion of national public spheres (Habermas 1972). Instead, the analysis assesses the chances for the condensation of context-related public web communication produced by online communicators with different political and social backgrounds into a transnational web sphere and how this digital space served for the dispersion of framings for key issues and actors.

Contextualising the Book

Analysing the structure and democratic quality of transnational discourses remains a recurring topic in research on political communication with a European dimension (Hutter, Grande, and Kriesi 2016; de Wilde et al. 2014; Risse 2015; Kriesi et al. 2016; Lodge and Sarikakis 2013; Hepp et al. 2016; 2012; Thiel 2011; Balcytiene and Vinciuniene 2010; Bee et al. 2010; de Vreese 2010; 2002; Triandafyllidou et al. 2009; Gerhards 2000; 1993; Peters 2007e). The “shockwaves” of the global financial crisis in Europe amplified this development (Doudaki 2015; Askanius and Mylonas 2015; Grande and Kriesi 2016), though research on the subject is still limited. The academic debate shows considerable theoretical differentiation and a diversity of definitions, operationalisations, and evaluations have been proposed, mainly based on research on the mass media’s role in constructing or dismantling transnational European public discourses. The various studies justify their empirical focus with the assumption that print- and broadcasting media still had the widest societal scope and biggest political relevance. Mass media platforms are regarded as the original sites for public discourses in modern societies and are the technological requirement to make nation-states possible (Peters 2007b: 79). Most studies agree that rudimentary European media public spheres exists, though they seem structurally “weak” and of limited societal scope. Moreover, transnational public discourses may not have the same shape and function as implied in democratic-inclusive, nation-state oriented models. The diverse and partly unstable nature of the EU reduces the explanatory power of conventional concepts of public discourse.

At the time of writing relatively few contributions analyse online media and their role in processes of convergence in transnational communication, though the number is increasing (Hepp et al 2016). Previous projects were often limited to case studies on official EU online platforms (e.g. Hoffmann and Monaghan 2011; Wodak and Wright 2006; Jankowski and van Os 2004) or explored how the Internet as such provides a transnational communication space for Europe (Koopmans and Zimmerman 2010). Against the background of the economic crisis, the Europeanisation of protest quickly became a relevant subject, too (Chabanet 2011). Other studies shift attention to social media platforms (Smyrnaios 2014a).

One of the largest and most important studies so far also uses the web sphere model as its methodological basis for an extensive quantitative content analysis of political online news media platforms from twelve member-states (de Wilde et al. 2014); this exceptional research project examines how online publics expressed their dissatisfaction with the EU in varying forms of ‘Euroscepticism’ during the 2009 European elections (*ibid*). Despite notable similarities to the present study regarding the general research outlook and empirical approach, it does not focus on frames and networks in the crisis context. Still, it implies in which direction transnational public sphere and public opinion research is heading.

There is no short supply of interesting and challenging research subjects, as in 2016 over 80% of the EU’s population had access to the WWW, i.e. roughly 412.466.679 of over 515.000.000 individuals (InternetWorldStats 2017). It is not an improbable assumption that the Web has become a relevant source of political information for many Europeans. Another case study that addressed this aspect at least

tentatively was an MA thesis written by the author at the University of Münster in 2011, which focused on European blogs as digital partial public spheres for European political elites (Nguyen 2011). This analysis showed that a diverse set of political and social actors make use of Internet technology for communicating political viewpoints; each implements the communicative potentials of online media in a variety of modes, ranging from genuine deliberation to plain public relations. This work was very limited in its theoretical and empirical scope; it had to restrict its focus to a handful of European blogs and their activity within a period of less than two months. Above all, the conceptualisation of digital public discourses remained sketchy at best. The complex, sometimes contradicting interrelations between the national and transnational dimensions were not part of the analysis. Nevertheless, it highlighted the potential for further research and served as an inspiration for a theoretically more complex and differentiated as well as methodologically refined and empirically larger study as provided here in this book.

As the distribution of Internet access continues to spread on the continent, examining online phenomena can yield important findings on the materialisation of discursive transnationalism and debates on the future of the EU, the nation-state, and European identity. An in-depth analysis of adequate web communication could simultaneously point to propensities towards exclusion and fragmentation or convergence in a European context. The transnational and national dimensions are inseparably linked to each other and not mutually exclusive. Empirical research on EU-related web communication can help to better understand the ambiguous interdependencies between both in political online discourses. Finally, the analysis of the European example may produce important theoretical and methodological insights that are applicable to other political contexts in which the relation between the transnational and national dimensions plays a central role.

To achieve these tasks the theoretical framework combines public sphere theory with approaches from Internet studies and cyber conflict research as a basis for a comprehensive description of web spheres. It further attempts to overcome the epistemological limitations of ‘methodological nationalism’ (Beck 2007) by proposing that political public communication on European issues is transnational per se, though communicators can vary in their degree of transnational interaction and integration. Platforms that address a Pan-European audience and promote a postnational identity reflect a strong transnational orientation. Online media that explicitly address a nationally framed audience and discuss European issues from a national angle represent a structurally and qualitatively different manifestation of transnational discursivity. This approach enables the examination of nationally oriented discourses against the backdrop of transnational political developments and avoids the perception of national cultures as closed containers.

Since web spheres consist of content and networks, a multi-level research process that integrates complementary content analytical and network analytical steps seems appropriate. The empirical examination hence builds on a three-step content analysis of 21 online platforms with a focus on EU- and crisis politics. The analysis had three purposes: first, to map general content areas that emerged in the sample and to identify tendencies towards discursive convergence (Hepp et al. 2012; Hepp 2009), i.e. to show where communicators talked about the same set of issues and where they departed; this initial step includes a portrayal of hyperlink patterns to reveal the network substructure of the EU web sphere.

Second, to identify frames by collecting data on frame elements as proposed by Matthes and Kohring (2008, citing Entman 1993): frames are disassembled into their individual parts, i.e. problem

definitions, causal interpretations, evaluations, and recommendations, which can be coded in a content analysis (*ibid*). The respective categories were developed inductively from the sampled material via an explorative-qualitative secondary content analysis before they were quantitatively processed as variables for hierarchical cluster analyses to identify complete frames. This ensures that fewer aspects escaped the researcher's lens, which can be very limited in purely quantitative approaches.

Third, the inductive coding served for identifying the set of political actors, media sources etc. mentioned or quoted in the texts to draw a map of key players in the overall crisis discourse. Thus, this multidimensional approach covered research processes that are traditionally labelled as quantitative and qualitative. The author regards this dogmatic separation of methodological perspectives as unproductive for content analyses of media communication, due to a range of epistemological inconsistencies. To stress the complementary research angle, it follows Terfrüchte's (2011: 113-114) proposition to rather speak of 'hypothesis-generating' (qualitative) and 'hypothesis-testing' (quantitative) research steps and agrees with Früh's argumentation that empirical studies almost always cover both dimensions at different stages (2007: 67), especially in content analytical research.

The sample includes a variety of online platforms with a focus on EU-issues from a political perspective and which are potentially part of a larger web discourse. Online communication, the basis of all web spheres, mainly consists of hypertexts that are made accessible to a potentially unlimited audience. Individual web platforms and their content in form of published messages or articles become the central analytical units for examining political communication. The analysis applied an empirical-descriptive approach and explicitly focused on political discourses, though it is acknowledged that cultural (especially artistic) versions of transnational communicative interaction can be of considerable relevance as well.

In sum, this book makes an original contribution to the current academic discourse on a highly urgent issue through theorising and empirically describing transnational political debates in online environments and proposing a research design that scans web spheres in-depth from multiple angles. By considering nationally oriented sub-discourses that are often a result of transnational developments and irritations, it explores the configurations of contemporary political conflicts in the European context on the Web.

The Structure of the Book

Due to the complexity and novelty of its research interest, the case study is exploratory. It can only succeed after a summarised yet thorough discussion of central social phenomena: Web communication, public spheres, transnationalism, nationalism, and frames/framing. The first part of the book discusses relevant models and theories to specify the research angle, to elaborate on the research questions, and to define the methodological approach. The second part starts with an explanation of the empirical tools used to collect data on the European crisis discourse from the Web and presents the results of the frame-and network analyses.

Chapter 2 starts with a critical review of research on transnational media discourses and theoretical approaches on transnationalism and nationalism. It summarises findings from research on

mass media communication in Europe and its role in the formation of transnational public discourses. Relevant studies focus European media policies, media systems, and the “Europeanisation” of news media. This is followed by a concise summary of available and, at the time of writing, on-going research on European-transnational communication on the Web; as indicated above, online platforms play a central role in political communication and diversify the spectrum of perspectives in discourses. A small but increasing number of researchers started to map, dissect, and assess the structure and logics of web-based communication for the European context (Smyrnaios 2014) and a summary of this emerging stock of knowledge must inevitably be part of the review.

Chapter 3 takes a critical look at the impact of online communication on public discourses and refines the research angle on digital public spheres as discursive contexts based on online platforms. The discussion starts with a critical summary of previous academic discussions on the public sphere; a differentiation is made between democratic-integrative (mainly inspired by Habermas’ work) and descriptive models (especially systems-theory inspired approaches), before the case is made for a pragmatic approach for empirical analyses. The chapter then moves on with the rise of the Internet and its lasting impact on forms of public communication; it provides a diversity of communicators with instantly accessible gateways to audiences. However, this pluralisation is accompanied by tendencies towards silo-formation or fragmentation. It is thus argued that Internet technology triggered ambivalent transformations of public discursivity, in which integration, diversification, fragmentation, individualisation, mass-consumption, participation, exclusion, globalisation, transnationalisation, and localisation are coupled in relations of tension. The chapter closes with a definition and operationalisation of web spheres as clusters of online communication on current issues.

Chapter 4 outlines the methodological approach and research design. The Web sphere analysis combines frame- and network analyses, which are again based on a quantitative-qualitative content analysis of online communication sampled from relevant online platforms. After introducing the chosen methods and describing the sample, each analytical step is briefly explained. The chapter makes the case for bridging the quantitative-qualitative divide in (online) content analyses.

Chapter 5 provides a comprehensive analysis of online communication on the EU- and Eurozone crisis discourse on the web. It starts with mapping the general themes and topics associated with the EU in the sampled content and the network structures of hyperlinks and actors. After analysing and interpreting the quantitative data, the chapter moves on to the qualitative analysis of frame elements: perceptions and assessments voiced by communicators in the crisis web sphere are in focus of this analysis. What follows is a description of the main frames that emerged across different online platforms and a typology of crisis communication. It closes with a categorisation of different national-transnational perspectives of the involved communicators and online platforms.

Chapter 6, the conclusion, provides a summary of the most important theoretical insights and central empirical findings; it reviews each of the previous chapters’ main themes and results and links them to the guiding research questions, before it articulates normative criticism on the tone and direction of the overall crisis discourse. It also outlines how the emerging field of digital methods (Rogers 2015) and big data research can drastically enhance empirical analyses of transnational political online communication in future research projects.

Chapter 2: Transnational Media Communication

Research on Transnational Media Discourses in Europe

The Europeanisation of media communication and research on transnational Web communication in Europe.

Mass Media and Transnational Communication

Research on transnationalism and communication technology in the European context covers at least three areas: first, research on political media discourses; various studies attempt to identify and measure tendencies towards convergence or “Europeanisation” across national news media as an indicator for transnational discursivity. Second, research on migrant networks; diasporas interact in a transnational context by forming culturally and socially framed networks across host- and home countries while online media are crucial for maintaining these transnational social worlds (e.g. Mig@Net 2012; Georgiou 2006). Third, research on the transnationalisation of protest, where studies analyse communication strategies applied by social movements (Karatzogianni 2006) and/or the coverage of protests by media outlets from different countries (Dolezal and Hutter 2012).

The first field of European political media research investigates chances and limits of (mass-)media-based transnational spheres through the empirical analysis of mainstream media. It is the most relevant research tradition in the still small area of transnational public discourse research. Its subsections cover the complex relations between media communication, transnationalism, and the EU: some studies discuss the infrastructure of European media systems and potentials for transnational communication by analysing EU policies on media regulations and –markets (Papathanassopoulos and Negrin 2011; Brüggemann and Schulz-Forberg 2009; Lund 2006). Others analyse flows of communication within the EU, i.e. between its branches and institutions (Bee 2010; Brüggemann 2010; 2008; Bretschneider and Rettich 2006). A few research projects focus on the EU’s relationship to organisations of the civil society (Michailidou 2010; Wodak 2007; Trenz 2002). Most publications compare the EU-coverage of national news media brands, i.e. their quantitative-qualitative Europeanisation (Risse 2015; Hepp et. al. 2012; Bee and Bozzini et al. 2010; Balcytiene and Vinciuniene 2010; Boomgarden 2010; Scharkow and Vogelsang 2009; Statham 2010). There are also studies on the role of journalists in Brussels (Lecheler and Hinrichsen 2010).³ Recently, research on the role of online media can be added to the list (Smyrnaios 2013a; Hepp et al. 2016; Koopmans and Zimmerman 2003, 2010).

One can distinguish between two sub-areas in European political media research: first, studies on the chances and limits for collective European media outlets and -systems; second, analyses of the transnational potential within national media agendas. Research in the first of the two sub-areas shows broad consensus that European media spaces still seem demarcated by their national foci (Adam 2007; 2008b; Brüggemann 2008: 34). The area of European TV broadcasting is quite illustrative: except for a few niche-communicators, there is no major broadcasting agency that operates on an exclusively

European level, i.e. there is no European equivalent to the BBC, ARD/ZDF or France Télévisions. This is not a result of technological or legal limitations, since for both an open infrastructure exists (Michalis 2009). However, European media systems are not isolated from each other, as a multitude of media products and -formats circulate among media organisations on a transnational stage; most private broadcasters, print products, and online services are part of global corporations (Castells 2009: 75), yet media products are often localised to what media companies perceive as regional or local tastes. The number of print outlets with an explicit focus on European issues is also limited and hardly comparable with national products in terms of societal scope and relevance beyond an expert audience. Nevertheless, some are successful in maintaining their status as central journalistic sources on EU politics, especially for economic and political elites (Brüggemann et al. 2009: 396); examples are European Voice or The Financial Times.

Due to the limitations of genuinely transnational mass media outlets, researchers came to agree that the communicative conjunction of individual national media spheres formed an indispensable precondition for the emergence of mass media-based transnational discourses in Europe. This is the second of the two sub-areas: if there are any chances for the emergence of a transnational space for public communication, then one would have to comparatively analyse the various nationally framed media discourses and the tendencies of convergence in their agenda-settings (Hepp et al. 2016; 2012; Thiel 2011; Trenz 2010; Menéndez-Alarcón 2010; Tobler 2010; Trandafiu 2008; Adam 2007; 2008a; Adam and Pfetsch 2009; Berkel 2006). The level of “Europeanisation” is mostly coupled to both the intensity and type of EU-reporting in mainstream news media. Analysing the frequency and style of media reports on the EU and Europe, i.e. framing, enables the assessment of openness for European issues in national public discourses (Pfetsch and Heft 2015: 37). This facilitates identifying mutual points of reference among the sampled media outlets, and may eventually reveal the structure and content of transnational discursive networks, i.e. Europeanised public spheres.

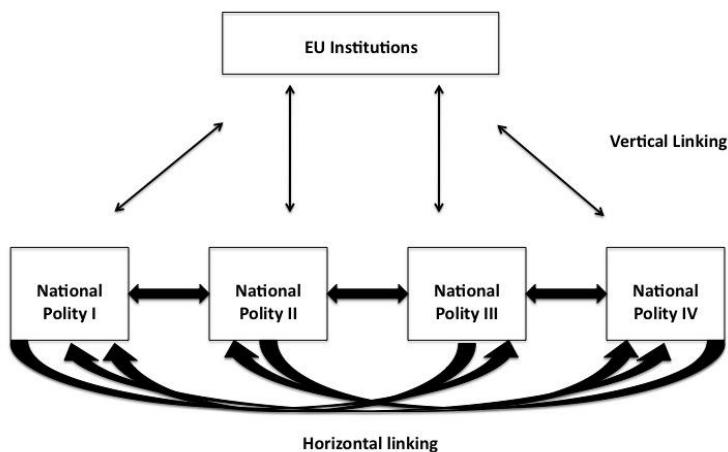
Media-based communication flows can take at least two different directions or trajectories (Statham 2011: 80): through ‘vertical linking’ that connects the various national polities on the continent with the EU; via ‘horizontal’ linking that connects different national polities in Europe. Statham explains: ‘[...] horizontal forms of Europeanised debate [...] are purely transnational, when compared to the vertical variants, because they build direct communicative links and exchanges between polities across national borders’ (Statham 2011: 84; Risse: 11). Both trajectories, as well as the relation between them, materialise in varying intensities and determining factors are the involved set of communicators, the issues in focus, and the addressed audiences. The exact context and its communication-sociological configurations define the strength of discursive ties in both the horizontal and vertical direction. For example, transnational media discourses on EU fishing policies and Eurozone politics may occasionally overlap but have their own sets of involved stakeholders across the transnational and national political landscapes.

Hepp et al. propose to further differentiate between sub-dimensions for each type of linking (2012: 26). The vertical dimension includes ‘monitoring governance’, i.e. the observation of the EU as an administrative body. Reports and comments on decisions made by the EU institutions fall into this category. Vertical linking covers issues related to ‘collective integration’ (*ibid*), i.e. the formation of a shared European identity among national polities. Media content that addresses a European audience or speaks of a European citizenry highlights this aspect. The horizontal dimension consists of ‘discursive

integration' and 'discursive convergence' (ibid). *Discursive integration* describes the degree to which mutual discursive relations exist between national polities. Citing and debating remarks made by an Italian politician in a British newspaper is one example, providing a political commentator from e.g. France with a forum in a German media outlet another. Examples from the Web are platforms that bring communicators from different European countries together (e.g. EurActive). *Discursive convergence* describes patterns of Europeanisation in reporting about the EU in different national public spheres, i.e. tendencies of parallelisation in media discourses. The EU crisis was one decisive chain of events covered by different political media outlets across Europe; it stimulated convergence between media publics. Both horizontal and vertical linking and their sub-sections provide useful analytical categories for examining and evaluating tendencies of convergence in any form of media-based discourse, including web spheres.

Differences in the perception, description, and evaluation of EU politics are grounded in different political discourse cultures that mould the content of a media outlet (Hepp et al. 2012: 44). Structure and quality of transnational debates cannot be properly understood without considering the actions and attitudes of individual communicators who contribute to the emergence or construction of public discursivity (ibid). The actions of individual agents are determined by the political culture of their organisation (is it a left-wing or a right-wing newspaper? Is it a national government institution or branch of the EU?).⁴ Hepp et al. (ibid) identify and examine diverging discourse cultures in a broad sample of European print media, in which each outlet frames European issues differently. The authors describe political discourse cultures as the substructure of public spheres and point to a 'multidimensional segmentation' (ibid) in their study of the European public communication space; transnational public discourses are shaped by national-cultural and political contrasts.

Figure 2: Trajectories of Transnationalisation as proposed by Statham 2011 (compiled by the author)



Despite multiple fragmentation along cultural and political, previous research shows an increased level of connectivity between national media discourses (Hepp et al. 2012: 26). Studies imply that there is a set of recurring topics and themes that dominate EU-debates, including economic issues, migration, institutional reform and a common foreign policy (Brüggemann et al. 2009). Analyses on

Europeanisation show that EU-related topics gradually gained relevance, though they were until 2008 a secondary concern when compared to domestic topics (Hepp et al. 2012). Most research projects focused the years before the crisis; the events and debates across Europe between 2009 and 2016 illustrate quite strikingly that the domestic and transnational political dimensions increasingly blur. The relevance of EU-issues needs re-evaluation, as the quantity and quality of media coverage has risen and changed because of the crisis.

Hepp et al. argue that communication and media studies cannot only help to understand how transnational public spheres emerge in a European context; on a more fundamental level, they may reveal how Europe is communicated (2012: 14), i.e. framed. Statham (2011: 90) asserts that EU journalism would generally remain rather informative than political, i.e. journalists made no personal political statements that could potentially polarise audiences and stimulate debates. This also has changed with the crisis, since the challenges of European integration stimulated the articulation of evaluative political statements. Others imply that media communicators seem to rarely display self-awareness as Europeans; the identification with Europe was rather underdeveloped and the national level remained the priority: especially in conflicts and unwelcomed economic or political developments, national media outlets tend to portray the EU as a ‘scapegoat’ (Gerhards et al. 2009: 532); it becomes the “other” that obtains a unfavourable position in mediatised discussions of ‘blame avoidance’ or ‘blame shifting’ and ‘credit claiming’ (*ibid*: 534). Furthermore, national media discourses can oversimplify political correlations and conflict-configurations by making no distinction between various branches of the EU, but rather criticise Brussels collectively (*ibid*: 534).

To sum up, horizontal and vertical linking, the elite-orientation of transnational content, and Europeanisation in news agenda setting must be considered as central elements in relevant online communication. Especially discursive integration and -convergence are critical dimensions in analysing transnational web spheres. Online discourses on Europe can integrate horizontal and vertical flows of communication, i.e. they may potentially address relations to the EU and establish connections between “nationally-separated” audiences. Online media platforms, the fundament of all web spheres, have partly very distinct communicative features that do not apply for print-/broadcasting media. Most importantly, web discourses can easily include communicators and platforms that are not rooted in the field of professional journalism; news media outlets are only one (but crucial!) type of nodes in online networks.

EU Discourses and Online Media

Numerous online media with a EU-/European focus exist. There are blogs and websites on EU politics that address a transnational readership (e.g. BlogActive; bloggingportal.eu), online platforms provided by transnational social movements and NGOs, and various official EU websites. Several professional news media sites have a decidedly transnational outlook (European Voice, EU Observer), with English as the preferred language. Furthermore, countless online platforms that do not necessarily aim for a transnational audience per se may cover transnational issues. Due to their general accessibility and coverage of European politics, explicitly nationally-oriented online platforms can become nodes in transnational discourse networks, too. Examples are national news media websites, government-related

online platforms, and web presences provided by political groups that can even have a Eurosceptic or nationalistic agenda. Aside from that, there is an unknown number of online platforms that fall into none of the categories above where users may discuss EU politics, especially in social media and blog networks.

A diverse set of communicators talk about European politics on the Web, each one representing a different perspective. These can be separated into two broad categories: decidedly postnational or Pan-European ones and those that attempt to address national audiences. Each category consists of sub-types, which depend on political backgrounds and how communicators relate their discursive actions to their ‘imagined community’ (Anderson 1991). Attributes and characteristics of diverse political discourse cultures are constitutive for online discourses, as ideological viewpoints determine the content and scope of individual online platforms. Yet different political websites tend to share a common discursive context by e.g. discussing the future of the EU, the course of the crisis, and the attribution of political responsibility on national and transnational levels.

The EU is one of the most productive online communicators on EU-issues. It regards public communication as a central means for securing political legitimacy and the various EU branches invested considerable efforts in the development of online communication strategies. The aim is not only increased transparency (Hoffmann and Monaghan 2011: 140; Vesnic-Alujevic 2013); they try to frame its self-representation in a favourable manner. The EU is aware of its communicative limits and defines the central problems quite accurately, especially regarding the often-alleged deficit of communication (European Commission 2007; 2006a; 2006b; 2005a; 2005b). The outcome of the 2005 referendums in France and the Netherlands had been a warning example. Since then, the EU tried to raise both the quality and quantity of its public communication and to provide technological means for feedback; it also aspired to improve its cultural and “corporate” identity (European Commission 2006b: 9). This included rebuilding its reputation and strengthening its political and cultural relevance. New communication strategy should eventually contribute to the formation of a stronger European sphere of transparent, inclusive, democratic political debate (European Commission 2006b) and stronger support among EU citizens.

The EU maintains that it was indispensable to apply a levelled, dialogue-oriented approach, ‘as peoples’ support for the European project is a matter of common interest’ (European Commission 2006b: 4). The EU frequently refers to a ‘European civil society’ (*ibid*: 2) and claims it would seek opportunities for collaboration and exchange with NGOs, local, regional, or transnational groups in the European political system (*ibid*: 5). To provide an adequate framework for integrative discourses, it developed plans for an expansion of its digital communication campaign. The EU’s 2006 white paper postulates that applying Internet technology could help reducing the feeling of remoteness among European citizens (European Commission 2006a: 4). Giving citizens the opportunity to express and exchange opinions in EU online forums could further ‘empower’ them and promote a stronger attachment to EU politics (European Commission 2006b: 6). The three normative goals of the EU’s online strategy are securing inclusiveness, securing diversity, and providing adequate means for discursive involvement for EU-citizens (European Commission 2006b: 6).

Its web presences are an attempt to implement these blueprints and mainly serve two purposes: providing forums and ensuring a constant output of information across all available means, including social media networks (EU 2014; Debating Europe 2014; European Parliament 2014; Eutube 2014;

European Commission Twitter 2014; European Press Room 2014). This mode of strategic public communication appears “symptomatic” for the EU and its different branches, as shown by Lodge and Sarikakis (2013) who critically analyse the institutions’ public communication campaign in the crisis context with a sobering conclusion:

The implicit agenda of the EU strategy was one of a-political persuasion, of engaging the Commission in communicating positive messages about European governance in an anodyne, nonprescriptive, nonpartisan a-political way. This overly simplistic view overlooked the role of national parties (at all levels) and that of social movements (*ibid*: 176).

Few empirical studies on transnational online discourses are available for the EU context, though the number is increasing. Most research projects analyse the topics, themes, and social structures of relevant online platforms (Bennett et al. 2015; de Wilde et al. 2014; Winkler et al. 2006; Wodak and Wright 2006), while others focus on user- and communicator motivations for consuming or providing EU online content (Michailidou 2010); research on social media platforms include network analyses for the detection of transnational debates (Smyrnaios 2014a; 2014b). Several publications examine official EU platforms and discussion boards (Hoffmann and Monaghan 2011; Wodak and Wright 2006; Winkler et al. 2006). The respective studies show that demographic factors delimit the group of participants to a mainly young male elite (Winkler et al. 2006: 398; Michailidou 2010: 76). More importantly, they reveal that most of the ambitious aims set by the EU remain unrealised; despite frequent and vital discussions, official EU online forums leave little impact on everyday business in EU politics: ‘[...] the use of the Internet as a place for public debate did not generate new ideas for the EU integration process and it fell short of its own attempt to increase EU legitimacy or even bring Europe closer to its citizens’ (Hoffmann and Monaghan 2011: 145). Scope, productivity, and relevance of official EU-online platforms are limited. Instead of pluralising EU politics, many EU online media sites serve as mere tools for political PR activities (European Commission 2012).

Lodge and Sarikakis (2013) thus argue that digital technologies cannot overcome the EU’s communication problems and deficits in democratic discourse and probably need to be accompanied by convincing visions for the future:

Communicating Europe and strategic interventions to facilitate some of the preconditions deemed necessary for assisting the development of a public sphere are political projects, inspired by political ideals and idealism. They depend on political mobilization by whatever means, using whatever tools, programmes and initiatives are available at the time. The seductiveness of the tools of e-participation and e-networking should not obscure the need for political vision (*ibid*: 176).

Other studies with broader samples of website types beyond the EU’s official platforms come to equally critical conclusions; one early example is Koopmans and Zimmermann (2003) comparison of Internet content with newspaper articles. The authors argue that web communication had significant limitations in terms of hierarchy and transnational openness; in another study the same authors explored how search engines and hyperlink networks shape ‘the overall structure of political communication on the

World Wide Web' (2010: 192) and showed that despite structural difference, European discourse are very similar on- and offline. Bennett et al. (2015) also broadened their empirical scope and analysed issue-networks to map European issue public related to the civil society online. Despite tendencies towards convergence, online media have not yet catalysed discursive integration as communicative ties between different national participants remain weak.

Other projects shift focus to public discursivity in social media spaces: Vesnic-Alujevic evaluates EU parliamentarians' usage of social media for political marketing and public information (2012). Smyrnaios shows how crucial events like the European Parliament elections in 2014, the Eurovision debates, or EU budget negotiations stimulated the formation of transnational web spheres on Twitter (2014a; 2014b; Smyrnaios and Ratinaud 2013). The findings imply that with the crisis, European politics experienced a boost in topicality for audiences, particularly in the EU's South, which was reflected in the emergence of a highly dynamic web discourse; they also show how EU politicians and -organisations 'institutionalised' the micro-blogging service for their public communication campaigns (Smyrnaios 2014b). Social media reveal major political fault lines, as 'political differences and affinities of the candidates [are] clearly reflected in the structure of the debate that took place on Twitter' (*ibid*). Political orientations, public reputations etc. seem to determine flows of communication and ties of discursive interaction on the Web. Smyrnaios pays close attention to social media platforms as spheres of resonance for official public communication from EU actors, i.e. how transnational debates evolve and gain momentum on Twitter; this inevitably involves communicative activities of "regular users" – i.e. communicators who are not official EU representatives.

Another important study analyses the reproduction of different types of attitudes towards the EU on online news media platforms (de Wilde et al. 2014); it is also based on the web sphere model and focuses 'online polity contestation' during the 2009 European elections (*ibid*). The study covers a broad sample of news media websites and political blogs from twelve countries and adds a few platforms with decidedly transnational perspectives. It compares 60 platforms and their activities over the course of a month: '[...] online media offer an ideal environment for analysing contestation of the EU precisely because they allow us to systematically link political contestation and citizens' participation with public salience and media framing' (*ibid*: 772). Via a quantitative content analysis, the authors show how participants defined their positions on the EU (varying shades from pro-European to 'diffuse Eurosceptic', *ibid*: 774), how often Eurosceptic statements occurred, and how citizens and politicians justified legitimacy evaluations for the EU. The findings reveal that EU polity contestation is a central element of 'EP election campaigning that is partly detached from partisan contestation' and that there is a 'citizens-elite divide' (*ibid*: 780-783). Furthermore, the evaluation of the EU does not 'vary substantially among countries' (*ibid*) but rather in terms of intensity. The authors finally conclude that '[t]here appears substantial consensus that the current EU set-up is not satisfactory, but the legitimate way forward is not voiced publicly in a clear enough manner' (*ibid*). The study shows that research on transnational public discursivity needs to broaden its perspective towards a more diverse network of political communication, something only a few other studies have done before (*ibid*: 772).

Despite some similarities, there are noticeable differences to the present analysis, especially regarding the theoretical framework and empirical survey: first, it does not further discuss and advance Schneider and Foot's web sphere model by outlining the different levels of online communication that condense into discursive online networks. An individual website is not simply a singular node within a

web discourse but has sub-dimensions that are interconnected, i.e. there are structural differences between a website in its entirety, its individual publications, and its comment sections. Admittedly, the authors implicitly acknowledge the existence of these different dimensions by analysing their content but they do not further reflect on these substructures of web spheres and how to approach them more precisely in respect of a specified methodology for empirical web sphere research. They also chose to ignore how the sampled websites interact or not interact with each other, either through linking or mutual referencing in content. No information on discursive ties between them is provided; the same applies to politicians and institutions named in EU-related discourses. It remains rather obscure what the actual structure of EU-related web discourses looks like. It also leaves out how participants frame other member-states and individual EU branches as well as EU politicians; the frame analysis is rather limited, as it does not assess how different communicators produce and distribute perceived problems, causalities, evaluations, and recommendations to describe the EU and member-states. Finally, previous studies seldom elaborate on the notion of transnationalism in use; transnational online interactions can occur in varying intensities and dimensions, ranging from weaker to stronger forms (Kriesi and Grande 2015: 206-208). There is little research available on how transnationalism and nationalism are discursively constructed and distributed in political online communication on Europe.

To sum up, transnational online media discourses might not create stronger individual affiliations to the EU or between member-states, but this does not mean that they have no political relevance at all. Quite the contrary, it is very likely that Internet technology continues to play an increasingly important role in public communication on the EU-/European politics (Michailidou 2010: 81). Online media within a transnational European context are constantly changing, even evolving. In any case, they expand the spectrum of transnational public discursivity. They can reveal what issues and topics dominate transnational discourses and what the major conflict constellations look like (see Smyrnaios' work, 2014a; 2014b); they reflect how both the national and transnational dimension are linked to each other by revealing participants' sentiments about an issue.

The proposition is to understand online platforms as context-bound, topic-defined sites for public communication that are potentially part of a wider web sphere with a transnational scope. It is not primarily the normative outcome for “European-identity-building” or “EU-state-building” that is of interest but how transnational political contexts materialise in political online communication in general. Before the analysis can continue, it is necessary to review existing definitions of transnationalism and nationalism and to formulate notions that facilitate their empirical examination on the Web.

Defining Transnationalism

Theorising transnationalism in the social sciences; how to overcome methodological nationalism and towards a classification system of transnational angles in political online discourses.

Transnationalism: An Interdisciplinary Issue

Transnationalism is both a social phenomenon and ambiguous theoretical perspective. There is no single coherent definition of and its variable construability remains controversial in academic and political debates. Transnationalism has manifold manifestations and its characteristics depend on the context. For example, forms of legal transnationalism are not the same as political ones, and socio-cultural transnationalisms are different from transnational developments in economy, though these dimensions are often closely interwoven.

The lowest common denominator across disciplines is an explicit focus on social interaction beyond local or national spaces; the ‘transnational’ presupposes the existence of the ‘national’ (Casteel 2011: 156). The disappearance of boundaries and convergences beyond national frames are not “new”, since transnational interactions have a long history throughout the globe (*ibid*: 58). However, under accelerating globalisation, academic approaches on transnationalism have become *en vogue* in the past decade, not least thanks to the Internet. Tendencies towards a tangible transnationalisation of politics and the deterritorialisation of spaces for communicative interaction trigger this interest (Brüggeman and Hepp et al. 2009: 395). Globalisation describes, in simplified terms, the seemingly omnipresent, rapid shrinking of the world in social, cultural, political, and economic respects (Karatzogianni and Robinson 2009: 56; 72; Habermas 2001: 73).

Transnationalism describes the interdependences between individuals, groups, organisations, and states in a world that becomes constantly smaller and simultaneously more complex (Rumford 2011: 37). Beck (1997; 2000; 2007) explicitly asks for new analytical approaches that focus on transnational formations, since conventional perspectives and axioms based on a modernist understanding of the nation-state were insufficient for explaining the complex relations and conflicts between contemporary social and political forces. In a similar vein, Casteel voices the need for a ‘transnational turn’ (2011: 158) in European historiography as opposed to the traditional dominance of nationally-oriented historical scholarship. As geographical and social borders seem to lose much –though by no means all– of their meaning, it is no longer the society of the nation-state that was of interest but the ‘transnational constellations, i.e. regional spaces’ which they are part of (Beck 2007: 309).

It is crucial to develop comprehensive and empirically applicable models for the identification and explanation of transnational interactions and -contexts; for various theoretical and empirical reasons this is no simple task. Keohane and Nye Jr. provide an early and still influential definition: ‘[...] “transnational interactions” [...] describe the movement of tangible or intangible items across state boundaries when at least one actor is not an agent of a government or an intergovernmental organisation’ (1971: 332). Transnational interactions stretch across trade, personal contact, and communication (*ibid*:

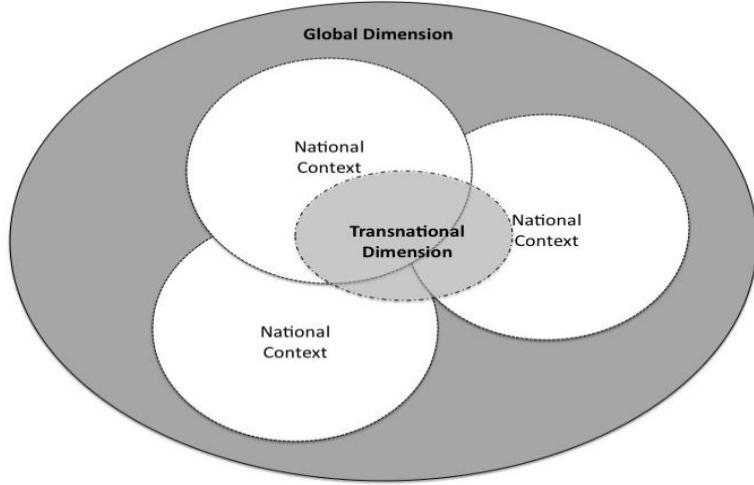
330). The final point is crucial, as it postulates that without proper communication any attempt to interact in a transnational dimension would inevitably fail. Moving ‘intangible items’ (*ibid*) is a relatively open category and implicitly covers the distribution of ideological perspectives, political opinions, values, the exchange of arguments and/or conflicts that result from political or cultural disagreement, or in other words: the dispersion of frames. Partially bypassing or excluding governmental institutions is another factor in this proposition. The implication is that interactions between national governments lead to an international rather than transnational context. This view echoes in other definitions: for example, Hurrelmann delivers a similar notion of transnationalism, when he describes it as ‘[...] the presence of at least one societal actor –meaning an actor who is neither an agent of a state nor an international organisation– in border-crossing interactions’ (Hurrelmann 2011: 20). Again, relations between two sovereign nation-states alone are not genuinely transnational.

However, this might not be entirely true for the European context. Member-states of the EU are actors in transnational relations or subjects of transnational discourses; they frequently discuss and develop a common political and economic framework and constantly negotiate the level of sovereignty that the EU can sustain to work efficiently. These processes are time consuming and carry a considerable potential for conflict with them. Still, the quality and outcome of political debates and common policies between EU member-states is different from e.g. those in the UN. The fine line between the international and transnational is blurring and nation-states debate, negotiate, and coordinate collective actions on a far closer level of mutual influence than anywhere else on the globe.

It is crucial to clearly distinguish terminology for interactions in border-transcending contexts: internationalism is a label for political interaction between two sovereign states, e.g. when two countries declare official trade agreements, enter or end wars, broker peace with a third or fourth nation etc. The lines are not clear-cut to forms of transnational interaction, especially on the meso- and micro-level of political, cultural, and economic interactions between countries. Yet internationalism emphasises that politically separated states cooperate for a limited purpose, whereas transnational contexts display considerable potential for the formation of new spaces for interaction that possibly turn into lasting political and social environments.

There are qualitative differences between modes of interaction in globalised contexts. Forms of transnationalism are a consequence of globalisation, but not all transnational relations are necessarily global in scope (Casteel 2011: 156; Rumford 2011: 39); they are limited to a specific set of stakeholders, located in a specific region. The EU is one example: within its political-geographical space, borders between nationally separated units partly dissolve in specific areas.

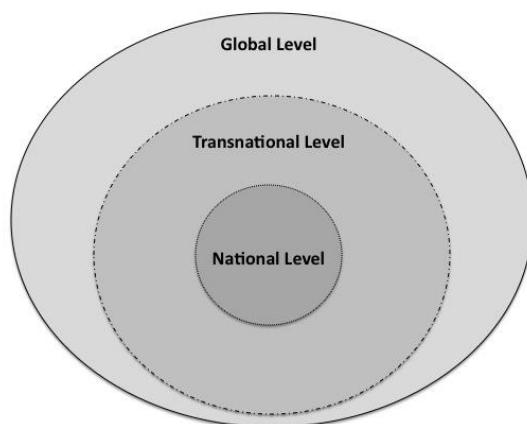
Figure 5: Transnational Dimension (compiled by the author)



Simultaneously, the EU reinforces borders on a supra-national level and is a distinguishable social-political sphere different from e.g. the USA or Asia.

Rumford describes nationalism, transnationalism, and globalism as successive layers; transnationalism is the ‘middle layer’, since it covers the ‘subglobal sphere of operation’ (2011: 41-40). This approach allows the separation of transnational contexts from the other two broad dimensions along structural factors and context. It further enables the definition and evaluation of interrelations between the national, the transnational, and the global. Transnationalism as a category for social interaction describes encounters and collaborations across borders that are intense and punctual, potentially leading to the formation of new social environment and identities, whereas globalism was less focused and attempts to catch general developments on the world stage (Holton 2008: 44, cited in Rumford 2011: 40).

Figure 6: Transnational dimensions as proposed by Rumford 2011 (compiled by the author)

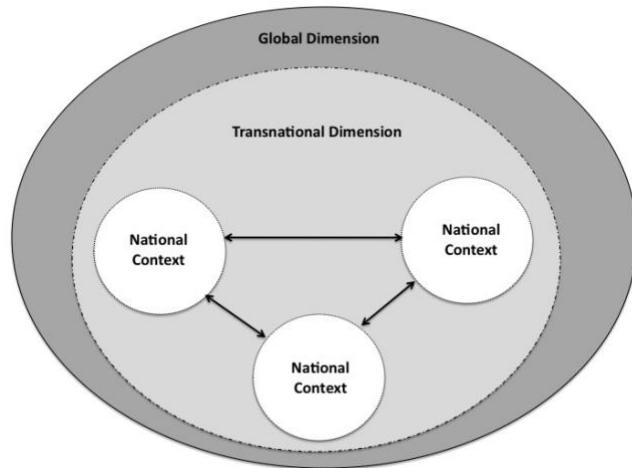


Transnational phenomena display a range of structural specifics. For example, transnational economic conglomerates, political movements, and migrant networks resemble rather rhizomatic than aborescent structures (Karatzogianni and Robinson 2009); they materialise as complex networks and social environments that ignore boundaries and have no centre or core. Social connectivity is thus a

central element in transnational contexts. However, Habermas points out that transnational networks and lifeworlds are not the same; he basically describes an almost binary relationship between them: networks served a ‘functional integration’, which coordinates social interaction between individuals on a horizontal dimension, whereas lifeworlds enabled ‘social integration’, which includes the formation of collective identities (Habermas 2001: 82). The boundaries between both are no clear-cut, as networks can provide a basis for new collectives that share a transnational identity, as protest movements or migrant diasporas show (Mig@Net 2012). Yet, not every transnational network forms a culturally coherent social environment; examples are areas of transnational economy or EU politics. Network ties are ‘highly fluid’ (Strange 2011: 1251), i.e. they can break or re-arrange quickly. Thus, one must differentiate between social structures of varying transnational scope and coherence.

All of this has conspicuous implications for public discursivity, but the notions of transnationalism summarised above primarily aim for general characteristics. They do not reflect on communication-sociological factors and technological structures of transnational mediatized communication; they do not elaborate on the role of on- and offline media channels in enabling and sustaining communicative spheres. Understanding and analysing the existence, texture, and function of public discourses across borders and cultures remains a considerable challenge for politics and academia.

Figure 7: Transnational networks (compiled by the author)



Brüggemann and Hepp offer a useful approach for a basic characterisation of transnational discourses with a focus on political issues. They describe them as ‘spaces for the condensation of public, media-based political communication that display relevance beyond the national context’ (Hepp et al. 2012: 25; Brüggemann et al. 2009: 391).⁵ The most important criterion is that several countries discuss the ‘*same transnational* issues at the *same time* and under similar *aspects of relevance*’ (Kantner 2015: 84). Ideally, these political discourses are openly accessible and arouse interest across geographical and language boundaries. They provide information on transnational political issues and stimulate the formation of individual opinions. Yet the national and transnational dimensions do not exclude each other; they are co-dependent (Brüggemann et al. 2009: 395).

Europe is inherently polycentric (Rumford 2011: 46), which resonates on the Web. The dimensions, types of communicators, and social constellations are radically pluralised. Especially the EU

crisis illustrated this complex multidimensionality of political discourses and conflict lines. The correlations between the national, transnational, and global dimensions depend on several social, cultural, and political factors, i.e. the transnational scope varies in each context. For example, transnational public online communication in the context of protest movements is very different from interactions in transnational migrant web spheres. Both types of transnational discourse display different characteristics and communicative dynamics from online discourses on EU politics –and one can further distinguish between types of transnational interaction within this context. Online news media debates display features of Europeanisation in their coverage of the EU, i.e. there are tendencies towards convergence in the composition of EU-related news item agendas. However, there are online platforms and networks in which more immediate modes of transnational interactions occur. An example is the relatively small yet quite productive European blogosphere. On some blogs, users from different European countries produce content related to EU developments and make their personal assessments accessible to a larger, transnational public. One should bear in mind that this is a rather elitist online discourse, in which an even smaller group announces a somewhat postnational identity. Still, it further shows the variety of transnational discursivity on the Web.

Moreover, transnational communication can emerge in contexts where its manifestation may seem rather unlikely. Ambiguous, even self-contradicting examples can be found among contemporary nationalist movements. Some groups establish transnational discourses through online media. There are various forums for racists, white supremacists, and neo-Nazis, in which like-minded people from all over the globe meet and discuss issues of their interest (e.g. whitepowerforum 2012). Pursuing ethno-nationalist or racist agendas does not necessarily preclude the establishment of transnational relations and discourses. For instance, the Greek nationalist party Golden Dawn has shown how transnational migrant networks may serve for nationalist discourses. In 2013, it announced its plans to strengthen its presence in the Greek diasporas all over Europe (and the world), i.e. to make use of a migrant network for promoting a mostly anti-migrant agenda.

These observations imply that transnationalism emerges in varying intensities and scopes. It is thus proposed to differentiate between weaker and stronger modes of transnational communication. Online platforms and audiences that discuss issues of transnational relevance, but remain socio-culturally relatively homogenous, are an example for the weaker type; communicators mainly address what they perceive as a national community. Still, due to their focus on transnational developments beyond the national context, they become part of broader transnational discourse networks. The exact counterpart are online platforms that not only focus on transnational issues, but attempt to address and integrate what they perceive as a transnational audience. Websites that involve communicators from different cultural backgrounds, possibly available in more than one language, and visited by a diverse audience, are examples for a stronger notion of transnational online discursivity. Both poles and the scaling continuum between them need to be considered in a definition of transnationalism for online communication. Kriesi and Grande (2015: 204) propose four similar types of ‘cleavage coalitions’, i.e. political camps divided along ideological lines, for the European context that exemplify what such a classification system can look like: interventionist-cosmopolitan, neoliberal-cosmopolitan, neo-liberal-nationalist, and interventionist-nationalist. Cleavage coalitions ‘include those actors that share (more or less) identical positions on the issue constitutive of a cleavage’ (*ibid*: 204).

To sum up, transnationalism describes communicative interactions between individuals and groups or organisations that transcend nationally framed cultural and political contexts but are limited to a certain region: Europe. The assumption is that the inherently globalised Web facilitates the construction of digital sites for transnational political communication moulded by technology and context. The analysis of both the structure and content of online networks allow the portrayal and examination of the fabric of transnational online debates; the same data can inform the systematic evaluation of individual online platforms' relation to the transnational sphere. Political backgrounds and content agendas determine how a communicator perceives and frames the EU, the crisis, and other member-states –but what can this data tell about their location in the spectrum between the global, transnational, and national? This question shifts focus to the chances and limits of online media to stimulate and sustain transnational spheres. When communicators move beyond local contexts, they often cover three dimensions of being transnational: first, their representation on a worldwide media stage; second, network building, as they may connect with individuals and groups from different countries; thirdly, in terms of their targeted field of contestation, as their communication often focuses political actors that exert power on a transnational scale, e.g. governments, the transnational business sector, or the EU. The empirical analysis of both frames and networks reveals the type of transnational orientation of a platform. Comparing the degree and type of transnationalism on platforms and online resources then allows the evaluation of general tendencies in EU- and crisis-related political communication.

On the Limitations of Methodological Nationalism

The empirical analysis of transnational discourses includes a range of methodological challenges, especially regarding the conceptualisation of nation-states and societies. Beck addresses this point in his criticism of ‘methodological nationalism’ or ‘container-theory’ (Beck 2000; 2007; Wimmer and Glick-Schiller 2002; Hepp et al. 2012: 49). Methodological nationalism presumes that society and nation-state are the same entity, which eventually determines the analytical approach on social phenomena. This is a problematic assumption, as it tends to exclude or simplify complex correlations between factors that transcend local or regional contexts. Nation-states were described as closed and comparable units. A classic example is Gellner’s structuralist approach (1997): ‘nationalism, national culture and the nation-state reflect the historical dynamics and fulfil the functional needs of industrial society’ (Arnason 2006: 50). And while diverging on many other aspects on the origins and functions of nations, his former principle Smith concurs: ‘[...] the idea of “society” is nothing more or less than that of the “nation” – with or without the state’ (2009: 13). Critique on methodological nationalism challenges these assumptions and points to diverse and fundamental influences of globalisation on the composition and dynamics of society; it asks to rethink the conventional understanding of the nation-state and limitations of a Western focus.

Beck claims it was this ‘closed’ thinking which has determined modern sociology as a ‘dominant societal paradigm’ (2000: 80) and significantly limited its explanatory power. By narrowing its perspective, methodological nationalism eventually turned blind for complex transnational and global causal relations, i.e. it ignored central factors that defined developments, conflicts, and transformations in

society. Furthermore, it potentially reproduced inequalities and imbalances in political discourses, due to its introversive perspective.⁶ The complexity of social relations, power networks, and discourses hardly fit into a closed container-model of the nation-state. A society and a nation are not one and the same entity or socio-political unit; societies are more complex than the geographical spaces that nation-states cover and it is very difficult to define their actual borders, especially in times of increased social mobility, cultural exchange, economic convergence, and constant migration flows.

Conventional boundaries are dissolving and concepts like nation, state, and citizenship experience transformations (Drake 2010: 99). They remain central points of reference in political discourses, including conflicts, but they are neither the only nor the most important factors in the formation of social spheres for communicative interaction. The crisis in Europe sparks nationalistic discourses, yet these are parts of an inherently transnational meta-discourse that connects spaces of communication with varying degrees of transnational orientation. Online media catalyse this development towards socio-cultural convergences on a global scale, potentially enabling the emergence of various transnational contexts on a regionally still broad yet simultaneously demarcated sub-dimension.

The effects of globalisation highlight the epistemological and empirical limits of methodological nationalism. Social systems form and integrate networks across boundaries. It is quite debatable whether basic assumptions of “container-theory” ever applied in human history, as societies have always been fluid, dynamic systems rather than monolithic blocks. The same goes for public discursivity, which has been repeatedly described as a crucial precondition for the formation of nation-states (Habermas 1972; 1990). However, contemporary forms of public communication are not necessarily bound to a single geographical location; they rather seem to comprise of flows of communication that condense within cultural and political spaces, but are neither fully self-sufficient nor isolated from external influences. Various public discourses reach beyond national settings, especially in European contexts.

Beck distinguishes between two different though not mutually exclusive types of methodological nationalism (2007: 297): one is a ‘historical concept’ that highlights the conjunction between the emergence of modern sociology and the nation-state (*ibid*). The other is a ‘logical concept’ that contextualises every aspect of society in a national frame (*ibid*). Subsequently, two major types of empirical research emerged: ‘*national-sociological self-analysis*’, i.e. structural analyses of a nation by its national sociology (*ibid*: 298, original italics) and ‘*comparative studies*’ of national societies (*ibid*, original italics). Either way, methodological nationalism always equates society with the nation. Wimmer and Glick-Schiller (2002: 300-310) further outline three basic types of methodological nationalism that significantly impeded the analysis of complex social phenomena: first, there was a tendency to simply ignore the intrinsically national framing of modern sociology; since it has been repeatedly assumed that ‘the nation/state/society is the natural social and political form of the modern world’ (*ibid*: 302; 304). Second, academia promoted a naturalisation of the nation by taking national discourses for granted, without analysing both the nation and nationalism as independent research subjects. Third, there is an imaginary territorialisation of the social sciences and a limited analytical focus on the political boundaries of the nation-state (*ibid*). They conclude that ‘[m]ethodological nationalism has thus inhibited a true understanding of the nature and limits of the modern project. It has produced a systematic blindness towards the paradox that modernisation has led to the creation of national communities amidst a modern society supposedly dominated by the principles of achievement’ (*ibid*).

Critics assert that this is a superficial verdict. Chernilo expresses his doubts on whether methodological nationalism distorted social sciences for the most part of their existence (2007: 14-20), as not all theoretical approaches equated the nation-state with society, neither implicitly nor explicitly. Systems-theory and the implications of a world society is just one example. According to him, it was never an immanent part of Western social theory (2007: 3).⁷ Chernilo admits, however, that methodological nationalism is a real epistemological and ontological obstacle for empirical analyses and theorisation; hence, he agrees with the basic rejection of methodological nationalism, but simultaneously asks for more differentiation between traditions and theoretical movements within the social sciences.⁸

To circumvent limitations and gain a comprehensive understanding of an increasingly complex world, Beck proposes a turn towards ‘methodological cosmopolitanism’ (Hepp et al. 2012: 50). This approach places emphasis on spatial and temporal complexities of transnational or global relations (Beck 2000). Research on events and developments in society needs to broaden its analytical perspectives beyond national contexts. This does not mean that nation-states and nationalisms are irrelevant to contemporary societal discourses. To the contrary, they retain their social and political relevance; the nation-state still forms a central point of reference in the formation of collective identities and distinguishable spheres of social, political, and legal organisation. It is constantly reproduced in political culture and public discourse and thus remains the primary political unit on the global stage. Nevertheless, Beck opens the way for more flexible approaches on the complex interrelations between the national and transnational.

Hepp et al. (2012) provide one example; they follow the call for a cosmopolitan turn with their notion of ‘methodological transculturalism’ in research on transnational public discourses.⁹ This approach proposes that cultural aspects can be partly uncoupled from the national context and transcend into a transnational sphere without affecting the whole globe. Taking a cultural-analytical perspective allows to observe the articulation of the national in transnational settings (Hepp et al. 2012: 51); this eventually left questions of the national behind, since it focused on the cultural, which was not coupled to the nation-state. The authors derive their argument from the work of Kevin Robins (2006; *ibid*), who proposed a change of methodological perspectives that does not imply the end of the nation-state, but rather aims for the analysis of the multidimensional relations and tensions between the national and transnational in a transcultural context. This approach finally avoided an ‘international and intercultural semantic of comparison’ (Hepp et al. 2012: 52-53), i.e. the assumption that ‘media cultures, media markets, and media systems’ (*ibid*) were congruent with nation-states and that they could be compared on this basis.¹⁰ The presumption that the nation-state implicitly or explicitly served as an ‘unquestioned frame of reference’ (*ibid*: 52) ultimately leads to the limitations of methodological nationalism. A shift towards a ‘transcultural semantic of comparison’ (*ibid*) overcomes this problem. It defines global media capitalism as the most important parameter for ‘border-transgressing communicative connectivity’ (*ibid*). Methodological transculturalism contextualises and analyses forms of communication that imply the emergence of transnational discursive settings without seeing the nation-state as a natural entity or excluding it altogether (*ibid*: 53). This perspective is easily transferable to research on transnational online communication. It facilitates the critical observation of political communicators and how they construct transnationally- or nationally-oriented spheres of political public communication on the Web within the context of EU- and crisis politics.

To sum up, the lines between the national and transnational are permeable. Political communicators do not exclusively refer to closed domestic contexts, but debate and negotiate political questions in a transnational dimension. Both spheres are intrinsically co-dependent, as events on the transnational dimension, e.g. decisions made in Brussels, have a profound effect on the national level and vice versa; in some contexts, it is not even possible to separate both contexts, since they are so strongly interwoven. The general framework of reference is the Web, which is global in scope. Nevertheless, specific discursive formations reproduce locally or regionally limited contexts for communicative interaction. Though discursive relations do indeed transcend national contexts, they can remain regionally limited on a transnational level and do not necessarily advance into a global dimension. That does not mean that global developments cannot affect the transnational dimension. To the contrary, they stimulate communicative activities and often apply pressure on transnational collaboration. Still, points of discursive reference and discursive contexts are to large extents bound to a regional dimension, in this case Europe.

Nationalism and Nation-States in Transnational Contexts

Nationalisms as discursive formations and nation-states as central references for organising societies; why nationalisms remain relevant in a globalised age.

Defining Nationalism

To understand forms of transnational communication in politics, it is necessary to review the role of nation-states and national ideologies. Despite discussions on a cosmopolitan future in Europe and the transition into a ‘postnational constellation’ (Habermas 2001), nation-states and nationalisms have not become obsolete. They continue to play key roles in cultural, social and political life: ‘[w]e doubt both the capacities of nation-states and the morality of many versions of nationalism, but we lack realistic and attractive alternatives’ (Calhoun 2007: 149). Debates on the consequences of economic and political convergence, and the challenges posed by migration, highlight the consistency of nationalistic discourses in various EU member-states, often coupled to grave social and political conflicts (e.g. Mig@net 2012).

Nation-states and nationalisms are not the same, though both are strongly linked. The nation-state is the concrete yet variable legal, social, political, and economic framework for collectives, influenced by different notions of nationalism, i.e. nationalistic narratives. Nationalisms as political ideologies provide the ideational basis for processes of social organisation. They are coupled to questions of identity, ethnicity, race, culture, and the idea of boundaries (e.g. Gellner 1997; 1995). As discursive formations, nationalisms based on myths and historical narratives offer central references for the formation of social relations and contribute to the construction of individual and collective identities (Wodak 2006: 104). They provide ideological guidelines for the framing of other political actors and entities, power relations, and conflict constellations through the reproduction of in- and out-groups, the attribution of responsibility, fame/blame shifting, or the proposition of political actions.

The academic discourse on the origin, function, and future of nations and nationalisms is quite polarised. A central point of disagreement is the question whether the nation and nationalism are products of modernity or if they can be traced back to pre-modern times (Delanty and O'Mahony 2002: 65); this goes hand in hand with the discussion on the nation's supposed constructedness or naturalness. Central to this debate are antagonistic historical and ontological views (Conversi 2006). Primordialistic and perennialistic perspectives describe the nation as a natural formation based on emotional ties, traceable back to 'ancestral times' (*ibid*: 17). Due to the emphasis on the natural origin of the nation, as products of a socially, culturally, linguistically or even biologically related collective and its quasi-evolutional development through history, there are strong connections to ethnic models of nationalism. Nationalistic narratives can reproduce and disseminate primordialist self-perceptions of a nation-state by distorting or ignoring historical facts (e.g. Nazism). Modernist and instrumentalist positions strongly disagree with primordialist accounts and date the origin of nation-states and nationalism at a much later stage. 'Chronological modernists' claim that nations and nationalisms were a result of modernisation (Smith 2009: 6; 10). Gellner saw the age of industrialisation as the historical caesura in the European context, since it triggered and catalysed the formation of nation-states (1993).

Modernists and instrumentalists are extremely sceptical about claims of naturalness of nations, since there is little empirical evidence for these speculations (Conversi 2006: 18). The nation was not a naturally grown social constellation, but rather a social construction, serving specific organisational purposes; nations were neither natural, nor "always there". Instead, they were best thought of as socio-political inventions of modernity. Anderson (1991: 6) defines nations as 'imagined communities'; since it was virtually impossible for individuals to know all members of a community in hypercomplex mass societies, there was always a strong element of fiction in their formation. They 'must hypothesise their commonality' (Karatzogianni 2006: 41). Historical narratives, cultural traditions and most importantly a common language provided the socio-cultural basis for the development of collective allegiances, i.e. a sense of identification. Nationalisms basically pooled this content and provided frames for the development of national identities as a 'real fantasy' (Drake 2010: 104; 113). Media channels have a crucial function in constructing and maintaining national communities.

Smith disagrees with modernist assumptions and sees continuity between pre-modern and modern forms of social organisation (Conversi 2006: 21; Smith 1998). Though some claims of pure perennialists were indeed debatable, it was fact that even the most fervent proponents of modernist positions could not entirely dismiss the relevance of pre-modern forms of community for the development and shape of nation-states (Smith 2009: 7). Smith develops a third perspective on the origins and functions of nations and nationalism: ethno-symbolism (*ibid*). He accepts that nations were to a certain extent constructed, imagined communities based on shared historical narratives and cultural practices, including symbols, ethical standards, and traditions (*ibid*); especially intellectuals played a central role in producing these narratives and catalysing processes of nation-formation. Nevertheless, nations were more than just discursive formations but 'dynamic, purposive communities of action' (*ibid*: 13). These communities had historical roots that reach back into pre-modern eras. Smith asserts that ethno-symbolism was not an elaborated theoretical framework, but rather a 'particular perspective on, and research programme for, the study of nations and nationalism' (*ibid*: 1). There is indeed one central weakness to this integrative approach: it fails to explain the indisputable variability of national cultures

and does not distinguish between nationhood, citizenship, the nation as a rather cultural entity, and the state as a legal-political one (Connor 2004 cited in Conversi 2006: 24).

To sum up, the controversial academic debate on nation-states and nationalisms illustrates their complexity and ambiguous character. A variety of social, cultural, political, and historical discourses play a significant role in moulding and establishing both nations and national collectives as manifest social entities, even if authors like Smith claim that they are more than “just” discursive formations. Before the chapter turns to the types and functions of nationalisms in political discourses, it is indispensable to briefly outline the role of contemporary nation-states, which remain reference points for public discourses and subjects of debate. This summary limits its focus to a few relevant aspects, as the fundamental transformations of the nation-state have been already discussed in great length elsewhere (Karatzogianni and Robinson 2009).

The Transforming Role of Nation-States

Globalisation and transnationalisation challenge the status and functions of nation-states, which puts them in an ambivalent situation: they try to secure levels of stability and coherence, yet they are subject to constant change. Nevertheless, nation-states successfully maintain their relevance as political forces that regulate life for larger populations. State structures reduce complexity and offer orientation for social collectives who share a legal, cultural, social, economic, and political context.

Fukuyama (2011) argues that they developed in different trajectories around the globe, when tribal and kinship-based social systems evolved into state-like entities. Contingent historical conditions determined the formation of different types of nation-states, leading to diverse conceptualisations of the same socio-political construct; defining what a state was depended on the cultural hemisphere to which a country belongs, e.g. Europe, India, or China. Fukuyama takes a different historical perspective on the origin of the nation-state, since most discussions date the emergence of its modern form to the Treaty of Westphalia in 1648 (Calhoun 2007; Thiel 2011). His extensive historical-comparative analysis of different centres of civilization remains limited to technocratic aspects of governance and state formation. Nevertheless, his account convincingly outlines why states or state-like structures came into being, evolved, and remain crucial for the organisation and hierachization of human collectives and social interactions. It implies that states are not monolithic units but dynamic outcomes of social-political processes. Others partly concur with Fukuyama’s general assessment when they characterise nation-states as a ‘social logic’ (Karatzogianni and Robinson 2009: 60), though sustained by illusion(s), i.e. supported by national narratives.

The historical formation of modern nation-states was based on concentration and unification, which often caused resistance from regional or local levels: for ‘[...]the nation-state to exist it was necessary to step beyond what had been articulated before –to deterritorialise– before it could establish a position for itself as a speaking object’ (Everard 2000: 45). Through addressing an imagined community

framed by a specific ideological perspective, nation-states establish distinguishable political spaces of discursivity. They experienced external as well as internal differentiation (Peters 2007a: 47). The individual departments of democratic governmental systems, for instance, have different institutional competencies and responsibilities. Each one follows another programme for regulation, coordination, and control (*ibid*: 45). Though each part depends on the other, they are to an extent operationally closed and self-sufficient. Branches and representatives of the state can become communicators in nationally-oriented or transnational discourses.

Nation-states are based on complex social relations and interactions that are the outcome of internal functional differentiation. But they are exposed to external transformations, too (Habermas 2001: 61-65). This applies not only to interactions between nation-states but concerns discursive relations to local, regional, or transnational organisations subsumed under the civil society. These social and political collectives expand the set of players on the (global) political stage by claiming their stakes in political decision-making processes; the civil society has no single ideological alignment but represents the full range of political perspectives, including extremist positions on the far left and right (Braman 2010: 151).

Another dimension that is subject to constant transformations is the nation-state's scope of action. Core responsibilities in economy and security often shift into a supra- or transnational dimension, since in globalised politics a nation cannot insist on absolute sovereignty. The role of nation-states is subject of constant re-negotiations on both the domestic and transnational level. For example, political developments in the EU frequently show how single member-states can no longer define their regulatory framework entirely on their own (*ibid*: 147). This does not necessarily mean that nation-states lost their ability to act independently. They remain active forces in globalisation and their influence has 'rather grown than shrunk' (Karatzogianni and Robinson 2009: 92). Describing a postnational constellation is paradoxical, since it is witnessed from 'the familiar perspective of the nation-state' (Habermas 2001: 61). Nevertheless, nation-states are only one among many factors in complex networks of political and social relations; they cannot ignore the written and unwritten rules of conduct in transnational contexts, not without taking considerable risks. This ambiguous situation bears significant potential for political conflicts. For example, plans and actions for closer political and economic integration in Europe often meet resistance and disapproval. Especially changes in economy, mostly triggered by crises in global capitalism, spark political protest and social unrest, as seen in various EU member-states since 2007.

The 'increasing scope and intensity of commercial, communicative, and exchange relations beyond national borders' (Habermas 2001: 66) question conventional concepts of the nation and function of national/-istic narratives. Tendencies towards convergence under the influence of globalisation or, in regionally limited contexts, transnationalisation do not imply that the world is about to become less pluralistic. Profound transformations in communicative interactions caused by online technology and the emergence of alternative political forces led theorists to re-assess the role of the nation-state and to contemplate on the future of 'cyber-states' (e.g. Everard 2000; Castells 2001; Chadwick 2006; Barrett 1996; Bernauer and Achini 2000; Karatzogianni 2006; Drezner 2004). There are no definite answers to the challenges and problems entailed in the multi-faceted developments caused by online media. However, a quick glance at everyday business in national and global politics, as well as culture, implies that the situation appears ambiguous and extremely complex. Modernist characteristics like institutionalisation, professionalisation, bureaucratisation, and oligarchisation face inherently postmodern attributes of the Web, such as globalisation, transnationalisation, and networking.

To sum up, the nation-state remains a central site for public discourses but it is not an exclusive one. The Internet constantly creates new spheres for political discourse, including social, cultural, political, and economic negotiations and conflicts. Online media not only serve as channels for the unidirectional distribution of information; they provide ways for coordinating actions and forming networks that ignore the limited dimensions of space and time. Online media are not isolated from the offline world and affect political discourse culture. A pluralised set of political agencies and constantly emerging globalised and/or transnational fields of interaction and contestation lead to new forms of public communication. The ambiguous value of the Web for nation-states is obvious: ‘No nation can live without it, yet no nation can control behaviour in it’ (Jenkins and Thorburn 2004: 5). On the Internet, governments face discursive counterparts of diverse ideological backgrounds on partly equal terms. Simultaneously, the dissemination of national narratives and ideological statements is not confined to official personal or institutional representatives of a state. There are various other non-governmental groups who claim to speak for what they perceive as a nation or national community. Different communicators instrumentalise varying notions of nationalism for their political purposes. Nationalisms are key factors in the construction of collective identities, particularly under pressure from transformations of transnational scope.

Types and Functions of Nationalism

Nationalism is a polarising issue in academia that divides positions along normative perspectives on the nation, national collectives, and nationalistic discourses. Central questions concern the definition of nationalism, its main features, and function for societies. Most authors agree that nationalisms are ‘discursive formations’ (Calhoun 2007): they are shared sets of values, beliefs, and perspectives that facilitate the formation of collective, community-oriented identities. Nationalisms provide discursive frameworks in which structures for interaction and socialisation emerge. They circulate through historical narratives, cultural symbols, and rituals (Casteel 2011: 153). Communication technology serves the distribution of ideologically loaded enunciations that condense into discourses of nationalism. As ‘unifying ideas’ (Everard 2000: 9) nationalisms subsequently enable imagined communities. Media channels are crucial for sustaining these illusions and distribute a sense of cohesion. Other material factors, such as territories, also determine the shape of nation-states (Habermas 2001: 63-64). The borders between materialistic claims and illusive constructions based on ideology are not clear-cut.

Nationalisms provide individuals, and thus the collectives they form, with an identity. The content of these identities are beliefs that are collected, historicised, glorified, and preserved in national narratives (*ibid*: 86). The nation becomes a crucial element of self-perception and recognition by others: ‘[...] the political unit consisting of the nation-state and the culture and language that it promotes, give birth to a new collective identity’ (Máiz 2006: 61). Identity politics, i.e. debates on race/ethnicity, language, history, and citizenship provide the framework for their formation (Keane 1995). However, a specific national identity is only one of multiple layers; individuals have affiliations to a multitude of

groups, networks, and social segments. From a historical perspective, national identities have never been the dominant ones, at least not until the rise of modern nationalism (Casteel 2011: 162). Examples are strong local (e.g. county/province or city), social (class or caste) or religious ties; cultural aspects are equally important (Norman 2006: 89), as are gender and age. Especially networked, digitalised environments hold potentials for creating new socially and culturally defined collective identities beyond the context of the national imaginarium.

There are two broad categories of nationalisms: ethnic and civic versions (Calhoun 2007: 117; Máiz 2006: 60; Drake 2010). This implies a normative classification into ‘good and bad nationalisms’ (Norman 2006: 86). Both types are coupled to political ideologies and manifestations vary between cultural contexts (Resnick 2006: 46), but forms of ethnic and civic nationalism are not at all mutually exclusive. Various mix-forms exist and modes of exclusion occur in both totalitarian and liberal-democratic societies. Nevertheless, there are noticeable qualitative differences between the two.

In ethnic nationalisms, biological-natural characteristics in form of race become unifying elements for collective identities. Critics of such ethno-biological notions maintain that their proponents deliberately ignored the nation’s inherently ‘constructive nature’ (Máiz 2006: 71). Throughout human history, ethnicities as categories for distinguishable collective identities have been highly variable concepts that changed over time and between contexts. Still, extreme ethno-nationalists assert that “their people” are a coherent biological and cultural unit and see nations as natural entities, which either have always existed or are the logical result of evolutionary processes; eventually, they claim the nation-state as their own property (Norman 2006: 91). It is crucial for all forms of ethnic nationalism to construct and oppose others: ‘[e]thnic groups were and are defined by their juxtaposition to other ethnic groups [...]’ (Calhoun 2007: 161). These out-groups are –often unilaterally and from the outside– defined and labelled by biological traits (i.e. colour of skin.), language, culture, religious beliefs, and even political viewpoints. Extreme ethnic nationalisms root in ‘historic myths of ethnic continuity and purity’ (Norman 2006: 87) of these discursively enforced distinctions and have a strong connection to forms of militarism (Karatzogianni and Robinson 2009: 64). Though extreme ethnic nationalism in Europe was largely condemned by the political establishment in the post-war period, various extreme nationalistic discourses on the far-right are very much alive today. They may represent only a political minority in most countries, but ethnic-based nationalisms nonetheless appear to have experienced a renaissance in recent years (e.g. Jobbik’s success in Hungary). Economic turmoil, migration issues, and a fear of losing one’s national identity, form the background for this development in several EU member-states. Extreme nationalists ignore plain realities, exploit stereotypes, and create false allegations to produce narratives that serve political i.e. ideological goals. For example, it is a fact that the EU does not aim for an end of all nation-states, melting them somehow down into a European super-state that neglects the differences of the 27 member-states. Still, many Eurosceptic and right-wing discourses in Europe frame the EU as a threat to national sovereignty and culture, blaming it for economic recession and societal transformations caused by increased migration. Examples are UKIP’s success in Britain, AfD in Germany, Front National in France, or Golden Dawn in Greece. Across the continent, different nationalistic voices proclaim their vision of a “Europe of Fatherlands” and demand devolution of transnational convergence, as the ‘current crisis has brought the drawback of deep transnationalisation to the fore’ (Bohle 2011: 136).

Proponents of nationalistic ideologies secure relevant positions in transnational political discourses and appear quite flexible in the design and implementation of communication strategies. Some

nationalist groups form transnational alliances to achieve their aims (BBC 2014). Fears about changes in culture and society are not confined to the margins of the political spectrum. Controversial issues such as migration and integration seem to catalyse the recollection of ethno-cultural collective identities in moderate parts of European citizenries, too. European conservative politicians placed emphasis on national sovereignty and exclusion in debates about Muslims, Roma, or Eastern European work migrants to appease voters. The lines between extremist and mainstream positions can blur, as moderate politicians occasionally use arguments or implement discursive practices similar in tone to their counterparts on the right-wing fringes, mostly to benefit politically from populist sentiments. As the Schengen- and Eurozone debates have shown, the creation of borders, the marginalisation of the other, and the formation of closed cultural and social collectives are integral to political discourses. Ethnic nationalisms play an active role in the European political landscape and right-wing organisations attempt to influence public discourses within and beyond the national context.

Civic nationalisms are not based on presumed biological or ethnic factors but shift focus to sets of political-ethical values, laws, and civic rights; they are connected to classic ideals of liberalism, ‘especially freedom and justice’ (Calhoun 2007: 131). There is an intrinsic relation between civic nationalism and democracy, ‘[...]since democratic process presupposes the existence and legitimacy of a populational and territorial unit’ (*ibid*: 60). The nation-state, moderate forms of nationalism, and democracy are highly influential on each other (*ibid*: 2007: 147). John Stuart Mill describes in his early vision of liberal nationalism a strong relation between the nation, the people, and democracy (e.g. *Representative Government* from 1861). The state should provide a ‘common ground for dialogue’ (Gagnon and Iacovino 2006: 28) and a shared ‘pole of allegiance’ (*ibid*: 38). Not all nation-states are democracies, yet democracies in the West almost always present themselves as nation-states (Habermas 2001: 62). Solidarity, which is again coupled to self-perception, identity and ideology, is an important element within the complex interplay between nationalism, nation-states, and democracy. Or as Calhoun puts it: ‘National solidarities are reasons for democracy and arenas of democratic struggle’ (Calhoun 2007: 167). Constitutions provide tangible, legally binding manifestations of such normative guidelines. Ideally, a democratic constitution forms the basis for a ‘strictly political concept of nation’ (Máiz 2006: 59) and the citizenry becomes a political rather than an ethnic community (*ibid*: 71).

Normative guidelines for democratic nation-states are not unproblematic, since they rarely meet empirical reality. Non-ethnic, democratic societies can demand assimilation and acculturation of minorities or even enforce modes of exclusion. Still, liberal or civic notions of nationalism appear particularly suitable for the formation of multicultural states: ‘Liberal nationalism [...] proclaims the possibility of plurinational states in which a new logic of institutional pluralism based on tolerance and mutual respect is implemented [...]’ (*ibid*: 66). Though this is a quite idealistic characterisation, it is fact that in most nation-states different cultures co-exist (*ibid*: 64). Discussing polyethnicity or multiethnicity (Gagnon and Iacovino 2006: 25) has become an urgent issue in Europe. Minorities have left an impact on their host societies and changed their cultural and social composition, challenging the idea of the container-state. However, multicultural societies face considerable challenges regarding social coherence and political, cultural, and economic equality. Conflicts frequently occur, which can again spark exclusive, undemocratic, nationalistic discourses in liberal-democratic societies.

The resurgence of nationalisms in political communication became observable in the EU crisis web sphere (chapter 5). It has been mentioned that online platforms expand options for networking,

distributing political viewpoints, and providing sources of information implemented by agents of any ideology. This includes discussions on ethnic or civic nationalisms. There are forums, websites, discussions boards, and blogs that champion various national visions between the two poles of extreme right wing, racist nationalisms and liberal-democratic notions; in other words, ‘[...]the power to influence people’s beliefs and sentiments in any realm is much more dispersed and decentralised’ (Norman 2006: 85). Ideologies, which shape beliefs, ethics, and values, determine the courses of action an individual or a group chooses, especially in political contestation and social conflicts. Interactions and beliefs are two different dimensions (Hurrelmann 2011: 27) but they are intrinsically coupled and materialise in communication through framing. Analysing the content of political online communication enables the identification and assessment of discursive formations that dominate a web sphere. The evaluation of how communicators frame variables such as the nation, “the people”, governments etc. provides information on the distribution of different types of nationalisms in political discourses on Europe and their relation to the transnational.

To sum up, nationalisms remain important factors in global and transnational contexts. They play a key role in the construction of collectively shared lifeworlds and determine to a certain extent spaces for human interaction. However, they are not the only point of reference for individuals and groups in such processes. The role of the nation-state has been repeatedly discussed and re-assessed, which inevitably includes reflections on the ideological basis of nationalism in its variable manifestations. It is possible to distinguish between nationalisms along their basic motifs and position towards in- and exclusion; ethnic and liberal notions are two poles between a scaling continuum. The ways in which political communicators define their relation towards a nation-state, describe their perspective on inclusion, exclusion and Europeanisation, address audiences, and represent themselves, provides information on the notion of nationalism they reproduce in their framing strategies. Specific enunciations manifested in online texts, selections of topics, directions of hyperlinking etc. yield empirical data for deriving conclusions on that matter. The framing of the nation against the background of transnational developments reveals the perception and evaluation of both by different online communicators.

In the context of contemporary Europe, online media appear to display an inherently dichotomous nature: they can both expand or particularise the field of political debate and possibly stimulate either closer integration or ‘fragmentation’ (Sunstein 2007: 37) in, as well as between, differentiated audiences in highly complex information societies. In some contexts, cultural and political borders are brought down, whereas other frames rather reinforce them. This has a profound impact on the structure and content of transnational public discourses and reveals how participants socialise each other in the European crisis context.

Chapter 3: Public Discourses and Political Online Communication

The Structural Features and Functions of Public Discourses

Why the public sphere remains an urgent topic for research in political communication; a contrast between democratic-integrative and descriptive models and the implications for empirical research.

Public Spheres as Public Discourses

Researching online communication and politics inevitably leads to a discussion about public spheres, which are in hypercomplex societies media-based public discourses of broader societal relevance. Analytical angles and normative expectations determine perspectives on public spheres (Risse 2015); as a polarising subject, it triggered a heterogeneous academic debate: some see it as a pillar of democracy (Habermas 1972), others as neutral projection surfaces for events and developments in society (Luhmann 2009), and critical perspectives doubt their very existence (Dean 2003b; Lippmann 1925). Other questions concern their scope: is there one holistic version, e.g. per nation-state, or a network of multiple public spheres? Dissonances result from different assumptions regarding the social and political functions of public communication. Ambiguous, partly contingent definitions lead to variable operationalisations of public spheres, publics, and publicness. The term public sphere describes a complex social phenomenon that evades precise definitions for empirical investigation (McKee 2005: 1). This leads to incongruent evaluations of its functions, relevance, and democratic value.

Still, there are basic assumptions shared across analytical angles: public spheres are usually regarded as discourses of political, cultural, and social relevance. They are based on media technology that connects communicators with audiences in spaces of communication; off- and online media are fundamental for generating and maintaining public discursivity. Public communicators' utterances or messages need to be linkable to a shared topic or context, which is made publicly accessible through media platforms. Hepp et al. (2012: 22-23) argue that public spheres are condensations of related communication relevant to an issue that involves different speakers. Trenz (2006: 192) provides a similar definition: they are spaces of communication with a mostly political, i.e. normative, function and to which observers can assign specific, context-related statements or viewpoints. To distinguish political discourses from other societal debates, Hepp et al. define them as 'ensemble[s] of communicative practices and discursive processes of attributing relevance within the field of political communication' (2012: 33); "political" issues include governance/regulation, identity formation, power distribution, and attributions of societal relevance/responsibility.¹¹ The categorisation of analytical dimensions and structural elements varies between theoretical approaches. Fraser proposes three units of the public sphere (1990): the state, the economy, and arenas of public discourse; Weßler and Wingert (2007: 24-26) identify five empirical dimensions, which are symbolic structures, social structures, temporal structures, differences between national public spheres, and processes of transnationalisation.

Others focus on social functions of public spheres. Neidhardt (1994: 8; also in Terfrüchte 2011: 28) identifies three normative purposes: transparency, i.e. universal access to public discourses and observation; validation through the discursive exchange of arguments among public speakers; orientation

for audiences to form public opinions. Each public sphere model emphasises one of these closely interwoven dimensions, though they differ regarding normative expectations (Terfrüchte 2011: 28). Democratic-integrative models outline ideal types of public discourse with a focus on integration, liberalisation, and emancipation. Descriptive models prioritise the empirical analysis of existing structures and observational functions.

Public discourses ideally cover issues, events, and developments of societal relevance. These include political decisions, re-allocations of resources, general (ethical) orientations, and normative principles. It is crucial to scrutinise an issue's 'far reaching interdependencies' (Peters 2007b: 84), i.e. the affected areas of society (e.g. economy, politics, culture, mass media, law, science).¹² Public discourses on the Eurozone crisis ignited along the blurring lines between the economic and political systems in a transnational dimension, i.e. across political and discursive cultures. This involves the element of societal attention, which is both a critical moment in the formation of public discourses and a limited resource. Due to a general scarcity of time and space in modern societies, spending these resources on political issues competes with other 'strains of social life, such as work or family' (ibid: 83). There is an 'episodic character' to public debates and 'manifest, latent, as well as potential problems' constantly compete for attention (ibid: 51).¹³

Communication flows in public discourses can suffer from dysfunctions: Peters (2007a: 49) explains that 'internalised programmes' in administrative systems and economic decisions in the mass media actively or passively block-out social or political issues. For instance, social minorities often lack agency in public debates (Mig@Net 2012). Not all topics of potentially societal relevance become subject of public discourses. Paradoxically, it is equally possible that vocal interest groups and/or media discourses exaggerate the importance of stories (ibid: 50). Public relations and lobbying try to influence selection processes that regulate public attention, and place preferred items on the agenda.

To sum up, decisions in agenda-setting processes are not only the result of internal structures and processes in 'media markets and media organisation[s]', but are significantly shaped by the 'social and cultural substructure' (Peters 2007: 363). Online media provide alternatives while social and political factors determine whether feedback-loops between web spheres and other media-based discourses materialise. Even though the Web facilitates the formation of counter-publics and distribution of alternative narratives and framings, this does not necessarily mean that they always have a tangible impact on a public discourse.

The Social and Technological Elements

The existence of a single all-encompassing public sphere is unlikely (Risse 2015: 9); it may be an imagined, but not empirically grounded social space (Habermas 1972: 75). Instead, society's communication environment comprises of dynamic networks of public discourses (Fraser 1990). The Internet promotes the formation of networked communication spaces (Coleman and Wright 2008: 3, summarising Bruns 2008) by enabling multi-layered, potentially interlinked web spheres.

Public spheres involve three intrinsically interwoven, structural dimensions: first, public exposure or publicness/publicity, i.e. the qualitative-quantitative extent of accessibility to public

communication and visibility of participants. Public moments connect political, cultural, social, and economic actors to society (Fraser 1990: 58).¹⁴ The scope depends on political and technological conditions for public discourses (Pfetsch and Heft 2015: 10). This relates to the reputation of public communicators. It is a primary goal of political and corporate communicators to achieve a high level of public exposure for specific issues by disseminating selected information. Reputation and “prestige” leave a tangible impact on a speaker’s relevance. The normative standards for control, secrecy and privacy are further elements that affect publicness (Peters 2007b: 57). For example, illegitimate covert operations frequently become subject of public concern (*ibid*: 58), as do violations of personal privacy. Governments may react harshly to unapproved publication of information, as WikiLeaks has shown (Karatzogianni 2012). Governmental systems and their underlying political cultures and political economies, including the legal situation, are influential factors in the formation of public spheres, nationally and transnationally.

Second, the social dimension of publics, i.e. audiences. These consist of active participants and passive observers. Active participants voice opinions beyond private settings (e.g. via a blog) but are different from public communicators as they do not officially represent an organisation or interest group. However, assemblages of like-minded people can form alternative political collectives “bottom-up” (e.g. protest movements, Castells 2012). The composition of publics depends on contextual factors, such as social stratification. The resulting socio-economic diversity may lead to unequal access to public discourses (e.g. digital divide). It further promotes the formation of potentially polarising political interests and opinions, though occasionally certain issues overcome social boundaries (e.g. Occupy). Still, different problems mobilise different publics and new political issues produce new public spheres (Drake 2010: 4). The cultural context and the influence of ideologies are equally important factors (Karatzogianni 2006: 55; 66). The differentiation of partial publics is inevitable in modern, complex societies. Web spheres with specific topical foci and audiences are primary examples. However, not all publics are equal in terms of relevance and political weight. Exclusion is the simplest form of inequality in communication and there mostly is an asymmetry between communicators and audiences.

Third, public spheres have a media-based technical infrastructure. Permanent access to information is a prerequisite for maintaining political debates and a diversity of media platforms sustain flows of communication that pool into discursive contexts. They serve as connectors between public communicators and society. Democratic models suggest that media platforms contribute to the integration of society, since they provide information across social and spatial boundaries; this may support the formation of collective identities. Especially mass media had a quasi-monopoly on constituting informative relations between social units due to their capabilities to produce, distribute, and connect discourses; hence, their elevated role in the formation of nation-states. Today, both off- and online media enable the observation of society and formation of discursive relations; for example, one increasingly important technology are social media networks that challenge traditional media agencies.

Moreover, media outlets are politically motivated communicators, though normative positions assert that journalism should have an independent, mediating position between electorates and the political class; they are supposed to act as the “fourth power” that watches democracy. This is linked to questions of freedom of speech and media impartiality. Economic and ideological factors distort this idealised function. News media agencies have complex filters for the selection of information, i.e. they are gatekeepers for the flow of information and frame issues and actors via priming and agenda-setting

(de Vreese 2005; Nisbet 2009; McQuail 1997). Journalism constructs topicality through programs of selection and depiction (Görke 2002: 73-76), as media producers are under pressure to make limited choices from a multitude of topics (*ibid*: 85) and prioritise stories that include elements of surprise or conflicts. The subsequent reduction of complexity of covered issues make them digestible for audiences yet delimit the “window” on social reality. Media content is always subject to variable construability. The content of news feeds varies noticeably and individual media reports are only one among many narrative versions. Also, while media content is widely accessible, it turns private via acquisition and interpretation by the recipient within her cultural context (Hepp et al. 2012: 35). The same factors determine content production and consumption on non-news media online platforms even more intensively. Filter bubbles in social media and the circulation of fake news are recent examples (Pew Internet 2017).

To sum up, off- and online media display complex processes of differentiation often insufficiently addressed in critical reflections on the public sphere (Peters 2007b: 79). Limited attention is paid to media-sociological factors that determine the structure, flows, and content of media-based public discourses. This includes the technological framework, the distribution of speaker roles, production processes, framing and agenda-setting processes, media convergences, pluralisation of content, and the interrelations between different media platforms. Examining who addresses what publics on which platforms for what purposes reveals how public discourses materialise and what their social and political functions are.

Democratic-Integrative Models

Democratic-integrative models postulate emancipatory functions for public discursivity that aim for societal consensus. This includes liberal ideals of universal access: the public’s right to consume information barrier-free and to voice opinions (Peters 2007b: 82). Peters asserts that participation in ‘emphatic public spheres’ (*ibid*: 59) constitutes a social collective, i.e. a public whose interests are at stake. Dean proposes a similar yet more pronounced definition: ‘[...]the public sphere is the site and subject of liberal democratic practice. It is that space within which people deliberate over matters of common concern, matters that are contested and about which it seems necessary to reach consensus’ (2003a: 1). Key attributes are qualitative standards for discourse, e.g. equality, freedom of speech, inclusion in processes of decision-making, and reciprocal flows of arguing, which implies that participants find a common language. Public opinion is the product of rationality and deliberation; it eventually serves as ‘the foundation of effective democracy’ (Coleman 2005: 8). The outcome of public discussions is ideally converted into programs for action by the parliamentary system (Peters 2007a: 36). Public spheres thus have a crucial function in the distribution of power, democratic configuration, and integration of society.

Habermas’ *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere* (1972; 1990) laid the groundwork for democratic-integrative models. His original proposal outlines a democratic public sphere in which political consensus is the result of discourses that adhere to the principles of rationality. Habermas’ historical analysis of the European bourgeois public sphere introduced the subject to sociology and initiated a productive yet controversial academic debate. He asserts that modern public

spheres emerged during the 18th and 19th century in tandem with an emancipated citizenry and that they formed a critical precondition for the formation of modern nation-states. In that period, citizens started to articulate political interests and challenge the traditional hierarchies of feudalism. Public locations (e.g. coffee houses) became important sites for the formation of public opinions that were the result of consensus-seeking debates. Print media later catalysed the integration and broader distribution of these discourses on “public” issues (Habermas 1990: 38; Peters 2007b: 63).

Participants need to agree that there is something to disagree about (*ibid*). The exchange of arguments should be the primary mode of communication and ultimately aim for consensus through reasoning. There is neither a final state nor an end to debates, since they must display virtual openness for unlimited follow-up discussions (Peters 2007b: 94).¹⁵ The rationality of public discourse eventually facilitates self-enlightenment and social stability; public opinion was literally rational and enlightened (Peters 2007b: 62). The audience must remain open, incomplete and to a degree *incognito*; social status, gender, and race, should become (temporarily) irrelevant. Providing equal access to and encouraging participation in political discourse is conditional for the functionality of democratic states (Máiz 2006: 73); they are based on constant discourse, i.e. never-ceasing renegotiations of socio-political, economic, and cultural questions, since ‘(I)liberal democracies have no single source of political legitimacy[...]’ (Requejo 2006: 100). Active engagement in democratic processes eventually shapes the self-perception of individuals, collectives, and nation-states, including their beliefs and values (Norman 2006: 93).

The emancipated, informed, and critical citizen becomes the central unit of political life. Democratic-integrative models are thus grounded in the theory of action (Habermas 1984; 1995a). Participants act communicatively by expressing and contrasting political viewpoints until the better argument eventually prevails. Habermas refined this model in *The Theory of Communicative Action* (1981; 1995a; 1995b). He argues that humans are both creators and products of their social environments and that language is the primary medium for social interaction. Complex speech acts, e.g. a political argument, consist of a variety of elementary speech acts that condense into discourses. To establish different types of action based on language, Habermas draws from Austin (1962) and Searle’s (1979) speech act theory (1995a: 384).¹⁶ Communicative actions consist of speech acts, in which communicators state problems, voice evaluations, and propose solutions, while a shared cultural framework increases the chances for mutual understanding.

Communicative acts include ‘validity claims’ and may involve forms of ‘public commitment’ (Heath 2003: 17). When a politician announces that she will not increase taxes, she is making a promise to potential voters; if she does not keep up to this, she can lose credibility. Different speech acts have different validity claims (Habermas 1995a: 410-427) and contestation over validity claims on an issue leads to the emergence of discourses. Proponents of a validity claim try to convince their audience and opponents by presenting sound arguments, while rational communicative practices can place emphasis on theoretical questions, practical problems, normative orientations, or discuss the intelligibility and design of communicative actions (*ibid*).¹⁷ If participants do not reach consensus, the flows of communication stop and the discourse dissolves. Peters (2007b: 90-91) identifies various ‘non-discursive’ forms of communication, including symbolic violence, insults, manipulation, or deception that can prevent consensus seeking.

Genuine consensus only becomes attainable in ideal speech situations, i.e. when all participants have the same rights and means to express or scrutinise opinions. Speakers need to accept the rule of the

‘non-compulsory force of the better argument and the motive of cooperation in the search for truth’ (Habermas 1991).¹⁸ If A has a better argument for her case, then B must accept this. Otherwise progress remained unachievable. ‘Understanding’ is a critical element in communicative interaction, as the interpretation of speech acts is the basis for agreement (Habermas 1995a: 525).¹⁹ Language is always embedded in social contexts; ideologies and normative perspectives are crucial for decoding and interpreting speech acts: ‘[...]worldviews are constitutive not only for processes of reaching understanding but for the social integration and the socialisation of individuals as well’ (Habermas 1984: 64). Culture, which is the foundation of the shared lifeworld (*ibid*: 82), provides the background for communicative interaction. It is also subject of negotiations, as ‘communication communit[ies] demarcate the one objective world and their intersubjectively shared social world from the subjective worlds of individuals and (other) collectives’ (*ibid*: 70). Debates on EU politics thus may reveal hints for a collective European lifeworld, even if it might not be as pronounced as the immediate national, regional or local one.

The bottom line of Habermas’ argumentation is: unbiased and unregulated communication between individuals leads to applicable, valid solutions for crises and irritations in society. Negotiations through discourse should take place in a deliberation-oriented, public frame for communication. The Habermasian public sphere model had considerable impact as both an inspiration (Peters et al. 2007; Peters 2007c; 2007d; Dahlberg 2007; Webster 2006: 163; Calhoun 1992; Fraser 1992; 1990) and subject of extended criticism (Bohman 2004; Dean 2003b; Calhoun 1992; Fraser 1992; 1990). Reactions were ambiguous: some point out that his original proposal was insufficient to grasp the realities of the ending 20th and early 21st century; simultaneously, they emphasise that the Habermasian theoretical framework formed a fruitful basis for further discussions and provided a differentiated set of analytical categories (Fraser 1990: 58; Calhoun 1992; Heath 2003; Fultner et al. 2011).

Criticism varies in gravity and aims for epistemological and empirical aspects. First, the idea of open access has been repeatedly questioned. Habermas basically ignored structural barriers and modes of exclusion that concern gender, race, and economic status. The utopian character of the bourgeois public sphere was blind for the marginalisation of minorities and that ‘deliberative processes in the public sphere’ tend to foster the advantages of ‘dominant groups’, which leads to social inequality (Fraser 1990: 63-66; 1992).

Others question the democratic nature of public discursivity: Dean describes the public sphere as an illusion and publicity as an oppressive ideology. Both sustained the dominant system of ‘communicative capitalism’ (Dean 2005); the Internet was no exception to this, despite claims of its liberalising potential.²⁰ She introduces the term ‘Habermasochism’, which was the predominant ideological perspective in academia and society that falsely asserts an unbreakable connection between democracy and public discursivity (2003b: 32). Dean claims that the public sphere is neither a genuinely democratic nor an indispensable precondition for the functionality of society. This would not necessarily mean that public information had no value in democratic politics at all. However, ‘the vast networks of news and entertainment that enable contemporary practices of democracy also threaten democratic forms of life’ (*ibid*: 16). Dean mentions the misuse of communication technology for surveillance purposes or the trivialisation and sensationalism of (symbolic) politics as examples for this.

Further criticism focuses the improbabilities of Habermas’ normative standards. This is probably the most fundamental problem with his original draft and democratic-integrative models: it is never quite

clear whether they describe an empirical entity or a ‘regulative idea’ (Gerhards and Neidhardt 1990: 5).²¹ Except for the historical examples of bourgeoisie publics in Europe, Habermas provides little empirical evidence. One could thus argue that it is hardly applicable in empirical research (*ibid*: 18). It is indeed easy to pronounce public spheres as myths or utopias, if sophisticated normative standards such as civility, equality, agreement, and rationality are regarded as conditional factors for the emergence of public discourses. Whoever expects these criteria to be inherent features of public debates must be ultimately disappointed, as the nature of political contestation displays quite contrary features. Competition and conflict seem to dominate the public arena rather than the rational synthesis of agreement.

Peters (2007a) acknowledges the central problem of the inherent infeasibility of idealised models; criticism on democratic-integrative concepts is valid and needs to be considered. Transforming conflict into dispute, i.e. a discursive exchange of arguments, is a complex and difficult process that can often fail (Peters 2007b: 93). Peters simultaneously rejects a total retraction of normative qualities and argues the case for a ‘heuristic function of the normative model of the public sphere’ (*ibid*: 68).²² Habermas himself defined his idealised model of the public sphere as a blueprint or Weberian ideal type for contrasting and assessing empirical reality (Peters 2007a: 46). Peters proposes to define normative notions of the public sphere as a ‘variable element of reality in contemporary societies’ (2007b: 67).²³ Democratic-integrative models need to consider a range of fundamental structural limitations, especially concerning inclusion and accessibility; however, claims that assert all normative assumptions are unrealistic would be futile and unconvincing. There is room for the exchange of rational arguments and consensus-oriented deliberation. Democratic-integrative discursive models then become a useful heuristic for the empirical analysis of public communication –as a scheme for measuring the quality of public debates (Peters 2007b: 101); their categories provide an empirically applicable gauge for assessing the ethical orientation of public discourses.

Finally, one can criticise a lack of analytical depth concerning the media. Democratic-integrative approaches define them as primary institutions for synchronising and distributing political opinions. However, they do not always explain the communication-sociological and -political attributes, characteristics, and idiosyncrasies of media actors, whether these are individual journalists or entire news organisations. Technical aspects of media platforms are of secondary interest. A notable exception is Peters’ work, which is a more empirical advancement of Habermas concept in the field of mass media research (Peters 2007a; 2007b; 2007c; 2007f).

Public discourses are always normative, since they tend to focus on the organisation of society and its manifold ethical, social, political, economic, and cultural challenges. However, they do not always meet democratic ideals of inclusion and fact-based deliberation. Deception, populism, aggression, stereotyping and other forms of conflict-oriented communication permanently undermine the democratic value of public discursivity. The rise of the so-called alt-right in the USA and Europe is just one recent example that highlights the ambiguity of public communication in the political realm, which is only increased with the possibilities of the Web. Not all public communicators strive for deliberation and some favour exclusion of groups over inclusion. But even if public discourses do not meet democratic-inclusive criteria, they provide information in openly accessible or at least observable media-based spheres.

To sum up, it is inadvisable to disregard the theoretical reflections and analytical categories of democratic-integrative approaches, since they allow the articulation of normative criticism and the

development of solutions to potential imbalances and problems, based on specific political visions that derive from democratic theory. Genuinely inclusive public discourses that implement the ideals of civility and rationality may form a minority but political discourses can apply deliberation-oriented, democratic forms of interaction, if not between political antagonists then at least within communities of like-minded individuals (Sunstein 2007).

However, Peters' definition of discourse seems limited: persuasion, insults, deliberate misinterpretations, exaggerations, allegations etc. can become forms of discursive interaction in political discussions if, and that is the critical criterion, they display a communicative relation to their respective opponent and the issue that triggered public communication. They put communicators in a shared context through differentiation, i.e. communicating antagonistic viewpoints, ideologies, and eventually identities through frames. Symbolic violence is a device in non-deliberative discourses that establishes a communicative relation between two or more speakers. Whenever an exchange of communicative acts between participants occurs that is contextualised by a specific topic- or issue-dependent frame, it is possible to identify a discourse. In other words, conflicts are discourses even though participating communicators do not aim to reach agreement but apply instrumental, strategic forms of communicative action. A distinction between deliberation-consensus oriented and non-consensus seeking political discourses provides analytical flexibility, as one can analytically differentiate between varying degrees of coherence, democratic quality, endurance, and intensity of conflict.

Descriptive Models

Descriptive models examine the structure of public discourses rather than their democratising potential (Gerhards and Neidhardt 1990). They describe public spheres as means of observation and orientation in complex, mediatised societies. Propositions inspired by Niklas Luhmann's structural-functionalism systems theory are exemplary for this branch (2006; 1987). Communication is central to this model of society; yet the abstract, non-normative perspective of systems theory comes to very different verdicts on its function and the usefulness of subject-centrism.

Luhmann perceives society as a conglomerate of functionally differentiated systems that are based on communication (1987: 24), such as economy or politics. These are autopoietically closed, i.e. self-observing, self-referential, self-sustaining and delimited, yet structurally coupled to each other. Systems constitute their own elements and reproduce/self-organise their boundaries and internal structure (ibid: 25). All elements and operations within a system are exclusively related to this system; it remains separate from all other systems surrounding it, which form its environment. Only through self-reference and differentiation do systems become distinguishable.

Systems theory differentiates between biological, psychic, and social systems (ibid: 15). Psychic systems, i.e. persons (ibid: 155), and social systems have the capability to communicate and to execute operations through the selection of information. Social systems contain systems of interaction, organisational systems (e.g. corporations, political parties, universities, EU institutions), and functional systems. The latter emerge around specific problems and areas of operation when there is (increasing)

need for them. Examples for functional systems are economy, politics, law, science, art, and education (Luhmann 2002a; 2002b; 2002c).

Functional systems comprise of ‘performance systems’ (Terfrüchte 2011: 34), e.g. academia within education, journalism in the media, or banks within economy. All systems and sub-systems are autonomous yet structurally coupled to each other (Luhmann 1987: 200).²⁴ In fact, functional differentiation causes complex relations of interdependency: Systems are not hermetically sealed and open to positive or negative irritations from their environment, while they remain independent (Kohring 2002: 99; Kluba 2002: 30). Outputs from the system of law “irritate” the systems of economy, family, and education, or a crisis in the economic system has an impact on the political one.

Communication is the basis of all systems: ‘[a] social system materialises whenever an autopoietic context of communication emerges that demarcates itself from its environment by limiting its applicable communication. Social systems consist not of human individuals, neither of their actions, but of communication’ (Luhmann 1986: 269).²⁵ Luhmann applies a rather abstract notion of communication that circumscribes the ‘differentiation of selections of messages, information, and understanding. Transmission is not possible since communication is not something material but an operation [...]’ (Kluba 2002: 34). Communication continues when the selection of information serves as a basis for further choices, i.e. when the flows of information exchange keep circulating.

The probability for successful communication is low, as each situation involves at least two contingent positions, i.e. two communicators. Without orientation, there is no guarantee that communication triggers follow-up communication. Luhmann describes this problem as ‘double contingency’ (ibid: 148). However, communicators can observe each other and try to influence these observations via communication based on assumptions of how their counterpart may react. The ‘feedback’ enables them to change their actions (ibid: 156) and to reduce the uncertainty of double contingency.

Chains of successful communication that overcome double contingency enable socialisation in specific contexts and eventually social systems emerge (ibid:157). The inherent selectivity of contingency always bears risks, since selecting information and ignoring other can cause unexpected effects and developments. Yet, communication is successful when the information it contains triggers further communication (ibid).²⁶ Media increase the chances for this; for instance, spoken and written language is a primary medium for understanding and overcoming distances. Luhmann further specifies notions of ‘symbolically generalised media of communication’ that reduce complexity within functional systems (ibid: 135-141).²⁷ The most important ones are money, power, art, truth, and justice. They raise the probability of communication by providing the enabling conditions for processes of selection. In science, “truth” is the most important medium. A scientifically falsifiable claim on truth allows another academic to base her arguments on these insights and to stimulate further progress in research (i.e. successful communication).

Each functional system operates by following a specific binary code (*Leitunterscheidung*) based on the respective medium. In economy, the code is have/have not and the symbolic medium is money, in science it is true/false and the medium is truth, in politics have power/no power and the medium is power. To assign communication correctly to one side or the other, systems apply ‘programmes’ (Terfrüchte 2011: 18). In the law system, these are codified laws and litigations (ibid), in science, theories and

empirical research; in politics, processes for power distribution, such as elections; and in journalism, editorial guidelines.

Social systems substitute acting individuals as the fundament of society (Habermas 1995a: 530–531). As psychic systems, they are always part of the environment but never fully integrated in a social system (Terfrüchte 2011: 34). This does not mean that actors are irrelevant in systems-theory, since all social systems are based on human communication (Kluba 2002: 33). ‘Interpenetration’ ensures this (Kluba: 2002: 32): it occurs when two systems are distinguishable yet co-dependent. Psychic systems, i.e. actors, are linked to social systems via interpenetration, since no social system could exist without their operations, that means communication. This is a two-way street as psychic systems also depend on social systems and other psychic systems –but they always stay separated (*ibid*): ‘Everyone can participate in all kinds of communication, can e.g. act economically or plead for his/her rights in court, but is never, not even temporarily, completely part of the respective system [...]’.

Still, Luhmann diverges from the humanistic tradition, as he does not perceive the individual as the fundamental element of society. Focus shifts from acting individuals and norms for interaction to the internal organisation and external connections of systems of communication; it is an analytical-descriptive and not an emancipatory approach.

The same applies to public sphere models inspired by systems-theory: it is either described as the reflexive, communicative environment of functional systems or as an integrative-reflexive yet demarcated, independent functional system that collects the output of other systems and transforms this information into agendas of public interest (Kohring 2006). In both propositions the public sphere is a means of observation that covers the sum of relevant public communication in society.

Though Luhmann ascribes central political functions to the public sphere and public opinion, his initial drafts ignored both (Gerhards and Neidhardt 1990: 5). He later outlined the public sphere as ‘a general societal medium’ that allowed society to observe and describe itself: it enables the observation of communication *in* and relations between different functional systems (Luhmann 2009: 127).²⁸ It forms the open, collective environment of other functional systems, like a common backdrop that pools topics of societal relevance (*ibid*: 197). However, the public sphere was not simply a portrayal of the individual realities of each functional system; it rather provided constructions of reality based on second-order observations.

Second-order observation basically means that an observer observes observers (Luhmann 1992: 80, cited in Kluba 2002: 104). A second-order observation is comparable to a mirror: the mirror allows the observation of oneself, but also to observe the observations of others; this does not mean that one gains access to an immediate reality (*ibid*). The public sphere provided society with such a medium of reflection; it is not exclusively related to the political system, since it reacts to the outputs of information across society.

However, Luhmann asserts that it shared a special relationship with politics, as it influences the outcome of agenda-setting processes; the public sphere could not determine political decisions on its own but was frequently ‘copied into’ the system of politics for strategic aims (Luhmann 2009: 128).²⁹ Furthermore, he extracts any normative value from public opinion. It would not consist of the sum of individual attitudes but was a latent phenomenon, as it is unlikely that within complex mass societies large parts of the citizenry articulate identical positions at the same time (*ibid*). Instead, it reflects what

the system of politics communicates. Public opinion becomes a surface of reflection for politicians, which would be ‘moving in front of the mirror for the mirror’ (Luhmann 2009: 128).

The mass media played a central role in maintaining the public sphere and forming public opinion. Establishing public discourses is not as important as enabling the observation of society. With the public sphere and mass media, hypercomplex society created systems to address the need for synchronisation, i.e. to maintain societal cohesion (Görke 2002: 88). Synchronisation conducts a radical ‘temporalisation’ to circumvent the problems of simultaneity of multiple events and developments (*ibid*: 74): the public sphere ensured that a selection of only the most urgent ones becomes observable, which explains the short due-date of public information. Since no individual could ever have immediate access to all sections in society, the mass media are needed to connect them to their societal environment. They enable the simultaneity of the non-simultaneous and establish a link between past, present, and future (Grusin 2010: 55–58).

Societal interdependency forces systems to develop expectations towards their environment, which provide orientation for their actions or ‘communications’ (Kohring 2002: 100). To achieve this, they need to constantly observe their environment. Subsequently, journalism evolved as the most important performance system of the mass media: it collects, processes, and disseminates information on developments within society. Journalism allows other functional systems to observe themselves and, based on this information, to adapt to new requirements posed by their environment. By reducing the complexity of information, they determine the recipients’ access to the collective cultural, social and political environment. Thus, observations enabled through news media are always stirred observations.

Re-interpretations of Luhmann’s take describe the public sphere as an independent, autopoietically closed functional system with its own binary code for the observation of society: For example, Kohring (2006) suggests the systems-value of ‘multiple-systems-relevance’ with journalism as the primary performance system for maintaining the public sphere (*ibid*: 169).³⁰ The binary difference between ‘multiple-systems-relevance/non-multiple-systems-relevance’ determined the public relevance and newsworthiness of an issue (*ibid*: 173): Public discourses materialise when unexpected and potentially momentous irritations happen within and between functional systems that may have an impact on larger parts of society; hence, they are of ‘multiple-systems-relevance’ (wars, disasters, economic crises, *ibid*: 168). This explains their attractiveness for news media communication (*ibid*.). By describing the public sphere as an independent functional system, operating by a clearly defined code, it becomes easier to explain processes of public agenda setting and the relations of interdependency between systems. The mode of communication of the public sphere is more tangible than in Luhmann’s cursorily proposal (*ibid*).

This enables the analysis of the internal structures and constituting mechanisms of public spheres, i.e. what communicators partake in a discourse and how their angles are determined by the structural differentiation of the systems they are coupled to. Based on this, Kohring (*ibid*: 177) explains that media organisations in the performance system journalism follow internal processes and work orders (e.g. news desks, rules for journalistic conduct, editorial roles etc.).

Systems-theory perspectives assume that though mediated communication enabled the observation of society, social integration must be regarded as a rather technical process and should not be confused with the liberalisation and pluralisation of public discursivity (*ibid*: 177). Public communication provided orientation for society regarding its constantly changing relations of dependence and

interdependence (Kohring 2002: 99). Nevertheless, the element of trust is critical for the success of public communication, especially in journalism (Kohring 2002): trust in public communication refers to trust through public communication, i.e. when it fulfils its purpose of providing orientation, and trust/mistrust in public communicators: ‘society delegates the problem of forming and controlling trust in its individual areas of operation or systems into a specific system, the system of the public sphere’ (Kohring 2002: 102).³¹ This is directly related to trusting journalistic selectivity, which covers four dimensions (*ibid*: 106–107): agenda setting, framing, the validity of presented facts and explicit evaluations. These factors are subject of contestation, not only in the context of journalism, but especially regarding alternative sources of political information on the Internet.

To sum up, systems-theoretical models emphasise that public communication reflects what issues concern society. The metaphor of a mirror appears suitable for an empirical description of public discourses, as it contextualises and examines all forms of public communication; it shifts the analytical focus to the ‘mediality’ of discourses (Grusin 2010). They highlight manifold interdependencies and flows of communication that shape society and the internal differentiations within public spheres, especially concerning roles and platforms. Since systems are not bound to geographical locations it is easier to analyse transnational phenomena, too. However, systems-theoretical approaches tend to ignore the micro-level of public discourses, the existing potentials for democratic-integrative exchanges and the influence of these on political developments. Critics point to the limited use for analysing the normative dimension (Peters 2007b: 98), as describing is often not enough for finding solutions to societal challenges. Coupling public spheres mainly to the system of mass media and/or journalism is problematic too; their monopoly on publicness is constantly contested on the Web. Online media need to be adequately accommodated within a systems-theoretical model and it seems unfeasible to reduce the immense complexity of the Web to a single functional system with one binary code, as the motivations that trigger online communication are as diverse as society itself. Online platforms are rather associated with their respective functional systems, e.g. Amazon is part of the economic system, the BBC websites are part of the mass media system, while the EU crisis web sphere is part of a general transnational political public sphere that feeds from multiple-systems relevance in the intersection of different political, economic, and media systems.

Luhmann asserted that the Internet was no mass medium, nor would it substitute the mass media but that both will continue to coexist (Laurin 2008). Internet usage is highly personalised; however, mix-forms of private and public communication are rather a rule than an exception; Luhmann could not foresee many of the developments that shaped the Web’s constantly changing structure. Few publications approach the Internet from a decidedly systems-theoretical perspective; an early, elaborative draft is Kluba’s comparison of mass media with the Internet (2002), who concludes the Internet was not operationally closed, nor binary codified, and open for operations in all systems.

The Implications for Empirical Research

The integrative approach proposed here is relatively simple: descriptive and democratic-integrative analytical lenses need to be applied at different stages of the research process. Neither a purely normative

nor exclusively descriptive approach covers the multifaceted reality of public communication; a pragmatic integration of theoretical insights determined by specific research interests seems the adequate methodological choice.

First, to reveal how and when public discursivity materialises within a specific technological and social framework asks for a structural analysis as proposed in descriptive models. Identifying and mapping the set of institutions and stakeholders involved, as well as the issues raised, is the first step, along with a critical discussion of the technological means applied for public communication and processes of content production (and distribution). From a systems-theory perspective, the transnational public sphere could be described as a still emerging functional system in a still fragile transnational-European society that reacts to developments across several national social systems; in other words, it is sensitive to ‘multiple-systems relevance’ (Kohring 2007). However, it is problematic to envision public spheres as singular and static; events and developments of societal relevance tend to trigger a multitude of discussions, involving different publics that discuss different aspects and sub-sections within a context. *The* transnational public sphere is then a metaphor or umbrella-term for dynamic discursive networks that are stimulated by the occurrence of specific issues. This does not mean that these networks are only reactive; they can trigger and/or influence the events, developments, and issues on their agendas. Furthermore, it is difficult to define a single transnational public sphere as a fully-fledged functional system for the self-observation of European society (yet); the structural elements for it exist but the manifestation is relatively weak and coherence not constant but rather episodic. EU politics triggered the formation of on-going transnational public discourses but this has not yet translated into an anchoring of a permanent transnational public sphere with its own media institutions –and it may never will. It seems as if the transnational public sphere is a dormant system that only activates if a certain threshold of multiple-systems relevance has been reached and then feeds from a variety of national and transnational sources of communication.

Second, the quality of public discourses needs to be measured, for which the democratic-integrative school of thought provides useful tools. Public discourses are inherently normative, since public communicators usually indicate what they perceive as urgent matters for society and thus, implicitly or explicitly, who they deem as part of society. Understanding in what modes of communication public speakers engage with each other, reveals how they claim validity for their statements in front of “the public” and how these claims are perceived and processed; this inevitable raises questions about democracy, deliberation, and inclusion. Democratic-integrative models can then help to evaluate the meaning of communication and to examine hierarchies and power relations.

Gerhards and Neidhardt offer an integrative model that draws from both research traditions (1990). They describe the public sphere as an independent system that emerged in its modern form because of processes of functional differentiation (*ibid*: 6). It established a connection between citizens and the political system by ‘[...] receiving (input) and processing certain issues (throughput) and opinions as well as by mediating public opinions (output) that emerge from this process [...]’ (*ibid*: 7).³² Public discourse enables a transition of social and political power by providing both a stage and source for social and political capital; this motivates communicators to constantly compete for public attention and support (*ibid*). Convincing the electorate and gaining approval is a crucial moment in achieving societal legitimisation for political actions (*ibid*: 3-4). As means for allocating resources, public spheres became discursively ‘contested arena[s]’ (*ibid*: 11). The public realm –understood as a network of condensations

of public communication on a potentially unlimited set of societal issues of varying relevance— is the place where the attribution of social and political legitimacy takes place; it is the primary source of power, which in turn motivates political groups to make use of political opportunity structures and to apply framing strategies (Karatzogianni 2006); strategically framing issues and debates is the primary mode for securing influence in public discourse, with the goal to impart worldviews and raise awareness for specific problems (Castells 2009: 155–193; Grusin 2010).

Contestation is intrinsic to public communication, e.g. in form of political campaigning, advertising, and public relations. This applies for both political and economic actors. Private and publicly funded institutions attempt to measure processes of opinion-formation to make statistically grounded predictions on moods and trends in society (*ibid*). Theorising and measuring public opinions are the origin of public sphere research, due to the dualistic role they have in modern, democratic societies; they are both influencing factors and potential results of public communication with considerable impacts on political processes.³³ Simultaneously, public discursivity enables the observation of political communicators (Gerhards and Neidhardt 1990: 7) and creates shared social realities. These observations vary between each contributing communicators' angles and are subjectively distorted, but in sum accumulate to our dynamic societal environment.

Conflicts, understood as the collision of opposed frames over irritations in society, provide individuals and groups with a collectively shared context, as two or more parties challenge each other on a specific set of issues. Though participants must pick a side, i.e. form a distinguishable identity, they are forced to establish communicative relations with their opponents, and socialise each other within a common discursive framework emerging from societal tensions. Differentiation not only creates “others”. It often localises them in a shared context. Political debates crosscutting the national and transnational levels on the EU crisis’ affects provide strong empirical evidence for the conflict-hypothesis, especially in Greece or Spain.

Since public spheres are mainly media-based, mass media and online media have a quadruple function of providing discourse arenas, enabling their observation, partaking in conflicts/debates themselves, and eventually supplying the audience with information for political orientation. Off- and online media are complementary and not isolated from each other. Journalistic outlets are still central for generating publicness and providing discursive arenas but online platforms that are not part of mass media institutions play an increasingly relevant role. A diverse set of public communicators, professionals and amateurs, use online technology to generate publicness, i.e. to disperse interpretations and evaluations of political events and developments. In this regard, journalism is not purely objective, as it shapes the image of political actors by scrutinising their legitimacy (Gerhards et al. 2009: 529) and contributes to the reproduction of authority relations (*ibid*: 586). Political journalism does not only observe; it actively contributes to negotiations and outcomes in political conflicts via the attribution of responsibility to individual actors, organisations, and institutions while sustaining broader societal discourses.

The structures of the Web differ considerably from the features of analogous mass media. For instance, previous models assert that mass media communication must address a general, mostly unspecified audience. It is quite debatable what an unspecified audience is and whether it ever existed, particularly in the field of political communication. Filters, such as personal interests, have always limited

and separated groups of recipients. At the same time, web communication is not necessarily focused on national audience but may attract a transnational group of recipients.

Transnational online public spheres are not a mere expansion *of* or substitutes *to* national ones. It is rather argued that transnational web spheres emerge along the fault lines of flows of communication and irritations that transcend national contexts. A model of transnational web spheres needs to disengage from idealised, nationally grounded visions of public discourse. Depending on the specific context, they can display an immanent spontaneity and almost unpredictable communicative dynamics. There is an unlimited amount of distinguishable yet related digital spaces for communicative interaction that emerged through processes of differentiation. Individuals and collectives alike can make themselves publicly visible, encounter each other and potentially discuss all kinds of issues. This does not exclude conflict-oriented forms of communicative interaction; to the contrary, contestation may be the primary mode of political discourse on the Web, especially against the background of severe social and economic crises.

To sum up, public spheres remain central points of reference for public communicators from both the political system and the private sector (Peters 2007: 50). The same applies for groups from civil society or local and transnational protest movements that attempt to gain public approval, support, and finally legitimisation. Each stakeholder in the public realm tries to achieve these goals via framing relevant issues in a manner favourable to their goals; producing publicity, communicating successfully in the public sphere, and winning public support are a combined central task in implementing social and political programmes (*ibid*).

Publicity, public sphere, and public opinion remain core elements in the ‘semantics’ (Peters 2007b: 55) of modern Western societies and their political discourses, despite partly severe criticism on the authenticity, value, and relevance of these concepts for genuinely democratic progress (Dean 2003b; 2005). Empirical manifestations are omnipresent in mediatised societies, as seen in elections, debates on same-sex marriage, ethical discussions on cloning, or arguments on austerity measures in financial crises. Whether the empirical situation meets democratic-integrative criteria is a set of different questions but public discourses are always normative.

Conflicts, fights, and competitions are types of discourse that are often neglected as an unwanted state in reflections on deliberative democracy, though they are ingrained in political communication, since the public realm is a contested source for crucial social and political resources; they can further indicate what relations competing communicators establish with each other and where to locate common stakes in interwoven systems and lifeworlds, especially in a transnational dimension. Thus, the case is argued for a shift of analytical balance to understanding and describing transnational public debates, at least in an initial stage of analysis. However, it is inadvisable to disregard individual communicative actions on the micro-level, as they shape the pluralistic, multilateral Web. The analytical categories of democratic-integrative models provide a useful blueprint for assessing the quality of public communication.

It is proposed to differentiate between three general structural dimensions of public spheres to analyse their communicative dynamics; these are the communicator-, the audience-, and the platform dimensions. The differentiation between levels of public communication, types of communicators, and categories of discursive actions within a complementary theoretical framework opens the way for an integrative approach on web spheres as public discourses. These are based on Internet technology, which diversifies public communication both quantitatively and qualitatively. Models highlighting the

competitive nature of political debates further support the assumption that frame- and networking analysis are suitable approaches to contextualise and assess public communication.

The Web as a Tool and Space for Political Communication

A critical overview of politics on the Internet and the impact of the Web on public discourses; how online media enable pluralisation of discourses but also promote fragmentation of the same.

Analysing Political Communication on the Web

Since public discourses are unthinkable without media technology, the rise of the Internet drastically transformed how public communicators and audiences interact in spheres of communication. The previous review of traditional public sphere models was necessary to understand how exactly the Internet and Web changed the structure and dynamics of public spheres. On one hand, it pluralises the simultaneity of public discourses and expands greatly the observation capacities of societies; more things are happening in parallel that can be observed through online communication and various alternative platform for public communication are available that go beyond the rigid filters of mass media. This also means that what an individual learns about its social environment depends even more on demographic aspects, cultural contexts, choices in online media consumption but also the workings of algorithms behind the user interface of search engines and social media networking sites. On the other, there are now virtually infinite spaces for encounters and discussion where individuals socialise each other through discourse. Identities are built and negotiated, live worlds are constructed, societal problems are identified and discussed etc. etc. This section provides an overview of the most important transformations to public discourses triggered by Internet technology.

There are two inextricably linked yet distinguishable research areas for political discourses and the Internet. The first one focuses the worldwide distribution of the Internet's infrastructure and forms of regulation. This includes conflicts between national interests and transnationalising/globalising tendencies in politics, culture, economy, and society, caused by the dissemination of Internet technology. Questions of control and access, subsumable under the label of Internet 'policy' (Schweitzer 2010: 44), are central to these discourses. Stakeholders are governments, international organisations such as ICANN or ITU, globally acting NGOs and dissident groups (Karatzogianni 2006; Pallin 2015). The political-legal situation in local and regional contexts determines the degree of access and while the intensities and situations for Internet regulation vary significantly, in both authoritarian and liberal-democratic societies private and state actors apply strategies to sustain control and enforce forms of censorship (Detenber and Rosenthal 2017; Chu 2017). Furthermore, many popular online platforms belong to a few large corporations that dominate many users' windows to the Web (e.g. Google or Facebook). Analysing the influence and affectivity of the Internet on political systems and/or Internet 'polity' (Schweitzer 2010: 44) thus forms an important sub-area. Another central issue is the digital divide, i.e. the socio-economic inequalities regarding access to the material means needed to participate in online activities that split societies in digital haves and have-nots. Differences are often determined by socio-economic factors; mainly education and income, while digital liberalisation, inclusion, and representation remain problematic issues. For example, online audiences of political debates seem to form exclusive networks of well-educated, male individuals, which promotes 'discourse elitism' (Benkler 2006: 204); even fewer

can code and actively shape the online environment. Systemic social inequalities (Fraser 1990: 65) are prevalent, despite tendencies towards a levelling of class, race, and gender imbalances. In sum, the Internet is regarded as a ‘technical medium of distribution’ or ‘medium of first order’ (Welker et al. 2010: 10, citing Joerges and Braun 1994) in this first broader field of research.³⁴

The second area focuses communicative activities using Web technology. The Web is a dynamic network of digital spheres based on software devices that facilitate communication between participants (social networking media, blogs, websites, forums etc.). It becomes a ‘medium of second order’ (*ibid.*) and the research foci lie on specific communicative actions and not on the technological or legal framework; digitalised forms of discursivity are the central research subjects. Analyses in this field are mainly concerned with the instrumentalisation of online media by political communicators and users. This puts emphasis on questions of social practice, representation, attitudes, and networking, i.e. Internet ‘politics’ (Schweitzer 2010: 44). Depending on the context this can include mobilisation strategies, movement formation, and -organisation (Karatzogianni 2006: 53; Vromen 2017; Choi and Cho 2017), as well as the relations between online and offline media (Lynch et al. 2013: 5; Allcott and Gentzkow 2017). Innumerable online discussions form and vaporise with unprecedented speed, accumulating to a continuous flow of digital communication. Millions of participants contribute to this torrent of information on a variety of platforms and their digital discourses cover any imaginable topic from the artistic, the economic, the political, to the trivial (Meikle and Young 2012: 59). Most of these debates are virtually open to an unlimited, largely invisible public (Rettberg 2013: 82). Aside from the vast amounts of user-created content, many professionalised information services from the private and public sectors, ranging from news media websites to corporate blogs, shape the direction and content of online discourses. For example, an article on the Prime Minister’s call for a EU referendum on Guardian Online causes site-visitors to read, comment on and share the story in their personal networks (GU_2013/01/24o), which can trigger activities in a second or third digital space. The same can apply to an online press release from a well-known company or governmental institution, a tweet by a famous singer, or a politician’s post in a social network. A controversial statement published via Twitter or a video clip on YouTube can initiate debates across various platforms and, depending on its brisance, have a tangible impact on political life (i.e. personal careers and institutional procedures, NY Times 2016; WSJ 2017).

Online content –especially videos and images– is integrated and remediated in print and broadcasting coverage. The mediation of the Syrian civil war highlighted the mutual affectivity between offline and online media, as information and visual content in many news reports was directly taken from social networking sites such as Facebook or YouTube (Lynch et al. 2013: 5-6). Through online content, political communicators frame issues and social groups from specific viewpoints. The constellation of stakeholders and their conflicts become observable through an analytical view on their online media usage. Political conflicts and crises illustrate the Internet’s function as both a tool and space for different types of political communication (e.g. Coleman & Wright 2008; Karatzogianni 2006; Castells 2009), including framing and networking as integral processes in political debates in digital public spheres. Questions of Internet policy and polity need to be considered but the focus shifts to the Web’s function as a second-order medium or, to put it differently, on its role as a digital arena for political communication.

Discussing the impact of online media on political public spheres seems only consequential (Papacharissi 2002; 2010), since the Web is a convergent meta-medium for multiple modes of

communication (Meikle and Young 2012: 2-7; Jenkins 2006). Media-based communication is the very fabric of modern public discourses. The number of empirical studies on digital public spheres grew constantly in recent years. Many research projects tend to focus on a micro-level of online communication, i.e. interactions on individual message boards, in forums, or specific social networking sites (Brundidge 2010; Black et al. 2013; Dahlberg 2007; 2005; 2001; Scaramuzzino and Scaramuzzino 2017). They are concerned with the implementation of democratic-integrative parameters in online discourses and try to measure degrees of inclusion as well as participation, i.e. to assess empirical reality against normative blueprints. More recent studies explore the role of social networking sites on news consumption and the formation of political opinions (Boczkowski, Mitchelstein and Matassi 2017; Jensen 2016). Large-scale, big data-driven analyses are currently trending in the social sciences as well (Rogers 2015; Kitchin 2013): data scraping and tools that access data structures through a social media networking site's application programming interface (API) enable researchers to analyse social phenomena with methods that are native to the Web (*ibid*). Examples are distant-readings of political debates, trend analyses and large-scale sentiment analyses (DMI 2017).

From an early stage on, ideal types derived from democratic theory influenced research on the effects that Internet technology could have on politics and public life. This inevitably triggered a polarising debate and most overly optimistic forecasts that envisioned a digital liberalisation and democratisation of society have been contested, critically revised, or empirically refuted (e.g. Dahlberg 2007: 47; 2005; 2011; Morozov 2011; Hindman 2009; Sunstein 2007). However, no side can provide definitive answers to the political implications of digital media and each empirical case needs individual assessment. The historical debate between enthusiasts and sceptics has been repeatedly reproduced and another review at this point seems redundant (see Miller 2011; Karatzogianni 2006). It shall suffice to say that perspectives on the Web and digital democracy have “sobered up” in the past decade; views on the Internet and its relevance for society and politics have become more differentiated and critical. It neither is an inherently “good” nor “bad” technology and the implementation of its political potentials depends on the respective communicators and the contexts in which they act. ‘Reductive’ perspectives should be avoided (Fenton 2012a: 124) and online communication needs to be analysed against its specific cultural, political, and social backgrounds. The implications of a media-centred view must also be critically reflected (*ibid*: 125); even though the Internet is omnipresent and changed daily routines in the media behaviour of millions, patterns of social life that existed prior to its rise do not simply forfeit their significance and need to be properly considered as constitutive factors in online contexts.

To sum up, the questions about the Internet's relevance in political discourses and processes of public opinion formation are far from being fully answered. However, it is hardly deniable that online media play an increasingly important role for contemporary political culture(s), with often dichotomous or contradicting qualities. The variable applications of online media in various events of contemporary history and politics illustrate the Web's potential as a fast and flexible tool for communicating political issues and as a digital space for publicly accessible discourses. Examples include election campaigns, political grassroots activities, and revolutions (Castells 2012; Karatzogianni 2006: 3). This inherent versatility results from the Internet's technological properties, which inevitably affected modes of political communication and political action.

The Web's Impact on Political Communication

Web technology permanently transformed the distributive flows of political information, which initiated an end to the mass media's quasi-monopoly on generating political publicity. Talking to the public never was easier. The Internet offers efficient alternatives to print-/broadcasting channels and multiplies the spectrum of sources of information. Both individuals and political organisations exploit this situation (Rettberg 2013: 90; Karatzogianni 2006: 4; Margetts et al. 2015), as online media hold considerable strategic potentials in at least two dimensions: first, they facilitate the management of networks and political actions. Second, online platforms serve as tools for external communication, mainly framing as a transmitter for political programmes. Ideologies need to circulate outside of political groups, otherwise they cannot influence unaffiliated individuals and the Web provides fast lanes to public audiences of varying sizes (Karatzogianni 2006: 5). Online media platforms turn into digital public spheres of potentially global or transnational scope, where individuals learn about ideas, socialise, debate, and coordinate actions. They enable the forging of networks and subsequent formation of collective identities; they provide public access to political organisations and their conflicts and struggles (Mercea 2011: 8).

Miller (2011: 12-29) identifies a range of technological properties and cultural forms that contribute to the Web's versatility: the technological side includes digitalisation, networking, interactivity, hypertextuality, automatisation, and the formation of enormous databases. Online media allow instant publication and sharing of information, through various cross-formats (audio, video, images, typed text), mostly free of temporal or spatial limitations. In a similar vein, boyd (2001: 126, cited in Rettberg 2013: 82) points to other fundamental differences between digital and analogous media: persistence, searchability, and replicability. Whatever is being communicated on the Web remains there in one form or the other due to its replicability and is retrievable via modern search engines. Furthermore, online communication is relatively cheap and enables large-scale communication campaigns on low-costs. This promotes the liberalisation of public communication and transforms the balance of power on the Web, where small protest groups and governments can become almost equal opponents in limited contexts (Strange 2011: 1242; Mercea 2011: 2; Karatzogianni 2006).

On the cultural side, the communicative logics of the Internet are determined by the re-contextualisation of communication, variability of online media usage and consumption, the multidirectional structure of discursive networks, and the processuality of online interactions (Miller 2011: 21-30). Flows of communication are less hierarchical and considerably more levelled; not unidirectional but distributed network structures mould the Web's shape (Benkler 2006: 212). It has an inherently rhizomatic fabric, i.e. it is a network of countless equal notes, growing and connecting without a specific centre or hierarchy (Karatzogianni 2006: 48). The enforcement of regulations becomes difficult to achieve for governments. That does not mean that "top-down" communication flows simply disappear; to the contrary, they remain extremely relevant. However, the Internet provides the framework for alternative, multilateral forms of communicative interaction. Users can seek and consume information and/or observe public debates beyond nationally-oriented agendas of traditional media hegemonies and may take an active role as communicators.

For example, the relative openness of digital communication continues to influence the way modern journalism operates (Papacharissi 2009; 2007; Tremayne 2009; de Kayser and Sehl 2007) and especially social networking sites such as the microblogging platform Twitter continue to transform

processes of public communication (Smyrnaios and Riedler 2013; Bousquet et al. 2014). Online media provide instantly accessible platforms for eyewitness accounts, alternative stories and opinions, or watchdog reports on everyday news media business (Rettberg 2013: 90-114). Geographical and social positions can lose their relevance, since online media provide diverse options for the articulation of viewpoints and affiliations, i.e. identities. The communicative environment of the Internet ‘offers further dimensions to personal identity in an already complex world’ (Karatzogianni 2006: 38). Users can express their opinions by creating their own content and digital spaces in a ‘participatory media culture’ (Miller 2011: 83). However, governments, political parties, NGOs, social movements, mass media brands, and industries maintain online representations and apply Internet agendas, i.e. institutions and professional organisations that fulfil crucial functions in complex social systems and political decision-making processes “are online” to provide their views on social and political issues. Their modes of content production do not necessarily reflect greater diversity, as agenda-setting processes influenced by specific discursive cultures still determine the set of covered topics; Smyrnaios et al. argue for instance, that content pluralism on journalistic websites has clear limits and agendas can look very similar to offline media outlets (2010: 14). Their study on French news sites shows how a small percentage of topics dominate journalistic content production and how more popular but less pluralistic platforms receive more web traffic than less popular but more diverse ones (*ibid*: 15-16). Based on these observations the authors hypothesise that ‘consumed diversity of content [might be] actually lower than diversity offered’ (*ibid*). This illustrates that off- and online media discourses are not somehow separated but rather mutually influential. More fundamentally, it implies that each type of online platform implements technological potentials differently and a conglomerate of economic, political, and cultural factors shape the materialisation of mediated public debates. Claims that the Internet catalyses pluralisation and liberalisation should not be dismissed from the outset but neither taken at face value; it rather needs more empirical research to test previous theories and evaluate the impact of the Web on public discursivity (*ibid*: 3-4).

The Internet’s potential for public communication serves different types of communicators for different objectives. Variability in web communication then applies in at least two general dimensions: first, agenda setting processes and content production; second, patterns of communicative flows and discursive modalities, including options for participation. Governmental information pages and news media websites can resemble rather hierarchical, unidirectional communication patterns while other political organisations might seek to initiate two-way dialogues with their target audience; one individual blogger might encourage and partake in conversations and follow-up discussions, while another may not go beyond publishing her original posts. The functionality of the communication software in use is another factor: a Twitter-feed enables to quickly “spread the word”, whereas a blog post provides the space for lengthy commentary. This does not mean that both remain separated from each other; to the contrary, the various online media spaces are closely interconnected (Smyrnaios and Riedler 2013). Common discursive contexts integrate platforms and communicators tend to use combinations of several devices, i.e. maintain a blog, microblog, website, and social media account(s) simultaneously. Whether they use online media as a means for unilateral communication or as platforms for reciprocal flows of communication largely depends on their agendas and communication strategies. The Web serves both purposes equally well, since it merges functions and features of interactive and unidirectional media; versatility and diversity are characteristic of online communication. Online platforms can cover several

communicative dimensions at once, since they mostly combine an encounter-level in form of a comment function, establish connections with related platforms through networking, and are usually open to a virtually unlimited audience.

Other approaches place emphasis on the network component of digital publics (Benkler 2006: 215) and describe online discourses as context-based networks that display different levels of interactivity, which can range from simple referencing via linking to direct dialogues. Discursive connectivity becomes a central resource in Web-based environments, manifested in incoming and outgoing hyperlinks. Popular search engines set the rules for this dynamic field of online economics. The underlying search algorithms of Google, Bing etc. mainly base their calculations of page rankings on the number of incoming links to an online platform. The level of connectivity determines its visibility and scope on the Web. Consequently, hyperlinks turn into a valuable digital resource (Rettberg 2013: 69; 75). The position and target of hyperlinks also indicates the discursive contextualisation of an online platform and its location within a network. Due to the impact on public discursivity, this confronts leading online companies with ethical questions on their algorithm-driven big data operations.

To sum up, it is hardly deniable that the public realm is inherently pluralised and that the Web hosts a potentially unlimited diversity of opinions that cannot be accommodated within confined agendas of conventional mass media outlets. Online media provide the means for diverse types of communicative actions that display contradicting qualities, while structurally very different communicators can share a thematic context. In the case of the EU and its crisis, a variety of professional and non-professional individuals, groups, organisations, and institutions commented on developments and their affectivities on the transnational and national dimensions. Each one applied different combinations of online media to disperse specific frames of related issues, yet all their communicative activities were contextualised by the same thematic focus. An online discourse's fabric consists of a variety of individual online media platforms, ranging from top-down news websites to participation-oriented blogs. The Web integrates different forms of public communication that are based on the same technological infrastructure, as convergence and diversification go hand in hand. The parallel existence of contradicting types of public communication hence shapes the structure of online discourses.

On the Political Relevance of Online Media and the Nature of Cyberconflict

Critics of political communication in online media repeatedly addressed several limitations and downsides. These cover three broad areas: fundamental dismissal of political relevance of online transactions (Dean 2005; Lovink 2011; 2008); criticism on the quality and integration of political online content (Bohman 2004); criticism that bemoans tendencies towards fragmentation and radicalisation on the Web (Lawrence et al. 2010; Sunstein 2007). The latter two areas are of concern to the present argumentation, since it focuses on the Internet as a second-order medium and does not question its political relevance. Postings on personal blogs, on government websites, or news media pages are no less political than their offline counterparts (i.e. private conversations, press releases, newspaper articles etc.); they carry and distribute meaning and expand the spectrum of sources of political information. The actual impact on societal discourses, their relation to mass media debates, and role in opinion formation may

vary but one can hardly disqualify online transactions as politically irrelevant. Think of the rise of the “alt-right” and recent presidential elections in the USA or the events of the Arab Spring, for instance. Nevertheless, fundamental criticism on the relevance and value of the Web indicates a few problematic aspects that shape access *to* and the quality *of* online communication. Jodi Dean (2005; 2013) discusses the commercial character of the Web and its allegedly ‘capitalistic logic’. This critical perspective asserts that the Internet could never create a truly democratic-inclusive sphere, since it was not promoting a liberalisation of society but rather serves as a technology for exploiting consumers through the capitalisation of digital goods and services (Fenton 2012a; 2012b). Meaningful political online actions were thus impossible to achieve. Indeed, most users rely on soft- and hardware provided by powerful companies, who determine the rules of conduct on their platforms and aim for making profits. Tendencies towards regulation and demarcation include both an extensive commercialisation by private corporations and constant attempts to regulate digital spaces by law. Still, the commercial nature of the Web does not necessarily mean that political content and actions forfeit genuineness, authenticity or impact *per se*. Individuals and groups try to put their views out to the world through the Internet’s various platforms and use them to coordinate activities in physical spaces. The implication is not to over-emphasise and ultimately distort Internet technology’s political potential but rather to assess its role as one among several crucial factors in political discourses.

Other criticism asserts that online communication lacked in quality and remained negligible in public debates, especially if compared to mass media institutions. These can rely on journalism as an institutionalised profession with historically grown, standardised procedures for educating staff and the production and distribution of content (Neuberger 2009: 50). Journalistic outlets have the means to collect and edit information in a coherent form with a logic structure (i.e. a magazine or newspaper), separating meaningful information from noise. This would ensure quality standards that many Internet platforms could not meet, since they simply had no elaborate mechanisms for the synthesis of information into formalised products for public consumption (Bohman 2004: 152; Katzenbach 2008: 144; Neuberger 2009: 50). The little content of political value remained isolated and restricted to small audiences who hardly affected public opinion formation on a larger scale. However, it is not yet clear how exactly online media do or do not influence personal attitudes that accumulate to collective public opinions or stimulate political behaviour (e.g. voting). Such criticism seems to ignore that web content developed distinguishable genres with varying qualitative features. Though non-standardised forms of communication may indeed dominate the Web, online postings are not all the same nor do they necessarily lose their political significance due to a lack of institutionalised procedures for information processing. Furthermore, off- and online media are strongly intertwined. The WikiLeaks case is one prominent example for how an online platform sparked a political debate catalysed by widespread coverage in both alternative online media and mass media outlets (Karatzogianni 2012). Off- and online media are not separated spheres; they influence each other in complex circuits of communicative flows, or feedback loops, that affect the course of political debates. The quality and relevance of online content cannot be measured against the same standards as the content of e.g. print journalism. Nevertheless, the ‘unmediated’ (Lynch et al. 2013: 5), allegedly authentic appearance of political information on the Web can indeed become a ‘dangerous illusion’ (*ibid*) that masks distortions and manipulations inherent to its (re-)production. For example, research on the role of social media in the 2011 Syrian conflict shows that alleged eyewitness accounts are often biased fabrications serving as devices in the digital media war for

“hearts and minds”. Providers of social media pages and other independent online platforms thus become gatekeepers of content (*ibid*: 10). Flows of political communication on the Web are not at all unregulated or unprocessed. To the contrary, political communicators try to re- and premediate narratives favourable to their agendas, often with clear intentions to arouse emotions and ultimately gain popular support, or at least acceptance, in a local and/or transnational dimension (Castells 2009: 155-192; Grusin 2010: 51). In the European context, protest movements such as the Spanish *indignados* and anti-austerity groups provided counter narratives presented as “raw” or “authentic” but are on second look anything but unfiltered, as selected messages and images were used to trigger specific reactions on part of a general public and the government (Take the Square 2012); another example are the various Occupy branches, which applied sophisticated online media strategies that partly outmatched governmental counterparts in terms of multimediality, creativity, and flexibility (Occupy London 2014). Mass media outlets can reinforce skewed representation of political issues and conflicts by picking online content favourable to their style and tone of coverage; as a result, accuracy and a balanced picture are sacrificed for sensationalism and striking images (Lynch et al. 2013: 11). The quality of Internet communication is determined by an inherent dualism: it offers an unprecedented amount of information and expanded options for participation, while simultaneously the ‘opportunities for mendacity and routine interference as regards information are much greater’ (Webster 2006: 199).

The third type of criticism questions the capability of online media to support social cohesion and to stimulate democratic-inclusive discourses (Lawrence et al. 2010; Lynch et al. 2013). Research shows that political online platforms may catalyse the fragmentation of society into secluded, ideologically homogenous discourse containers (Sunstein 2007). Ethnographic factors and personal interests serve as cornerstones for marking contexts that determine discursive configurations, i.e. the content, the modes of communicative interaction, and the composition of audiences; for instance, online media can reinforce the formation of in-group identities, especially in (party-)politics (Morin and Flynn 2014). Despite general accessibility of online media, in many cases cultural, social, and political filters exist. Some fear that the Web promotes the fragmentation of public discourse culture and cripple the integration of society:

Those same developments, however, have not been matched by an extension of the normative criteria that Habermas identified as indicators of the democratizing function of the media, but rather have contracted, so that new media and information and communication technologies seem to invoke not social solidarity, but division, not individual sociability, independence and confidence, but isolation, dependence and insecurity, not democracy but authoritarianism (Drake 2010: 123).

The main argument is that dispersed audiences can diminish normative expectations towards societal cohesion, which is a primary aim of public discourse from democratic-integrative perspectives. Online debates among political extremists are one example (Karatzogianni 2006). However, tendencies towards fragmentation and seclusion are not intrinsic to all forms of political online communication. The actual shape and outcome of online debates very much depend on the communicators, the thematic focus, and the type of audience that they address; the same factors that define the degree of seclusion determine a platform’s openness and connectivity to other web communicators.

The Web includes an immense diversity of content, modes of discursive interaction, and connectivity. It reflects the diversity of opinions available in the political landscape. Users who are interested in an issue have access to different publicly communicated perspectives and may contrast these with each other. On the macro-level, even the most antagonistic communicators are often contextualised by a shared topic that serves as the central point of reference for a web sphere. For example, the EU crisis spawns a range of different, partly irreconcilable positions that produce their arguments on their online platforms. These may attract a homogenous audience of mainly like-minded people (e.g. Derek Bennett 2013; BetterOffOut 2013). However, such debates on the micro-level are not isolated from the broader discourses on the crisis, which inevitably involves communicators with diverging opinions. To communicate their views as distinguishable they need to make references to the opposing side (e.g. Eurosceptics vs. pro-European). Even the most exclusive groups must refer to general societal debates and a political opponent. Otherwise they could hardly develop an argument. Sets of beliefs and values shape discursive contexts and eventually statements made about subjects (Hall 2000); they determine how cultural, social, and political groups perceive themselves and others; difference, i.e. being distinguishable from the social environment, is central to this formation process (*ibid*) that cannot happen in isolation. Online platforms are not hermetically closed nor do they need to promote the exchange of arguments in a democratic way to have discursive relations and to share a common context. Shared contexts can pool diverse positions into a larger web sphere that provides an observer with an overall picture of a political discourse. These may materialise as conflicts or contests and seldom meet normative criteria of democratic-integrative deliberation. Forms of ideologically motivated fragmentation have always been an empirical reality, as media outlets in print or broadcast reflect political orientations between the left and right. Extremism in one form or the other is an inherent part of political discourses, which do not have to be integrative at all. The threats pointed out in debates on discursive fragmentation (Sunstein 2007) are not necessarily specific to the Internet age but may have been intrinsic to the political realm throughout modern history. It is still not fully answerable whether online media and the vast diversity of content they provide lead to the dissolution of general publics and eventually to the breakdown of society, or whether the Internet may stimulate an expansion of the political realm by providing communicators of all backgrounds with tools for partaking and initiating public debates; they may simply reveal and catalyse a complexity and diversity that has always been latent in politics.

Karatzogianni (2006) further develops the notion of a contest- or conflict-driven digital public sphere in her discussion of ‘cyberconflict’. Her theoretical framework includes a critical discussion of cyber culture, globalisation, social movements, as well as conflict- and media research. Since processes of interaction, networking, and communication always involve political questions, for instance on hierarchies, power relations, and consumerism, it is assumable that the Internet is a political sphere –to the extent that conflicts in society materialise in online environments. These conflicts are not limited to cyberspace, but affect offline discourses and vice versa. The ‘postmodern’ features of the Internet could provide tools for leaving conventional modes of political negotiation and social interaction behind, and may provide opportunities for unprecedented ways of doing politics (*ibid*: 39). Online media allow political groups and social movements to establish alternative mobilizing structures, political opportunity structures, and framing processes (*ibid*: 53); they enable them to organise collective actions, to interact with political opponents and publics, and to distribute their worldviews on a global scale. However, Karatzogianni argues that the postmodern potential of online media remains largely unused and Internet

communication mostly serves ‘modernist’ purposes in political competition for power and influence (*ibid*: 50); political organisations might use new communication platforms yet their goals are traditional ones. These mainly concern the re-negotiation of political hierarchies, i.e. power relations, and the re-distribution of resources. The primary sites for the respective conflicts are public spheres based on media communication. By disseminating narratives and worldviews, political communicators struggle for societal attention and legitimisation. Still, on the level of political communication, the Internet changed the rules:

Nevertheless, as a two-way mass communication medium that allows users to receive news and information, inasmuch as they participate in information, transmission and public discussion, the Internet potentially diffuses power over information dissemination and public debate (Karatzogianni 2006: 21).

Framing issues, mobilisation and support, as well as attacking the opponent’s online platforms are central aspects of political cyber conflicts. Furthermore, due to the Internet’s global reach, most cyber conflicts have a transnational dimension, either through involving transnational networks of digital activist/combatants or addressing a transnational audience, or both (Karatzogianni 2006: 35). This does not mean that local issues or political conflicts lose relevance; to the contrary, they remain of vital importance but are not detached from their transnational context in a globalised world. If anything, they highlight the close link between the local/national, the transnational, and the global.

Despite tendencies towards ideological homogeneity within certain political communities, political communicators do not seek seclusion per se. They rather try to harness the potentials of online media to achieve concrete strategic objectives and to frame issues of concern in a light favourable to them. This takes place on a digital public stage that has a strong yet ambivalent relationship with conventional mass media channels. Ultimately, political communicators try to increase their communicative scope to reach what they perceive to be the public, however elusive, constructed or invisible this social entity might be. It is therefore argued that political communication and activities on the Internet are part of social reality, since they are not only observable; they can have a tangible impact on societal debates, problems, and conflicts.

To sum up, the Internet has transformed and pluralised political communication. Various political stakeholders use online media to address publics and expand the spectrum of sources of information, which inevitably includes the dissemination of ideological viewpoints and opinions through practices of framing. However, online debates do not necessarily stimulate integrative processes, as political viewpoints, personal interests, and socio-economic backgrounds can separate online audiences. This does not mean that political web platforms exist in a vacuum; to the contrary, they remain reactive towards larger political conflicts in which they are embedded. Furthermore, political online discourses appear to remain elite-dominated, involving a relatively small social stratum. Despite a latent potential for democratisation, emancipation, and integration, various social and political factors eventually delimit its manifestation. Web technology theoretically offers opportunities for postmodern approaches on organising social and political life as well as to communicate re-configured affiliations and identities. Yet its actual application in politics reflects conventional strategies and objectives of the modernist power play (Karatzogianni 2006). Political online communication is variable in several respects, especially

regarding discursive structures (unilateral vs. multilateral) as well as networking and framing strategies. Online media can stimulate deliberative discourses and increased political activity, if only in homogenous groups (Lee, Kwak, and Campbell 2013; Campbell and Kwak 2011; Meraz 2007). However, the Web serves as both a tool and arena for political conflict. Since it facilitates communication on an unprecedented scope and promotes the formation of public discourses, it automatically turns into a contested source for political power and influence (Castells 2009). Though all online platforms are potentially global in their technical scope, social and content-related factors determine the local, regional, or transnational alignment.

Forms of public online communication that condense into web spheres need to be analysed against the background of these ambivalent features. The evaluation of the impact of online media on political debates must be accompanied by an analysis of the complex processes behind media-based communication; they cannot be seen as isolated or independent from the cultural, historical, social, as well as political environment and vice versa. From a systems-theory perspective, the “triggers” for web sphere can be identified by describing the fault lines and intersections between societal areas in which irritations, crises, and conflicts emerge; one can also argue that the Web expands the observation capacities for societal developments but that ultimately individual factors determine what window to social reality audience have through online and offline media. However, its function does not stop there; aside from observing society, web activates can have a tangible impact on society. Examples are the organisations of protests, online campaigns, and cyberconflicts. Hence, the Web is both a tool and space for public discourse. It cannot be described as a single social system; it is far too dynamic/erratic and entangled in complex relationships with all sectors of society.

The Web is inherently transnational but also hosts national spaces of interaction; the orientation of an individual platform depends on the communicators, who build online spaces through technology and content; who they address in which way and what topics they focus determine their openness to audiences. A critical look at discursive practices remains therefore central for comprehensive analyses of web spheres but democratic-integrative positions need to accommodate the Web inherent pluralism that can translate into conflict-oriented discourses in which participants do not seek consensus with their opponents but prioritise the distribution of their views among (digital) publics.

In any case, Web technology facilitates the construction of communicative spheres for political debates, which turns them into relevant subjects in research on contemporary political public spheres. Contrasting critical accounts of the Internet with the various potentials outlined above opens the way to describe political web spheres as discursive spaces of contest and conflict.

The Web Sphere Perspective

Defining web spheres as clouds of digital public communication, their connections to public discourses and how to analyse them.

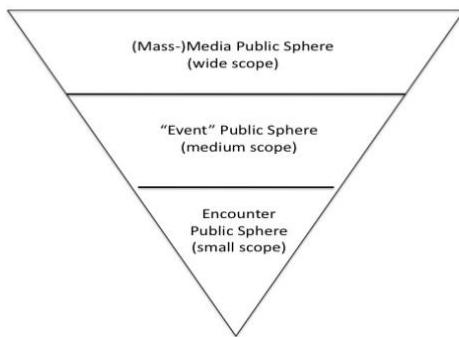
Operationalising Web Spheres

Online media platforms meet two key criteria for the formation of spheres of public communication: first, web-content reflects on and reacts to events and developments in society. Online platforms are observers, subjects, and initiators of public discourses. Depending on the context, they can cover these roles simultaneously. This implies that online discourses are not detached from mass media discourses. The Internet permeates the analogous realm and transforms the fundamental fabric of contemporary public spheres. Second, by allowing professional and amateur communicators to address audiences of varying sizes, the Web constantly produces publicity or “publicness”, i.e. visibility and accessibility of (political) information, which condenses into ‘spaces of communication’ (Hepp et al. 2012: 25) that contextualise messages on an issue. If speakers communicate through media platforms that are freely retrievable in principle, and make their utterances in relation to a topic that contextualises them with other communicators, one can point to a public discourse. This view enables the analysis of public spheres in terms of their mediality. The social dimension, i.e. communicators and audiences as well as content-related factors, i.e. issues that stimulate communication, determine the alignment of an online platform and its position within a web sphere. These can emerge on social, political, and cultural topics and the manifold intersections between these fields of discursivity.

Online platforms cover different dimensions of public communication, like those proposed in the arena model of the public sphere developed by Gerhards and Neidhardt (1990); they distinguish between ‘encounter public spheres’, which emerge in ad-hoc situations via face-to-face communication (e.g. when a small number of individuals meet and discuss political or social issues); ‘public events’, with broader scope but limited topical focus and a predetermined timeframe (e.g. pre-election parties, trade fairs, or party congresses); ‘mass media-based publicity’, which has the broadest scope and is based on an elaborated technological infrastructure for addressing an abstract, collective audience. The last dimension is the most relevant type of public communication in modern hyper-complex mass societies (Gerhards and Neidhardt: 24-26), since the mass media serve as tools for addressing and forming imagined communities on a large scale. However, the probability of reciprocal communication between sender and recipients is the lowest.

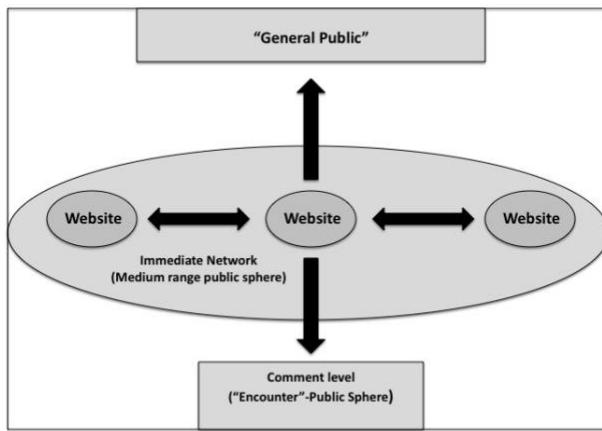
This tripartite analytical differentiation covers distinct modes of public communication and describes their specific relevance for political discourses but an updated version must acknowledge the blurring lines between private and public in online media and the potentially global scope of all three dimensions on the Web.

Figure 3: Arena model as proposed by Gerhards and Neidhardt 1990 (compiled by the author)



Each website, blog, or social media page has a potential “mass media-level”, since most online platforms are accessible to virtually anybody. At least in liberal democracies, there are usually no hard filters that refuse access to political online media, though there are exceptions (e.g. when governments try to shut down extremists’ websites). There is also an “immediate-network-level”, since websites are often interlinked with other context-related websites. Link lists and blog rolls reveal the composition of these close networks. The “comment-level” forms another layer, since many online platforms provide some sort of commenting function and/or forums for direct interactions with and/or among site visitors. Website administrators have control over the course of these debates, since they can exclude participants and potentially censor postings. These levels of communication are different in scope, but not isolated from each other and often materialise all at once on a website; one can basically dissect an online platform into its different communicative dimensions and operationalise communicative actions in each level, analyse them, and then link them to each other to draw conclusions about the platform. The Guardian Online’s EU section, for instance, puts its main emphasis on the mass media-dimension, as it attempts to address a general public with journalistic content. It also used to include a more immediate, potentially reciprocal encounter-level through its comment function on selected articles. This does not mean that the respective editors always engaged in dialogues with their audience. Nevertheless, it provides users with the opportunity to communicate with each other or at least to post their opinions. The crucial difference to offline encounters is that these user-generated messages become accessible to a much larger audience, too. This eventually expands the spectrum of publicly communicated viewpoints. All three dimensions thus have a latent mass media scope.

Figure 4: Communicative dimensions of online Media (compiled by the author)



Depending on the communicator and technological basis of a platform, one or the other dimension of public communication is more pronounced. For example, a politician's Twitter feed or social media page may mainly serve to expand his/her capabilities to reach a larger audience with mainly unidirectional messages, while a private blogger may prioritise the immediate network- and comment-level.

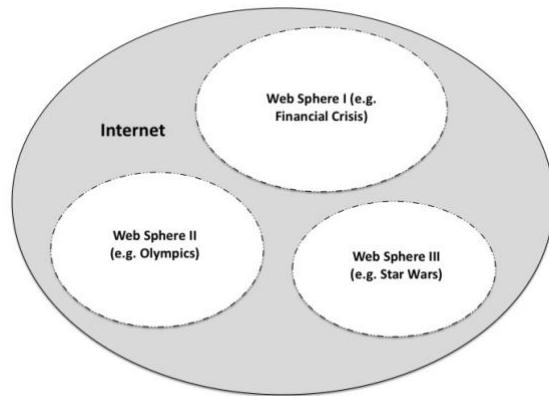
Communicators and recipients can easily switch between different news media websites, blogs, forums, and social media pages. Brundidge (2010: 1066) describes this online mobility as 'traversability', the option to 'traverse seamlessly and with relative ease from one discursive space to the next'. The tripartite sub-structure of online platforms not only differentiates between varying types of communication; it also enables the analysis of individual structural elements of online discourses. Each online platform is a small multidimensional digital public space.

Communication across online platforms is integrated in context-bound web spheres, the larger communicative units that in sum create the discursive "clouds" that shape the content areas of the Internet. There are no inescapable borders between e.g. the blogosphere and the Twitterverse, and flows of communication can condense into discursive networks, even though the possibilities for participation and content distribution may vary on a micro-level, that means that some individual platforms might allow direct feedback on the comment-level and use additional channels (e.g. RSS feeds, micro blogs) to share their content, while others do not.

Schneider and Foot (2006: 157-158) characterise web spheres as hyperlinked, dynamic discourse networks based on online content across different platforms that focus on specific developments, events, or concepts. They argue that the 'boundaries of a web sphere are delimited by a shared topical orientation and temporal framework' (*ibid*). Certain issues stimulate a particularly broad and intensive communicative resonance on the Web and contextualise a diverse set of communicators, of which each one may have a different opinion on the issue(s) in focus. Yet they share a common context and potentially form communicative networks via hyperlinking and referencing. Examples are online discourses that emerge on political topics such as the current financial crisis, events like the Olympics, or cultural objects, such as fan communities that focus on e.g. Star Wars. A context-providing issue or event poses as a meta- or master frame, which determines the modes of communicative interactions and discursive practices related to the observed topic(s). Several meta-frames can simultaneously stir debates on the micro- and meso-level. In present case, there is the meta-frame of the Euro crisis and a general

European master frame that shape the discourse(s).

Figure 5: Web sphere model as proposed by Schneider and Foot 2006 (compiled by the author)

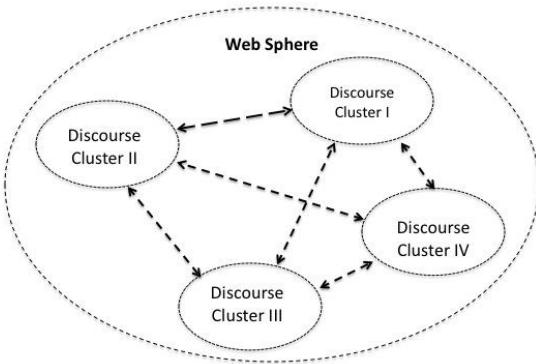


Each context provides a shared but specified frame for producing related statements. Whenever events, themes or issues stimulate online communication and bind these flows of information in discursive clusters, structurally held together by hyperlinks and referencing, it is possible to identify specific web spheres. The content of online communication and networks provide information on the social, cultural, and political composition of a web sphere. The same variables determine its societal scope and relevance.

Web spheres are results *of* and stages *for* political struggles and contestation. When two or more parties compete through online media, within the same context, one can potentially point to a conflict-oriented web sphere. A vivid example is the web sphere that emerged on the death of a British soldier who was stabbed to death by two alleged terrorists in May 2013. This tragic event sparked a controversial debate on the role of Islam in the UK and the potential threats it would pose to British society. Particularly vocal speakers in this heated debate were nationalist, far-right organisations, liberal groups and British Muslim communities. Accusations, oversimplifications, stereotyping, and forms of verbal/textual violence were common among the respective Web encounters. Another, more recent example is the rise of the so-called “alt-right” during the presidential election campaigns in 2016 and the eventual success of Donald Trump; the election provided a shared context for various discourses clusters on the Web. Some of these indeed resembled isolated “echo-chambers” and/or “filter bubbles” on the micro-level of online communication, especially along ideological and demographic lines, paired with extremely toxic rhetoric. Nevertheless, they all became part of a larger web sphere that was held together by a common focus: the election. The fierce nature of these examples must be assessed against the background of the particularly controversial and volatile character of the underlying political-cultural conflicts. Still, they highlight that varying modes of communicative interaction materialise in online public spheres. The quality and intensity of political discourse depends on the issue that trigger a debate and individual attitudes. This implies that even if some occurrences of public political debate may display democratic-integrative qualities in the Habermasian sense, not all do automatically aspire discursive consensus and seek forms of integration. Quite the opposite, it can be assumed that participants in political online discussions can show a less rational or civilized communicative behaviour; the Web is not quite the ‘idealized agora’ (Benkler 2006: 181). Nevertheless, while the micro- and meso-levels of communication may display characteristics of fragmentation and polarisation, even the most antagonistic

communicators are contextualised through a shared framework on the macro-level. Political and cultural boundaries do not necessarily prohibit the formation of web spheres. In accordance with systems theory-based mirror-models, it is assumable that political web spheres tend to emerge as reactions to exceptional societal events, i.e. they mirror irritations in other areas of society and enable their collective observation. This does not mean that they are simple reflections; they provide collections of stirred observations and even influence the dynamics of public debates.

Figure 6: Web sphere sub-structures (compiled by the author)



Web spheres are partial public spheres of varying sizes and durations. Their durability largely depends on the issues that triggered their formation; some disappear more quickly than others. There are two general types of web spheres (*ibid*: 160): web spheres which are partly predictable regarding the involved communicators, their content, and duration. Web discourses that fall into this category are usually linked to elections, annual events in sports or culture and other institutionalised political, and social events. Then there are rather erratically emerging web spheres, triggered by unexpected or unforeseen events, which have a less predictable structure and scope. Examples are accidents, disasters, or scandals, which can cause the rapid production of online communication. Identifying the set of public communicators and their discursive relations is more difficult in such contexts. Unstable and dynamic forms of public debate can gain considerable societal attention and political relevance, as seen in the case of the global Occupy movement or the upheavals in North Africa and the Middle East in 2011. The EU crisis was a largely unexpected event of unprecedented proportions that caused the formation of highly dynamic and unstable transnational communication flows that condensed into a crisis discourse, which heavily affected political processes, as well as social and economic life in the EU and individual member-states (Fouskas and Dimoulas 2013; Armingeon and Guthmann 2013; Gallie 2013). Web spheres display an immanent dynamism and their size can change at any time, e.g. they are always open for new content. Their boundaries are not closed nor are they necessarily isolated from each other; web spheres might interconnect and form larger ones. Specific research questions and -interests form the central lens for demarcating (parts of) web sphere sections for empirical analysis. Some events or issues that lead to the formation of a web space may stimulate more intense and immediate communicative interactions between

communicators, others may remain limited to sharing a common context and display no direct discursive relations.

Empirical analyses of web spheres can help to better understand the origin, structure and dynamics of public online discourses and the connections to other media-based forms of public communication. Analysing the content and networks of web spheres enables to identify who is talking to whom in what contexts for what purposes; it opens the path for the evaluation of how affiliations, identities, and politically loaded concepts such as “Europe” are communicated and discussed. This can further determine the societal and political relevance of web-based public discourses. However, there is one obvious limitation: it is very difficult to define audiences for web communication. One can only approach a definition of assumed audiences from a communicator’s perspective, as it is often not possible to empirically verify who consumes specific online content. Even large-scale surveys could only provide hints on the size and composition of online audiences, but never determine their scope to a full extent; large-scale data on Web traffic could provide a more accurate picture, but access to this data is often limited.

To sum up, web spheres are context-dependent online public discourses that consist of a multitude of smaller discursive networks on a meso-level and individual platforms on a micro-level. Each platform may cover three levels of online public communication, ranging from the comment-level, through the immediate-network-level, to the potential mass-media scope. This differentiation of communicative dimensions opens the way for a comprehensive analysis of web spheres that considers both their structural features and content. Technological and social factors are equally important for a better understanding of online discursivity.

Complementary content- and network analyses seem most suitable for approaching each of the outlined analytical dimensions. It is further argued that political web spheres serve as arenas for conflict and contestation, due to the controversial-polarising nature of most social, cultural, and economic issues. Frames form then a basic structural feature of the communicative fabric of public discourses that are mainly based on media-transmitted texts. They materialise as ‘certain pattern[s] in each text composed of several elements. These elements are not words but previously defined components or devices of frames’ (Matthes and Kohring 2008: 263), i.e. sequences of related enunciations. Frame- and framing analyses subsequently enable the structural examination of public debates by considering both the role of public speakers and the content of their communication. Not to mention the public realm’s function as a source for social and political capital and legitimisation. Political online platforms are communicative arenas in the sense that speakers try to communicate evaluations based on political ideologies and to apply persuasive forms of argumentation that are different from a political “other” within a specific context. Media narratives and media realities reproduce and distribute social meanings. Thus, media communication contributes to the reproduction of socio-political configurations, identities and eventually conflict constellations in national, transnational or global contexts. By providing distorted observations of the world and constructing contexts, media discourses can have a considerable impact on an individual’s perception of its environment –including other subjects (Uricchio: 2008: 15). Web spheres are no exception.

Definitions of the Key Concepts

The theoretical framework combines insights from research on transnational media communication, transnationalism- and nationalism studies, public sphere theory, framing research and Internet studies. This diverse and broad scope is necessary for describing and understanding the complex subjects of the empirical analysis.

Political public online discourses as web spheres: web spheres are sets of communicative practices and attributions of relevance (Hepp et al. 2012: 33, citing Keller 2007); online communication is the basis of digital public spheres. Online media are political when they produce communicative practices and discursive processes that display attributes of relevance to the general field of national and/or transnational political communication (Hepp et al. 2012). There are various sub-genres and categories of political web content, such as party politics, commercial policy, environmental policy, health policy; these are mainly concerned with the attribution of social, economic, and political responsibility, solutions for specific problems, the negotiation of cultural inclusion and exclusion, the (re-)distribution of resources, the definition of victimhood and perpetration, and the construction of potential future scenarios through often polarising debates on causalities, probabilities, and assumed certainties. Media-constructed ‘quasi-objects’ (Grusin 2010: 58) such as wars, crises, disasters, elections, or cultural events provide central points of reference for communicative activities, which tend to create specific frames. Especially irritations across different social systems trigger the formation of public discourses (Kohring 2007). When an online platform is explicitly dealing with European and/or EU-issues, it falls into the sub-category of European political online media. Different types of political online media are not strictly separated and mix-forms exist. A classificatory system that takes the fluidity of genres into consideration gives orientation and facilitates the identification of suitable subjects for empirical analysis.

Web spheres emerge where a set of communicators make related utterances that share the same trigger and catalogue of references (Schneider and Foot 2007). These have the potential to establish direct discursive ties between communicators via hyperlinking or referencing. However, expressing opinions and assessments without directly or indirectly addressing other speakers, but within the same thematic context, already contributes to the formation of a discourse. One can identify three different yet not mutually exclusive levels of discursivity: firstly, on a more general notion, discourse through sharing the same content-related context, e.g. speaking about the financial crisis; secondly, through addressing and referencing other communicators, e.g. citing, agreeing or disagreeing with other speakers within a certain context; thirdly, through direct communicative interaction on a specific web platform via commenting, e.g. on-site follow-up debates. Online media enable a diverse set of communicators to interact in discourses, either for political conflict or, in certain settings, deliberation purposes. Framing is a dominant mode of political communication; in accordance with Entman (1993: 52), it is understood as selecting aspects of a social and political reality and re-interpret and re-define them in a specific, ideology-determined context with the overall aim to promote certain problem identifications, subjective interpretations, and to propose ethical assessments or courses of action. Strategically communicating viewpoints and applying political agendas are the discursive materialisation of framing and subsequently frames. From this perspective, conflicts and struggles are sets of related yet antagonising frames that are communicated by participating actors who represent diverging political viewpoints on the issues that cause the condensation of public communication. Analysing discursive integration and discursive

convergence among platforms enables the empirically grounded assessment of a potentially transnational web sphere based on communicative confluence. Political online discourses are public in the sense that they are accessible to a virtually unlimited online audience, though filters for delimitation or even exclusion exist (e.g. languages, education, personal interests). Web spheres exist in parallel to other forms of publicity, e.g. mass media-based ones, and do not substitute but rather supplement them in a mutually affective circle of communicative flows.

Transnational discourse: Political online discourses are transnational when public communication focuses on political issues that transcend the local context of individual nation-states but have an impact on the entire EU and/or Eurozone. The difference to global contexts is the demarcation of a specific regional, European context. Web content on the EU and its crisis is transnational *per se* but the perception, processing, and evaluation of related events varies between communicators; their level of national-transnational outlook becomes the decisive indicator. It is proposed to distinguish between varying intensities of transnational alignment. “Strong” manifestations emerge when communicators leave national backgrounds behind and discuss political issues from a potentially post- or transnational angle. “Weaker” forms occur when mainly nationally-oriented communicators comment on transnational issues. Between both poles different grey scales exist and there are varying degrees of connectivity and interaction on the meso- and micro-level. The modes in which communicators portray political issues, use cross-references, create agendas, tie in hyperlinks etc. enables the evaluation of national-transnational trajectories. However, even extremely nationalistic online platforms can have transnational links on a macro-level, i.e. web sphere dimension, when developments within a nation-state are linked to transnational events or responsibility and blame is assigned to transnational actors. This approach allows the contextualisation of different relevant political attitudes and the frames they produce in an inherently transnational setting.

Chapter 4: Analysing Transnational Web Spheres

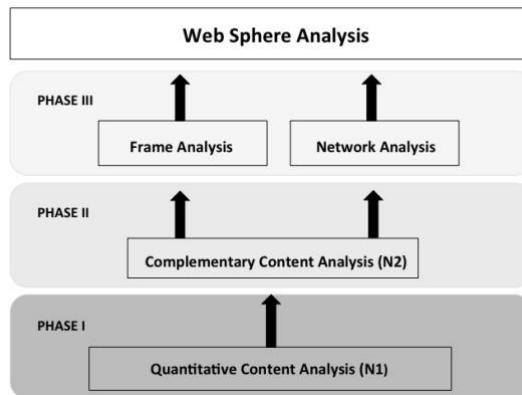
The Research Design

Content analyses as tools for frame- and network analyses; in favour of a mixed methods design.

The frame- and network analyses are based on a multi-step content analysis of genres and types of digital texts interspersed with hyperlinks. For practical purposes, the analysis formally distinguished between *publications*, i.e. articles and postings produced by the official provider/s of an online platform, and *comments*, i.e. messages left by site-visitors below a publication. Both publications and comments can include not only written but also audio, visual, and audio-visual content; not their specific format but the position within this bipolar structural relation determines when a piece of online text is one or the other. Twenty-one political online platforms with a focus on Europe/the EU were selected and the sample covers the period between March 2011 and 2013. This specific time frame was chosen due to several important events that took place in these two years, most importantly the intensification of the Eurozone crisis in Greece, Spain, and Cyprus.

The first phase, a purely quantitative content analysis, served for mapping general topic areas that emerged during the covered period; variables in this analytical dimension considered formats and genres, amounts of comments, as well as countries and topics covered. This data was used to trace the structure and thematic foci of EU- and Europe-related content in the sample ($N1= 13080$). Based on this primary analysis, a smaller sample of ca. 10% was pseudo-randomly selected from $N1$ for a more detailed complementary content analysis with a strong qualitative emphasis ($N2= 1347$). In this second phase data was gathered on cited references (politicians, political parties, journalists, NGOs, think tanks etc.) and communicative devices that accumulated to evaluative frames for the EU and individual nation-states. The complementary content analysis basically collected what different political speakers had communicated; to be able to allocate statements to their actual sources, the articles were divided into content/information provided by first level (i.e. authors) and second level communicators (i.e. references). The respective discursive manifestations can vary considerably and crucial data might have slipped through a purely quantitative approach (Terfrüchte 2011: 121). The codebook for the complementary content analysis therefore included a range of open variables, which served for the development of more precise categories in the secondary analysis. The turn to a qualitative approach emerged from the explorative nature of the case study: one of the aims was to examine what discursive devices were used, which could not be determined entirely from the outset (Terfrüchte 2011: 118, citing Mayring 2008: 9). More flexibility was needed and a highly systematised procedure ensured that each text was screened in sufficient depth. Data collected from $N2$ on discursive devices, quoted speakers, and hyperlinks was processed in a third phase, which consisted of frame- and network analyses. Hierarchical cluster analyses for the identification of complete frames were based on inductively generated variables for individual frame elements from the secondary analysis; the final stage hence connected the quantitative with the qualitative dimension. The overall aim was to a) identify dominant frames in the sample b) link them to specific communicators, and c) link both to the network structures that emerged from the analysis.

Figure 7: The three phases of empirical analysis (compiled by the author)



Mapping networks facilitates the contextualisation of online communication (Nuernbergk 2012: 294). But a network analysis alone would have put too much focus on structure (*ibid*: 290) and its findings might not have explained the formation and dynamics of a web discourse. Scrutinising how issues were debated in what manner was equally important. The frame analysis served for the identification of communication strategies applied by political communicators that initiated, stimulated, and influenced debates on European politics (how did who speak about Europe at what time for what purpose?). The network analysis enabled the observer to map discursive relations between political communicators, i.e. the infrastructure and scope of the transnational web sphere (who spoke to whom about Europe?). Horizontal and vertical linking, and discursive integration and convergence became empirically accessible. Exclusively focusing on either the content- or network aspect would have imposed considerable empirical restrictions and a comprehensive description of the EU web sphere might have remained unfeasible. This could only be achieved by considering both dimensions, as each affects the other. Both research processes drew from the data of the two content analyses. To cover the central dimensions of political online communication in sufficient depth, the proposed integrative method avoided a strict separation between qualitative and quantitative research procedures and opted for a pragmatic approach (Baumann and Scherer 2012).

The Content Analysis of Online Texts

Content analyses are efficient and flexible tools for accessing discursive patterns, portrayals, ideological statements and structural features, such as hyperlinks, incorporated in media-transmitted texts. Different forms of content analysis have been developed and applied in online media research, covering a variety of communicative dimensions (McMillan 2009; Scharkow 2012). They are a standard procedure in empirical web research, not least due to their flexible applicability (Welker et al. 2010). Since the Web primarily consists texts, i.e. conserved communication encrypted in reading material, videos, pictures, audio files and countless mix-forms, this method indeed becomes suitable for research on different types

of online media. Research designs are as diverse as the range of subjects. Content analyses are a class of customised empirical methods for assessing text-based human communication; each application has a different analytical scope and functionality, largely determined by the theoretical framework (Fink et al. 2013: 44). However, most content analyses share a set of methodological assumptions and research procedures. Früh delivers a comprehensive definition that highlights the key features of content analysis by describing them as empirical methods ‘[...]for the systematic, intersubjective description of contentual and formal attributes/characteristics of messages, often with the aim of an interpretative inference on external facts and circumstances’ (2007: 27).³⁵ They identify patterns, correlations and evaluate influences between media-based discourses and social systems. A content analysis basically is ‘an empirical method for capturing social reality [...] and thus approaching [media-generated, D.N.] constructions of reality’ (Terfrüchte 2011: 117, citing Brosius et al. 2008: 145).³⁶

An adequately designed content analysis gathers data through a structured instrument of measurement, i.e. a quasi-bespoke codebook that is individually conceptualised for the selected texts and research questions. Specific data sheets or survey instruments serve for obtaining information from the sample. Coherent coding instructions and intersubjectively replicable operationalisations of the key variables are mandatory for quality assurance and the replicability of results (Früh 2007: 27). Specific mathematical formulas measure the degree of intercoder reliability, i.e. the level of consensus among coders involved in the primary research process of quantitative content analyses (e.g. Cronbach’s Alpha, Fink et al. 2013: 48). Qualitative content analyses, which mostly cannot use mathematical devices, ensure replicability through consensus finding among the involved researchers and detailed recordings of the research process (Kuckartz 2012: 49). Sampling appears to be particularly problematic in online content analyses, which often are non-probabilistic due to the immensity of information on the Internet (*ibid*: 55). This aspect is not a fundamental hindrance to validity and reliability *per se* but needs to be acknowledged in any empirical research project on web communication, regardless of the size of data (Bruns 2013); the present study also had to choose a rather non-probabilistic sample due to practical limitations.

It has been repeatedly asserted that content analyses were purely descriptive methods, i.e. that they can only analyse what is being said within in a text and cannot yield any information on audiences, i.e. patterns of media consumption or media effects (Bruhn-Jensen 2002; Früh 2007: 27). Though they indeed put focus on the communicator’s side, this is not entirely true. There are empirical methods, such as media-resonance-analysis, that evaluate how content is causing follow-up communication, i.e. responses and reactions caused by content in other outlets (Früh 2007: 213). Since most content analyses base their findings on the quantification of numeric data, they are often counted as an almost exclusively quantitative method for empirical inquiry. Critics bemoan the limits of numbers and graphs and claimed that content analyses would be an inadequate choice when it comes to the in-depth analysis of complex media-based phenomena (*ibid*: 68); some therefore propose decidedly qualitative approaches, like critical discourse analyses (Richardson 2007). However, such perspectives are somewhat ignorant towards the complexity and flexibility of content analyses. They form a class of multidimensional methods that involve different research processes; there is more to them than just counting frequencies. For instance, the development of analytical categories and variables already demands deeper reflections on the selected research subjects within the theoretical framework. Critics ignore the growing relevance of explicitly qualitative yet systematised content analyses in communications research, which were originally developed for the analysis of interview transcripts (Mayring 2010; Kuckartz 2012; 2010). These

approaches are suitable for ‘pilot studies, case studies, consolidation of hypothesis-generation, and inductive development of categories as well as classifications’ (Terfrüchte 2011: 118), since they ‘combine standardised and explorative analytical processes’ (*ibid*). It is quite debatable whether one can speak of a strictly quantitative and exclusively descriptive orientation of content analytical research methods (Gunter 2000: 57).

On the Quantitative-Qualitative Divide: in Favour of a Pragmatic Approach

Früh (2007) extensively discusses the epistemological background of content analyses and convincingly explains why they always combine both qualitative and quantitative processes. The specific research questions and subjects would determine the relation or balance between both dimensions, but none is entirely excluded. Most content analyses combine two qualitative analytical processes through one quantitative step (*ibid*: 64). The development of analytical categories involves a rather qualitative approach by justifying definitions through the literature review yet needs constant updates of the codebook during the empirical analysis. That means the construction of the codebook can combine deductive steps, i.e. deriving categories from theoretical reflections, and inductive steps, i.e. developing additional categories based on empirical observations. Hence, the present study focused not only on predetermined features but contingent communicative devices that might materialise in forms that could not have been predicted prior to empirical examination but became accessible only through the explorative-qualitative analysis of the material. This step is then linked through the quantitative measurement to the analysis and interpretation, which is again a qualitative process. Quantitative aspects must be combined with qualitative interpretations to gain access to deeper levels of analytical inquiry. To be able to draw conclusions on the distribution of discursive interactions or non-interactions, ideological statements and the expression of affiliations, the respective categories need to be quantifiable; only then noteworthy political and/or social tendencies can be revealed. Terfrüchte argues that the artificial distinction between ‘‘qualitative’ (connoting ‘better’, ‘of higher value’) and ‘quantitative’ (‘in larger numbers’)’ (2011: 113) implies a false value judgement of different research processes that are often combined instead of being strictly separated.³⁷ To avoid ambiguities, she proposes a different choice of terms:

Less ambiguous could be a characterisation of the approaches upon which the respective principles are based: on the one hand, it is a rather explorative one and its aim is to generate hypotheses [i.e. qualitative, D.N.] and on the other hand it is standardised and thus designed for testing hypotheses [i.e. quantitative, D.N.]. Thus, when we start to talk about hypothesis-testing and hypothesis-generating approaches or standardised procedures as well as explorative ones, the often-conjured antagonism of methods, which the conceptualities quantitative and qualitative can suggest, does not emerge and we can consider both research processes as equal and combinable (Terfrüchte 2011: 113-114).³⁸

Früh and Terfrüchte make a strong case for integrating both hypothesis-testing and hypothesis-generating steps to produce detailed yet generalisable findings. It seems futile to enforce an artificial separation between methodological dogmas in content analyses; contrary to mainstream positions, it is thus maintained that there are no purely quantitative or qualitative methods (Baumann and Scherer 2012: 27; Tashakorri and Teddlie 2010). Distinguishing between these two approaches merely denotes different epistemological and methodological emphases (Baumann and Scherer 2012: 27). The present study hence uses the terms quantitative and qualitative to distinguish different analytical foci. But both dimensions are neither mutually exclusive nor incompatible under the roof of a multi-method research design. Baumann and Scherer argue that especially communication and media studies should aim for pragmatic synthesis rather than ideological trench warfare: ‘[...] processes of communication are always about the mediation of meaning. To get access to manifold meanings, applying qualitative methods becomes on the one hand indispensable. On the other, carriers of meaning [i.e. media, D.N.] are produced in large quantities, distributed in large quantities, and consumed by large audiences’ (2012: 29). It is the theoretical framework that determines the choice, combination, and subject-specific configuration of the methodological approach (*ibid*: 43; Benoit and Holbert 2008). This means: adequate numeric data allowed the assessment of the scope, structure, and duration of the transnational web sphere. It enabled the identification of the dominant frames applied for contextualising issues in a trans-/national setting. However, modes of framing, contestation, symbolism etc. needed a “qualitative” reading of the sampled material; they materialised in forms that could not be pre-determined deductively and had to be coded from the text. The content analytical approach enabled the examination of online texts in several dimensions and to screen web communication for social, cultural, and political configurations. Besides “topographical” aspects, the social dimension of online communication became accessible. It helped to investigate different factors that promote the emergence of specific contexts. This opens ways for determining where conflicts/struggles materialised and how communicators perceived and portrayed the crisis. The chosen empirical method offered another central advantage: it facilitated the comparative analysis of different online platforms and genres from multiple angles. The applied content analysis did not simply count keywords. It rather identified and filtered complex communicative actions and developed precise categories for the analysis of frames and networks in EU/Europe-related debates and was complementary-integrative rather than purely quantitative *or* qualitative.

The Frame- and Network Analysis of Online Discourses

Frame- and framing analyses are popular empirical methods in political communication research (e.g. Vliegenthart and van Zoonen 2011; Matthes and Kohring 2008; David et al. 2011; D’Angelo, P. and Kuypers 2010). The different fields of application have been repeatedly summarised (Matthes 2014; David et al. 2011: 330-335; Borah 2011) and one can distinguish between two general research dimensions: one branch focuses on the discursive construction and communication of frames by public speakers through media outlets; the other deals with potential effects on the audience(s). Analytical approaches are immensely diverse and the whole research area suffers from a lack of comparability (Vliegenthart and van Zoonen 2011: 105). Matthes and Kohring identify at least five different

methodological types of frame analyses (2008: 259-263): hermeneutic, linguistic, manual-holistic, computer-assisted, and deductive approaches. Since the authors already discuss each type in detail this section skips another exhaustive (and ultimately redundant) account of the different perspectives. It shall suffice to say that they all vary in their epistemological perspectives, analytical depths and empirical scopes. The crucial point is: approaches in frame analysis often miss an intersubjectively convincing definition and subsequent operationalisation of frames, especially for content analytical approaches (*ibid*). It is partly unclear how the various qualitative, quantitative, and few complementary studies derive interferences and conclusions on characteristics and shapes of frames from the source material. A central problem is that most studies attempt to code entire frames instead of focusing on individual sets of elements that constitute them. The authors thus argue in favour of a cluster analysis of frame elements to approach frames; this partial atomisation could overcome the empirical difficulties of previous approaches and a content analysis provides an efficient tool for collecting adequate data:

[...] We understand a frame as a certain pattern in a given text that is composed of several elements. These elements are not words but previously defined components or devices of frames. Rather than directly coding the whole frame, we suggest splitting up the frame into its separate elements, which can quite easily be coded in a content analysis. After this, a cluster analysis of those elements should reveal the frame [...]. That means when some elements group together systematically in a specific way, they form a pattern that can be identified across several texts in a sample. We call these patterns frames (Matthes and Kohring 2008: 263).

They further elaborate on the methodological advantages:

Altogether, a frame consists of several frame elements, and each frame element consists of several content analytical variables [...] In other words, every frame is characterized by a specific pattern of variables. Conceived this way, frames are neither identified beforehand, nor directly coded with a single variable. Instead, the variables that signify single frame elements are grouped together by hierarchical cluster analysis (2008: 264).

The problem of reliability does not simply vaporise but becomes an issue of content analytical validity and the operationalisation of variables (*ibid*: 264). The main benefit of this approach is the empirical reconstruction of frames and not their *a priori* definition (*ibid*: 265). Additionally, it is possible to determine the number of frames within a text and to identify ‘new emerging frames’ (*ibid*). With a complementary content analysis, frames can be approached through in-depth reading and flexible interpretation by the human coder and the subsequent quantification of the inductively derived variable set. This procedure relies on a clear definition and operationalisation of a frame, or to be more precise, its elements. Entman’s proposition provides a still valid and applicable description: ‘[t]o frame is to select some aspects of a perceived reality and make them more salient in a communicating text, in such a way as to promote a particular problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation, and/or treatment recommendation for the item described’ (1993: 52). Communicators are both producers and subjects of frames, i.e. the frame of a discourse determines what framing strategies they apply. This affects a speaker’s viewpoints, as frames influence discourse-related utterances made by partaking subjects and

‘organize their belief systems’ (ibid: 53). Entman argues that framing eventually influences how individuals perceive issues and problems and determine their positions on these, which can subsequently translate into concrete actions (ibid: 54). Framing is a means of exerting political power (ibid: 55; 2004); frames do not merely mirror social reality but are proactive elements in its construction (1991, summarised in Matthes 2014: 91). Chong and Druckman (2007) further outline why the competition between antagonising frames must be considered as a crucial aspect in their analysis. This resonates in arena- and conflict based models of the public sphere, in which communicators compete for influence with each other, i.e. by framing issues, problems, other actors etc. in a manner that suits their agendas best. Framing is a ‘struggle for meaning between different actors that have unequal material and symbolic resources’ (Vliegenthart and van Zoonen 2011: 105).

D’Angelo further enhanced and refined Entman’s approach in his discussion of a meta-theory for framing research (2002); based on a critical account of Entman’s approach, he develops a complementary, multi-paradigmatic research programme for frame analysis that considers a cognitive paradigm (negotiation), a constructionist paradigm (co-optation), and a critical paradigm (domination) (ibid: 871-875). These aspects would need adequate assessment in a coherent frame analysis. D’Angelo emphasises that an individual’s knowledge about the world influences the perception of frames encoded within a given text (ibid) and that frames in the media are results from economically and politically motivated agenda-setting processes. Moreover, there is a distinction to be made between frames and framing: the former would be ‘content features’ of texts, the latter a ‘process or contextual features’ of content ‘making and receiving[...]’ (Vliegenthart and van Zoonen 2011: 102). Vliegenthart and van Zoonen explain that frames are determined by several ‘mostly sociological axioms’ (ibid: 105): firstly, frames are not singular but multiple discursive occurrence that can antagonise each other; secondly, frames are means of power and control; thirdly, frames result from social processes that again are influenced by political cultures; they emerge within the area of tension between various public discourses. Though the authors decidedly refer to news content, this applies to all kinds of publicly accessible text. The design of the codebook considered these aspects and collected data on individual text elements that enable to draw inferences from these about the construction of different frames within the context of EU politics and the European crisis.

The network analysis served for drawing hyperlink maps between websites but also between communicators cited in content; it therefore distinguished between *hard networking*, i.e. the inclusion of actual hyperlinks to another online platform, and *soft referencing*, i.e. the inclusion of references to other political communicators and media platforms without the embedment of a link in the text. The degrees of transnational openness and potential ideological seclusion of a specific online platform became empirically measurable by analysing the type and direction of hyperlinks and referencing. The network analysis revealed discursive ties between public communicators in European politics. The network analytical part of this study is a structural sub-element of the underlying content analysis and it enfolds its full explanatory power only if combined with the frame analysis. Furthermore, all findings of an online network analysis are limited to the respective sample, since the shape of hyperlink structures constantly change (Nuernbergk 2012: 299); this is an inherent feature of the dynamic character of the Internet. Nevertheless, such snapshots provide insights into pathways of communication flows that form the infrastructure of digital political discourses.

Data Collection and Analysis

The sampling strategy and analytical steps of the quantitative-qualitative analyses; benefits and limitations of the chosen methods.

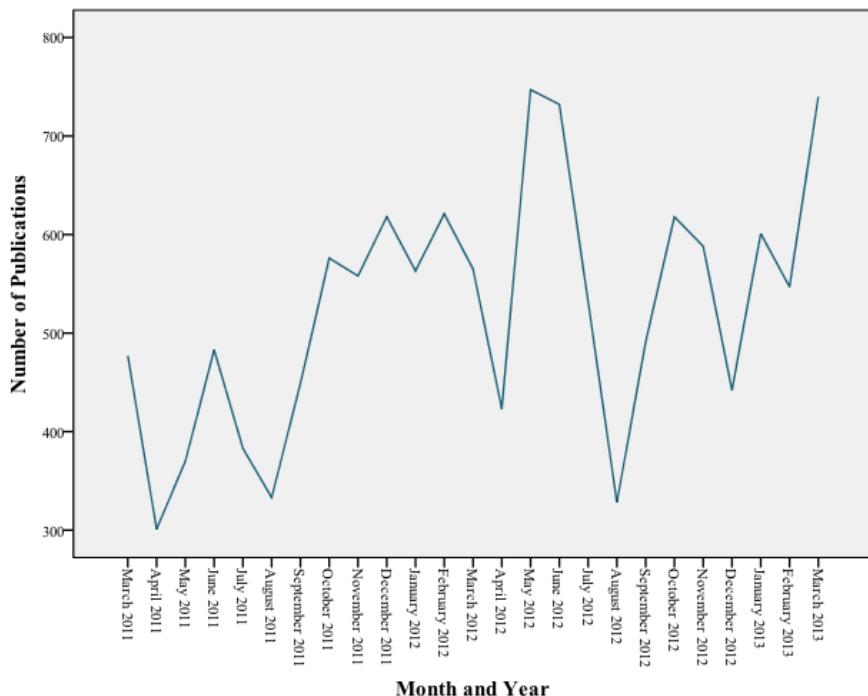
Sampling and Data

Sampling is a critical issue in online research that entails several technical challenges (Scharkow and Mahrt 2013: 22), which concern problems of representability and researcher bias. Many projects combine purposive and random sampling, which is not unproblematic, yet seems one applicable approach for filtering data for analysis from the vast amounts of online content (*ibid*). However, one should reduce the negative effects of ‘availability bias’ (*ibid*: 25) on the validity of results. It is important to underline that sampling of online content is bound to certain limitations and that it is difficult to ensure overall representability. The present study also had to resort to a combination of both stratified and random sampling. A multitude of political communicators operates in the European context; each one produces and disseminates frames from specific political perspectives and uses online media in their communication strategies. Defining the total population for most political communicator categories remained empirically unfeasible and any conclusions need careful assessment regarding their overall generalisability beyond the sampled data. For example, due to linguistic restrictions the analysis was limited to content in English, French, and German; even though this study has a relatively wide empirical scope, one could argue that it is indeed rather explorative in nature. Several other pre-defined filters further demarcated the pool of subjects from which again random samples were taken for analysis. The discussion in previous chapters influenced the selection of a range of communicators in EU-/Europe-related political discourses: firstly, official EU online content provided by different branches of the administrative body in Brussels (the commissions, council, parliament, and ECB). Secondly, professional content provided by institutionalised communicators, i.e. governments, think tanks, NGOs, and news media. Online communication of member-states’ governments’ websites but also European NGOs and political think tanks has been ignored in most previous studies despite their potential influence on transnational debates. Traditional news media outlets may still dominate media debates but they are by no means the only platforms within digital web spheres and many organisations try to circumvent the mass media’s monopolies on public communication through the Internet. Simultaneously, online versions of news media brands become new and insightful subjects for empirical examination, since only a handful of studies paid attention to their role in transnational web spheres. Thirdly, there is the group of user-generated content in form of e.g. personal websites and blogs. Defining a representative sample of these communicators is even more difficult than in the other cases, due to the sheer number of blogs.

The sample consists of six specific categories: institutions of the EU, news media agencies, governments, think tanks, NGOs, and independent platforms. All of them initiated and contributed to potentially transnational political communication spheres. The central task was to assess whether and when they communicated with each other, which framings they shared, and how they constructed or

deconstructed transnational and national spheres of communicative interaction in the context of the EU crisis. However, there were far too many online platforms, communicators, articles, posts, and comments, so that a complete survey was unrealistic. The sample was limited to no more than four online platforms per communicator category, accumulating to a total of 21 platforms (table 1). These were selected based on their perspectives on and/or roles in EU- and crisis politics.

Figure 8: Publications per Month in Total Sample (compiled by author)



The EU category includes the Council, Commission, EUROZONE Portal, and European Parliament. They were chosen for their central relevance in the design and implementation of EU politics and crisis strategies. The selection of news media outlets was grounded in preceding deliberations on their role in political debates on Europe. To find evidence for discursive convergence/integration and contrast media frames with those of other public communicators, the sample covered four news media brands from different parts of the EU: the British Guardian Online, French Le Monde Online, German Spiegel Online, and the English version of the Greek news website EKathimerini. Each one produced large amounts of content on EU/Europe-related issues and provided access to local political media arenas. The publications were either taken from the websites' EU sections or, where no such section existed, were identified through an advanced keyword search for Europe, European Union, EU, and Eurozone (-crisis). The sample of governments was also based on a conscious choice, as some of the most important and influential member-states in discourses on the crisis and Europe were selected, which are the UK, Germany, and Greece. The sub-sample of think tanks should cover at least two different perspectives on Europe and it included one slightly pro-European and one Eurosceptic communicator to reflect the diversity of opinions in this category. A similar sampling strategy applied for the selection of European NGOs and independent platforms, so that both pro-European and Eurosceptic perspectives were covered. The four individual bloggers were filtered with the same parameters and “independent” means in this context that the communicators are individuals who comment on political issues from a personal

perspective on a platform that is not part of any official web presence, though they might be associated with a political organisation (e.g. a party). To further filter the final set of research subjects an additional temporal frame was set: only content that was published between March 2011 and March 2013 was included. The reason for choosing this period was to cover some of the most decisive development and events of the financial and political crisis in Europe, such as the referendum debate in the UK, the intensification of the crisis in Greece, Spain, and Cyprus, and the resulting tensions between member-states (North-South divide) in the EU.

In a first stage the complete sample was subject to a quantitative content analysis (N1= 13080), before a second sample N2 (=1347) was pseudo-randomly selected for an in-depth examination in the secondary analysis. It is “pseudo-random” as each month of the set time frame should be sufficiently covered by the analysis, but individual publications were randomly selected within a month from the respective platforms.³⁹ N2 still covers roughly 10% of the larger sample and ensures the representability of findings. At this second stage the sampling excluded publications on sports and other cultural stories with no clear link to EU politics, since it is assumed that these genres rarely included relevant frame elements. The research subjects are publications and postings, hereafter articles, which covered current events. Plans for including social media networks existed but were dropped for practical reasons; their increasingly important role in public discourse is acknowledged but they need to be dealt with in a follow-up research project.

Analytical Dimensions and Coding

A coding instrument was devised for the quantitative content analysis of sample N1. The variables included: the article's title, URL, date of publication, amount of comments, main topic area (EU politics & economy, National politics & economy etc.), secondary themes (EU crisis, EU enlargement etc.), and countries mentioned, but only if they were contextualised as political or economic actors; a country was also coded when its leading politicians or governmental institutions were named. The codebook provided precise instructions and examples. To ensure reliability, the researcher and two test coders independently coded 10% of N1. Adjustments to the coding instructions were made to improve intercoder agreement; a few categories were dropped and/or collapsed and the phrasing of some coding instructions changed.⁴⁰ The test was repeated with 25% of N1 and intercoder reliability was calculated with Krippendorff's Alpha, which resulted in satisfactory average values for all topic variables of ($KALPHA = .88$), ($KALPHA = .97$) for all country variables, and ($KALPHA = 1$) for the comment variable. Clear categories and precise coding instructions ensured a high level of agreement. Websites usually pre-tagged articles with a general category and the coder only needed check if the text covered additional issues and/or which countries occurred; the total amount of comments was often clearly displayed above or below an article.

The analysis of sample N1 helped with mapping the web sphere and supported the inductive development of analytical categories during the qualitative content analysis of sample N2 (Terfrüchte 2011: 129). The openness of the qualitative content analysis enabled the identification of portrayals, metaphors, parallelisations, and symbolisms from the material. Generating the coding instrument linked theory, research questions, and research subjects in a circular relationship, which is a primary feature of content analyses with a "qualitative" focus (Mayring 2010: 59, cited in Terfrüchte 2011: 129). It covered two stages: in the first phase, relevant data from N2 was entered in customised online survey software (Questback/EFS) with both closed and open categories.⁴¹ The data was then exported to and processed in Gephi, EXCEL, MAXQDA and SPSS.

For the second phase of the qualitative content analysis, all summaries of articles and notes on actor statements, evaluations, and propositions were collected in text files, which were split between first- and second level communicators. This was necessary to later assign frame elements to specific political actors and organisations. The documents were then inductively coded in MAXQDA, a tool for qualitative content analysis, using Kuckartz's (2012: 148-152) instructions for structural and evaluative qualitative content analyses as an orientation for the explorative process. The subsequent frame analysis built on Matthes and Kohring (2008) advancement of Entman's original frame operationalisation and statements made by first- and second level communicators were coded following a quadruple differentiation of frame elements:

Table 1: Frame elements

Element	Coded Content
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Conflict areas	Discourse areas and conflicts/contests within EU politics and -crisis.
Casual interpretations	Attributions of responsibility, affectivities, and correlations between actors and developments within EU politics and -crisis.
Evaluations	Consequences, moral/ethical assessments, acceptance/rejection of events, developments, decisions etc. in EU politics and -crisis.
Recommendations and demanded actions	Recommended actions, proposals, prognoses, and pre-mediations in EU politics and -crisis.

The main categories for each frame element were mainly defined through inductive coding under the influence of the research questions and the results of the quantitative content analysis. Statements made by first- and second level communicators were read again and a code was assigned to each one, while new codes were created when necessary. For instance, a conflict area was coded whenever a first- or second level communicator mentioned a political, social, cultural, or economic aspect of the crisis that potentially triggered the formation of at least two diverging opinions and/or interpretations. An example from the sample illustrates this process:

EU Commission will decide on new regulation of energy consumption by coffee machines; this is an example for how the Commission got side-lined in favour for national governments during the crisis.

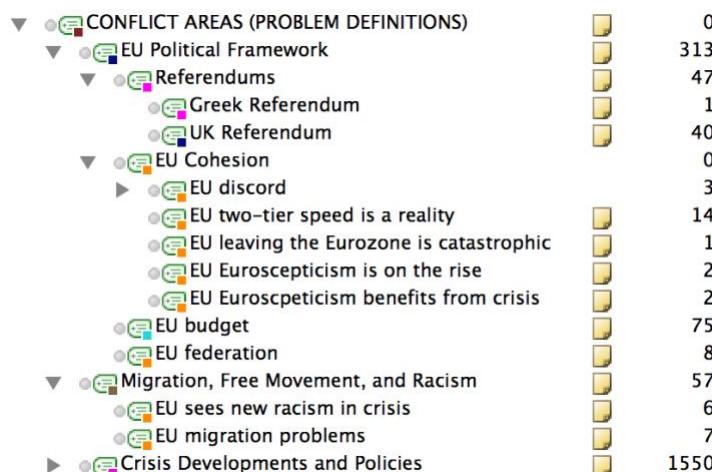
Since this statement has a clear relation to the crisis, it was coded for the conflict area *Crisis Developments and Policies*. It also addresses the EU commission's dwindling political influence during the crisis and thus was coded for a second conflict area *EU Political Framework*. The content was coded for the frame element *Evaluations*, too, since it implicitly addresses the structural weaknesses of the EU; the code *EU Structural Weaknesses* is in turn a sub-code of the main code *EU Critical*, which automatically applied as well if one of its sub-codes was activated. In sum, four codes apply to this statement. Another example shows how main- and sub-categories were coupled:

Papandreu's announcement of a referendum caused shocked reactions from Eurozone partners; the burgeoning debt crisis across the Eurozone is widely seen as taking a toll on national sovereignty.

This item covers developments that are both a direct result of the crisis and influential factors in its future development; hence it was coded for the conflict area *Crisis Developments and Policies*. Since the content focuses on the Greek referendum it received the main code for the second conflict area *EU Political Framework*, the sub-code *Referendums*, and the “sub-sub-code” *Greek Referendum*. This differentiation of dimensions within the categories for the frame element *Conflict Areas* enabled the identification of fault lines and comparisons between communicators within the discourse. The coding scheme for the qualitative analysis was very detailed and tried to “catch” as much information as possible, while the reduction of complexity and identification of broader conflict areas remained unproblematic due to the coupling of the sub-codes to their main codes (e.g. *EU Political Framework>Referendums> Greek Referendum*), which is mandatory for the subsequent hierarchical cluster-analysis for the detection of frames. The data could be screened in varying levels of depth, which provided flexibility in the discussion of the results and their relevance for different research questions. It was therefore possible to trace the different facets of the crisis and compile a comprehensive picture of the discourse.

To identify dominant frames for the EU and the crisis in the content with a hierarchical cluster analysis, it was indispensable to reduce the level of differentiation again; otherwise the determination of frames based on quantitative data that was yielded with the categories derived from the qualitative content analysis would have remained unfeasible. The variables that served for differentiating between clusters needed to be definable via binary codes that decide whether an attribute applied or not. To achieve this, the extensive level of detail in the coding categories that emerged during the explorative-qualitative analysis had to be reduced to a binary 0/1 scheme (0= does not occur, 1= occurs) for their main coding categories, i.e. the broader conflict areas, causal interpretations, evaluations, or recommendations and demand. The occurrence/non-occurrence of a sub-category served as an indicator for this. For example, the occurrence of the conflict area *EU Political Framework* applied wherever one of its sub-categories was mentioned in the sample, i.e. in all statements that were coded for *Referendum*, *EU Cohesion*, *EU Budget* and their sub-sub categories.

Screenshot 1: Category building in MAXQDA



The main analytical units were not entire articles but coded content that was divided into first- and second communicator statements; this partial atomisation allowed the allocation of frame elements to actors and served for spotting differences in the perception of EU politics and the crisis between communicators (or authors and sources).

Cluster analyses as multivariate statistical methods often serve for the identification of groups of similar types within a sample. Their main purpose is to reduce complexity and “cluster” cases that share common attributes into distinguishable groups. For each of the platforms a hierarchical cluster analysis was conducted to see what frames occurred. The clusters grouped first- and second level statements that included a similar set of frame elements and enabled the identification of complete frames per platform. Following Matthes and Kohring (2008: 269), the Ward method was applied for calculating what clusters of articles/postings were particularly close to each other; an adequate number of clusters was then defined with the elbow-method ‘similar to a scree test in exploratory factor analysis. A clear “elbow” in the plot of the heterogeneity measure signifies that fusing these two clusters would result in a cluster that is too heterogeneous’ (*ibid*).⁴² Only variables that occurred in more than 5% of the content, and at least two times, were included in the cluster analysis (*ibid*). The mean values per frame elements were calculated for each cluster; high mean values implied that a set of frame elements occurred relatively often, which served then for the interpretation of a cluster as an individual frame (*ibid*: 269). The authors admit that ‘mean values of binary variables are problematic in statistical terms’ but they also point out that this method ‘alleviates a quick interpretation of our cluster solution’ (*ibid*). They further advise: ‘First, the highest means within one cluster indicate the most important variables[...] Second, rather low mean values within a cluster can also be of significance when it is a high value compared to all other clusters[...] Third, it is also important to note which variables have low values’ (*ibid*). The same process was applied to the other frame elements. The inductively established categories were transformed into a variable set that was processed in *SPSS* to conduct the hierarchical cluster-analyses. Comparisons with the qualitative data refined the final definition. The raw data, graphs, tables, and all appendices can be found on the author’s blog (<https://dennisnguyen2010.wordpress.com>).

Chapter 5: The Crisis Web Sphere

Convergence versus Conflict and Fragmentation

The structure of the crisis web sphere: where online communicators converge and where they diverge, what main conflict areas the crisis debate covered, how political communicators framed the crisis, the impact of cultural-political segmentation, and what key actors dominated the discourse.

An Emerging Transnational Web Sphere?

The analysis of European online platforms shows that the crisis in EU- and Eurozone politics and economy triggered considerable communicative activity and limited convergence in the political media landscape. Despite structural and quantitative differences, most online platforms covered the same themes and issues that dominated EU politics between 2011 and 2013. This implies at least rudimentary discursive convergence across the political and geographical spectrum, as the crisis and its sub-areas served as common points of reference for different online communicators. The findings are based on sample N1 (=13080).

Political and economic topics clearly dominated the analysed period; cultural issues were a minority (table 4). The EU is primarily perceived as a political institution that affects economic life through regulating the single market and single currency; EU politics denominates discussions and decisions made by key actors on a transnational level, though it also covers EU-related debates in individual member-states.

Table 2: General Topics in N1

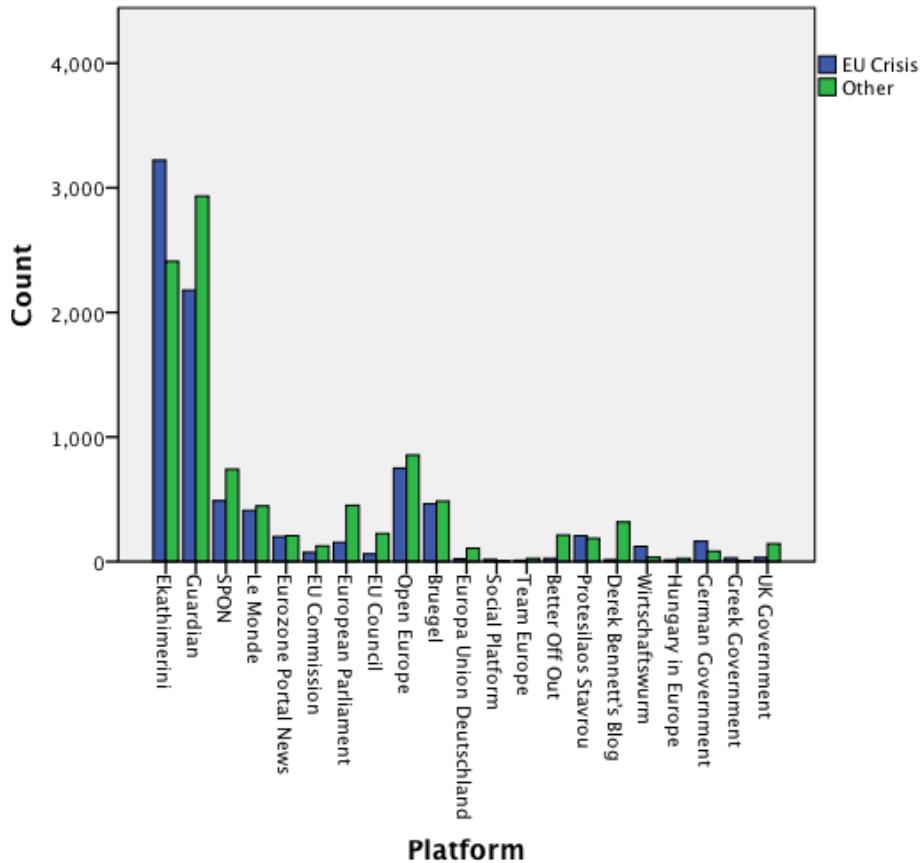
Topic	Frequency	Percent of N1
EU Politics & Economy	8696	66.5
EU Culture	242	1.9
EU Environment	188	1.4
EU Migration/Racism	280	2.1
National Politics & Economy	3391	25.9
Other	281	2.1
Total	13078	100.0

Examples are bailout negotiations, EU summits, EU budget negotiations, the banking union, the fiscal union, and EU foreign policy. Additional topics include environmental issues, Internet regulation, law, and migration and racism issues. The second largest topic area concerns the national-domestic stage, such as elections or debates between national party politicians etc. This confirms previous findings on “offline” EU newspaper coverage, which showed a strong tendency towards political and economy-related content in the EU sections of European news media prior to the crisis years (Hepp et al. 2012).

The data further indicates that all European political online platforms addressed the Eurozone crisis, which is with 64% a majority among the covered topics. A large proportion of the analysed articles included at least one aspect related to the crisis’ general development or its local manifestations in Spain, Portugal, Ireland, Italy, Cyprus, and most importantly Greece (figure 3). The crisis and its sub-sections became a shared context for public political communication, which is a fundamental precondition for the emergence of a (transnational) web sphere. The crisis stimulated communicative activity across the continent, as the various communicators reported, analysed, and commented on its development from different political and social angles across various cultural spaces.

The frequency of EU crisis reporting varied between platform types and depends on its level of perceived affectivity. For instance, it is hardly surprising that economic think tank Bruegel devoted 86% of its content to crisis related developments. Greek platforms covered the crisis intensively: 89% of EKathimerini articles dealt with the crisis or one of its sub-sections; on the Greek blogger’s site, it was 98%. Greece was one of the crisis’ “core countries” where the consequences of an enormous public deficit, the threat of a total default, and austerity measures hit hardest, especially in form of high unemployment and extensive dismantling of the welfare state. The crisis quickly developed into an omnipresent factor in public and private life in Greece; it heavily affected interactions across the Greek political landscape and left a permanent impact on Greek society, which is reflected in the EU coverage of Greek news media outlets (Doudaki 2015) and political online platforms.

Figure 3: EU Crisis in articles per platform in N1



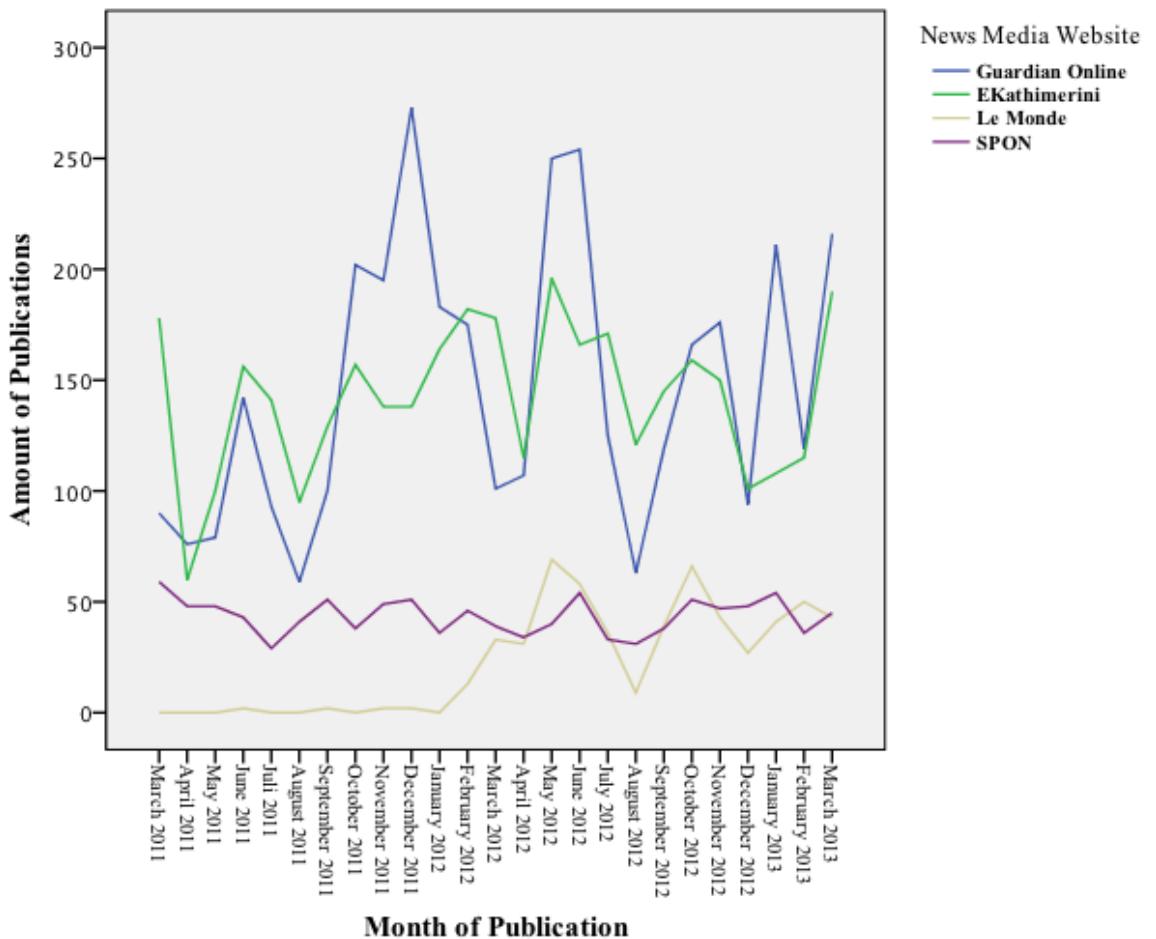
German platforms paid close attention to the crisis, too: on Spiegel Online 45% of all articles covered the crisis, on Wirtschaftswurm’s blog it was 67%, and on the German government page 72%; only Europa Union Deutschland delimited its crisis coverage to 15% of all published articles. However, the type of affect the crisis had on the German context was a very different one: the level of involvement as a key player in political and economic decisions that largely determined the Eurozone’s future is one important reason for the strong focus on the EU crisis in German political online platforms. Leading German politicians, first and foremost Chancellor Angela Merkel and Minister of Finance Wolfgang Schäuble, were perceived as primary architects of the Eurozone’s crisis strategy, which mainly consisted of bailouts attached to austerity measures for achieving fiscal consolidation and to sustainably reduce sovereign debt. Germany assumed a central role as the EU’s strongest economy and main contributor to the EU budget and Eurozone bailouts. The crisis became a crucial factor in German transnational and national politics, even if the crisis was not immediately experienced among German taxpayers –at least not to the extent as it materialised in everyday life of regular citizens in the Southern part of the Eurozone and Ireland. German commentators discussed to what extent the country should help struggling Eurozone members, i.e. what costs for bailouts and thus maintaining the single currency were acceptable, which entailed a chain of political implications for the transnational balance of power in the EU.

British online media covered the crisis to a noticeable degree: The Guardian Online included the crisis in 56% of its EU-related content and on Open Europe its 78%. The economic challenges in the Eurozone had far-reaching political implications and consequences beyond the countries that were

immediately affected; it was not limited to struggling Eurozone economies in the Mediterranean area but quickly expanded to the EU in general and influenced debates on its future course for integration. It evolved into an ever-present factor in political debates on the EU across the continent, leaving an impact even in contexts that did not seem to have any immediate links to the crisis as such, at least not at first glance. Examples are the UK referendum debate or the negotiations for a new EU budget plan in 2012 and 2013.

Though the quality of the crisis' immediacy and actual social and economic consequences varied between the different member-states, it transformed into a connecting element in a purely communicative sense, as it determined the course of the overall political discourse on the EU, due to its unprecedented scope and gravity. "Connecting" must not be confused with social integration or the proactive formation of Pan-European identities in this context, but should be interpreted as an indicator for discursive convergence: the parallel observation and discussion of the same transnational phenomena that affect different social and economic regions in variable form but in potentially equal intensity. Furthermore, the platforms show similarities in a "historical" respect. The four news media sites shared peaks and lows in their EU coverage throughout the analysed time span; these shared peaks, e.g. in between May and June 2012 (Greek elections) or between February and March 2013 (the height of the Cypriot crisis, figure 4), imply a convergence of topical foci.

Figure 9: Publications per month per news media site in N1



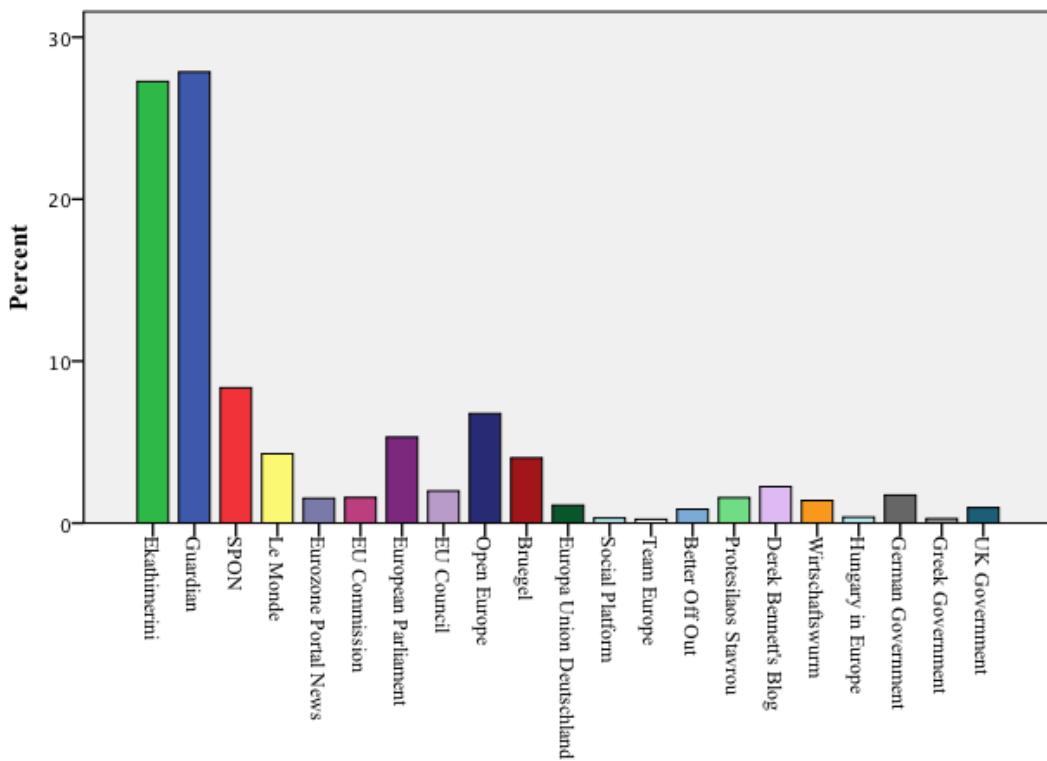
The peak in the Guardian's EU reporting between January and February 2013 is linked to the platform's extensive coverage of the UK's government stance in the EU budget negotiations; an issue which had considerable topicality in the domestic political discourse on the EU in Britain. Hence, despite several trajectories of confluence, noticeable differences between platforms emerged: only 22% of the European Parliament's online platform's content explicitly discussed the EU crisis or one of its sub-sections; in the case of the EU Council it was 21%, and even the EU Commission mentioned the crisis only in 35% of its content. The official EU platforms produced only a limited amount of crisis-related content, with the Eurozone Portal being the obvious exception. One reason for the low quantities of crisis-related articles might be the fact that the EU provided specific channels and platforms for Eurozone developments; the Eurozone Portal was such a specialised platform. However, even on this website the level of activity was low, especially if compared to the other types of platforms; it offered a mere 204 articles for two years of economic and political turmoil.

The pro-European NGO Europa Union Deutschland is another example for a decidedly EU-focused platform that paid surprisingly little attention to developments relevant to the crisis but rather focused on the general political framework for integration and federalisation. Unsurprisingly, the same applied for the UKIP Blog, which was mainly concerned with the UK referendum and treated the crisis as

a mere argument for leaving the union but not as an independent topical area. The analysis implies that the level of “response intensity” varied between different political actors, observers, and commentators. Each one had specific thematic emphases within EU politics and economy. While the official EU platforms seldom covered developments on an explicitly national level (e.g. the German general election, UK domestic debates on the EU referendum), 91% of articles on the UKIP blog covered stories on British Euroscepticism; on likeminded Better Off Out it was 76%. These are only a few examples for similar tendencies towards specialisation across platforms (e.g. EU economy, EU political framework, EU federalism, Euroscepticism, EU social work).

The intensity and quality of content production varied noticeably on each site: the British Guardian Online produced 3672 publications between March 2011 and March 2013, publishing up to 25 articles per day at peak moments such as the 2012 Greek elections; the Eurosceptic platform Team Europe shared only 30 postings in the same time span. Though based on the same technology, different structural features, communicative agendas, and internal work procedures determine each website’s level of productivity, i.e. the frequency and depth of content creation. Since news media sites depend on the constant production of content they formed the top providers of EU-related political information, leaving a considerable quantitative gap to other organisations and independent sources: almost 68% of all content in the sample was published on Guardian Online, EKathimerini, Spiegel Online (SPON), Le Monde Online (table 3). Productivity levels varied considerably within each category, i.e. between individual platforms, as well. Greek EKathimerini and British Guardian Online outperformed the other news sites and combined they accounted for 55% of the total sample (figure 5). There are two possible explanations for the vast quantitative differences.

Figure 5: Publications per platform in sample N1



Firstly, each news media brand approaches its Internet business model differently; how and to what extent sites share content is a major factor that determines its output. While some provide large amounts of quality publications virtually for free (Guardian Online), others may keep the intensity of online content production somewhat limited, in order to not compete with their own offline products (SPON). The human, cultural, and financial capital at disposal determines the overall output of an online platform. The second potential explanation seeks answers in different underlying discourse cultures that mould the scope and type of EU reporting (Hepp et al. 2012). The different platforms may write about the same events and developments within their EU sections yet the intensity and quality varied depending on the degree of relevance ascribed to EU topics. However, in the present cases it is more likely that different business models caused the differences between news media platforms' output levels; it seems rather unlikely that the German and French platforms assigned less relevance to the EU crisis as a result of prioritising e.g. domestic developments, since these were largely affected by transnational developments in the European dimension.

Table 3: Percentage of overall sample per platform type (N1= 13,080)

Type	Amount	Percentage of Overall Sample

News Media	8868	68%
EU Institutions	1357	10.4%
Think Tanks	1406	11%
NGOs	336	2.5%
Governments	385	3%
Independent	728	5.6%

The British Guardian Online dominated the sample quantitatively, which can be linked to the site's international outlook and the level of topicality that the EU, the Eurozone and its crisis achieved in UK domestic politics, especially regarding the controversial EU referendum debate. The situation looks similar on EKathimerini, the English version of the popular Greek news media site, at least from a structural perspective. Since the Greek crisis and the EU crisis were intrinsically linked to each other in a continuous feedback-loop, the thin lines between domestic and transnational politics almost completely dissolved in Greece, which left an impact on the intensity of EU coverage in Greek news media. Between 2011 and 2013 EU-related politics fundamentally affected political, economic, social and cultural developments in the country on a virtually daily basis. Due to the unprecedented scope of the crisis, EKathimerini produced a large amount of related news items, reports, and comments; the levels of immediacy and topicality of EU- and crisis developments for specific cultural and political contexts seemed to influence the quantity of EU reporting.

Content production appeared more homogenous across the official EU websites. Most platforms provided 200 to 250 articles, with the European Parliament being the only exception, as its online news feed included 697 stories. A look at the internal structures and spheres of competency for each EU branch hints at potential reasons for this quantitative difference: the EU Council, the EU commission, and the Eurozone Portal include a limited number of political actors with relatively well-defined areas of responsibility, which frames and filters the levels of content production in form of news items, comments, and reports. The European Parliament (EP) includes a more diverse set of partly antagonistic political actors and groups and it is involved in a wider spectrum of political and cultural activities. An additional reason for higher productivity levels on the EP's website is its role as a representation of EU citizens and the implied proximity that should ideally exist between Members of Parliament and electorates.

Think tanks were the second most productive group, even though it includes only two platforms. Centre-right Open Europe published 881 articles on its official blog, self-proclaimed 'non-doctrinal' Bruegel 525. This relatively intense EU coverage can be linked to the main goals and "work order" of think tanks: to produce and distribute interpretations and proposals for solutions to problems from a specific political perspective via all available means of communication. Since the two organisations focus on EU politics and economics in particular, the crisis may have stimulated the articulation of opinions on their websites. Online media expand the set of communication tools and enable political groups to partly circumvent the mass media as a mediating entity. This does not mean that political organisations do not

have an interest in attaining the attention of traditional media outlets; to the contrary, it remains one of their key goals when it comes to the dispersion of specific political agendas. Nevertheless, online media enable them to provide additional, unfiltered access to their content and to open new arenas for political discourses. It is hardly surprising that think tanks make extensive use of media technologies to comment on and potentially influence processes of political decision-making and policy implementation.

The four NGOs, Europa Union Deutschland, Social Platform, Better Off Out, and Team Europe, showed the lowest productivity levels. Altogether, they only accounted for 338 articles of N1. This implies that not all organisations regard online communication as a central element in their daily political work; its role might be limited to a supplementary function. Different levels of know-how and resources (time, money, manpower) for online campaigning contribute to qualitative and quantitative gaps between online platforms. However, web representations can change rapidly and continuously, due to the extremely dynamic nature of the technological infrastructure. For instance, Social Platform's online presence underwent a complete update and started to produce more content in 2014 and similar developments took place on Better Off Out.

The three national government websites showed a lower level of content production. Within the sub-sample the German government news feed provided the most publications, almost 40% more than its British counterpart. The German government's role as a key player in fundamental decisions on the future of the Eurozone, and the EU in general, might be one reason for this quantitative difference. Differences in the attribution of relevance to EU politics can explain such gaps between government platforms. The numbers imply that official European government news feeds on Europe rather form supplements *to* than central elements *of* public communication campaigns.

Finally, there is the category of independent commentators who use blogs as their preferred online platforms. The level of activity mainly depended on the authors' professional backgrounds but is generally high, considering that single, individual persons maintained each blog. Though all of them expressed personal opinions and were not acting under the direct (obvious) leadership of some political organisation, they are not political amateurs in a strict sense: the Greek blogger studied political science and commented on the crisis from a very critical yet not Eurosceptic perspective in Greece; the articles reflected academic knowledge about political philosophy and political economy. The author of Hungary in Europe is a professional in EU politics and displays a high level of insider knowledge on political developments in the EU and Eastern Europe. Wirtschaftswurm received an award for his blog on which he analyses Eurozone politics and -economy; he disseminated his economically motivated Euroscepticism in articles that show a professional expertise of economics. The British UKIP blogger articulated his perspectives from a local politician's perspective. Due to their backgrounds none of the authors can be seen as representative of a larger population of regular citizens. In fact, their content can easily compete with the other professional online platforms in terms of complexity and depth. Still, the actual level of expert knowledge about EU politics and economy varied between the independent bloggers with each emphasising a different dimension (economic policy, integration politics, national sovereignty etc.).

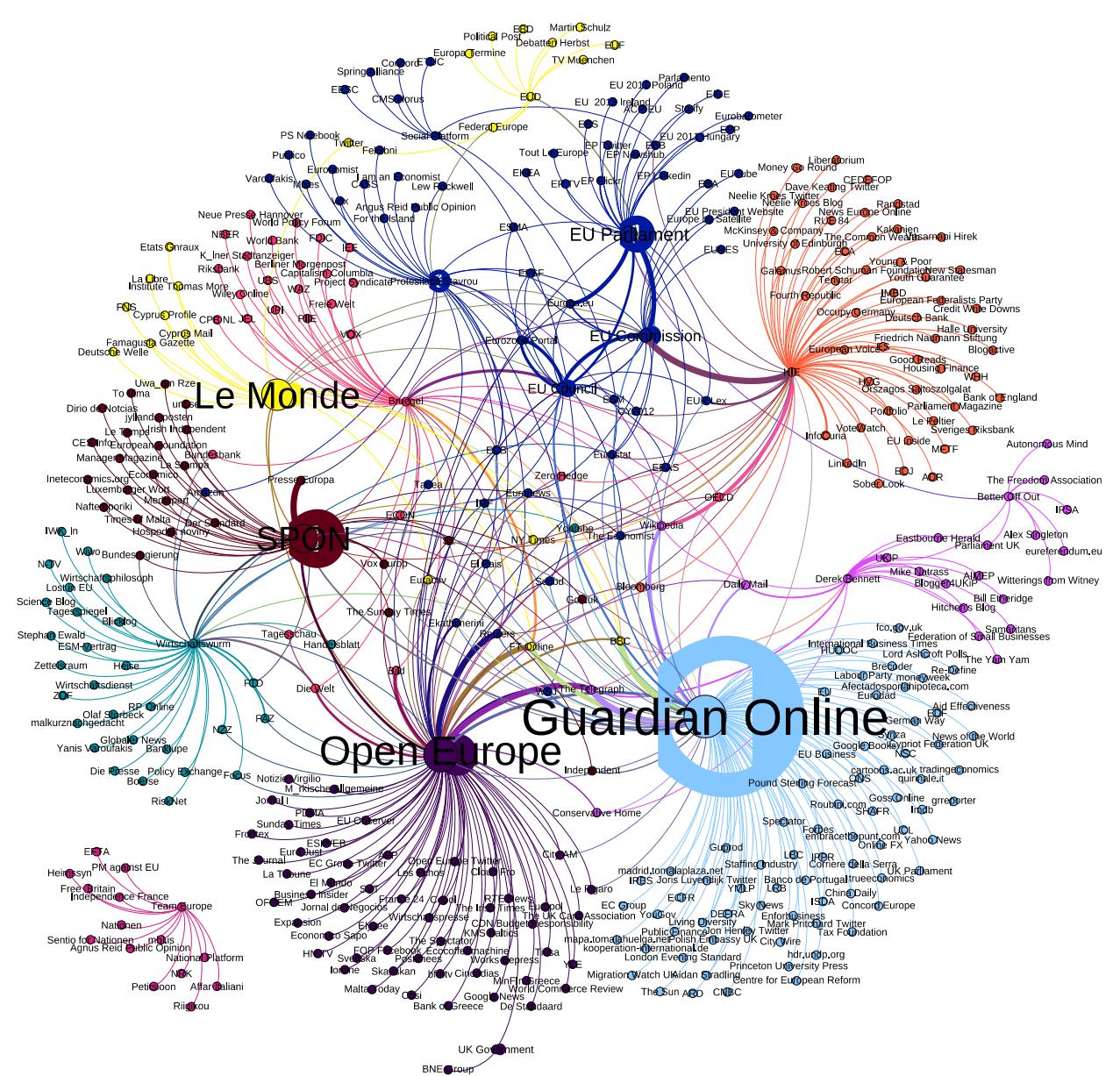
An online platform's specialisation within the area of EU politics and economics further determines the structure of the hyperlink network that it is part of: Though the data shows that the online

platforms included relatively few links in general, the directions of existing hyperlinks imply tendencies towards discursive clustering, mainly along topical foci, political-ideological attitudes, and national lines. Forms of silo creation or partial fragmentation did indeed emerge in the political web sphere on the EU and its crisis. Discursive convergence and discursive integration are not necessarily mutually dependent, nor is the latter an inevitable consequence of the former, i.e. online communicators may talk about the same issues but do not necessarily link to each other or opposing perspectives. The data implies that aside from linkages to the general field of EU politics and –economy, each platform developed its own sub-discourse with focus on a relevant but distinguishable topic area.

Each of the online platforms had a separate sub-network of sources and partner sites, as shown in figure 12.⁴³ A node's size implies the amount of content with integrated links published on a platform (the larger the node, the more articles with links), while a connection or “edge’s” weight, i.e. thickness, indicates the number of directed links to another node. The colouring indicates to which community a node belongs within the network graph; the calculation of communities was based on the set of shared directed edges towards another node, i.e. it clusters websites that link to the same sources.

Diversity of hyperlinking targets depended on the type of online platform. For example, while think tank blog Open Europe included links to a variety of different web sources, the news media sites mainly limited the scope of their comparatively few integrated links to other “in-house” content. The EU platforms formed a closely connected cluster in the upper centre right of the graph and did not establish any direct hyperlink ties with websites outside of their own organisations. In the case of news media, the majority of links also directed to other in-house articles and not to an alternative source; the graph does not include any information on hyperlinking in EKathimerini's as well as the German and Greek governments' content, since the platforms did not integrate any links at all. The situation for independent bloggers looks mixed: The Greek blogger mostly linked to his own articles, while the others preferred to include alternative sources (*ibid*).

Figure 6: Hyperlink network (directed) in N2



In a few cases tendencies towards demarcation emerged regarding the ideological outlook of a platform. Websites sharing a similar political background can share closer ties with each other, while only rudimentary or no hyperlink relations exist to online platforms from the other end of the ideological spectrum. For example, in the upper half of the map pro-European platform Europa Union Deutschland included hyperlinks to websites with a similar political outlook as their own, while the same applied to their Eurosceptic counterparts in the right section of the graph. Economy-focused platforms Wirtschaftswurm, Bruegel, and Open Europe frequently linked to sources with a fiscal/economic focus; NGO Social Platform mainly linked to websites on social work. Though the news media sites prioritised referencing their own content they still displayed a relatively high diversity in the choice of targets within this limited segment, which included different national and international websites. This implies tentative discursive integration on the hyperlink level, as e.g. SPON or the Guardian Online occasionally integrated links to other European news sites. However, they almost never included hyperlinks to alternative political platforms and -groups (e.g. protest movements) but established their few hyperlinks with other institutionalised political- and media organisations. Nodes that served as references for multiple platforms, such as Wikipedia or popular news media sites, are located closer to the centre of the graph.

The data implies that most online platforms were embedded within a hyperlink-based web sphere that showed ambivalent qualities: on one hand, there were tendencies of separation, as several online platforms seemed to limit their hyperlinks to related websites or their own content, which indicates demarcation in a general ideological dimension as well as concerning network ties in a technical dimension. At the same time, common linked nodes existed and various platforms included links to websites outside of their own political, linguistic, and cultural spectrum, if only to a very limited extent. One notable exception is the Eurosceptic Team Europe website, which is completely isolated from the rest of the sample in the lower left section. This might be a result of the platform's very low level of productivity and a lack of hyperlinks. From a technical perspective, discursive integration through hyperlinking and the condensation of online communication within a EU crisis-related context materialised only to a limited extent; the degree of integration remained rather low as forms of demarcation and clustering seemed to dominate the sampled content. Though hyperlinking can be used to establish direct ties with all relevant stakeholders in a transnational debate, the sampled platforms hardly implemented this potential but primarily promoted their own content. Discursive integration was therefore not a primary aim for online platforms in the EU crisis web sphere. However, these observations are strictly limited to the sample and additional research with much larger datasets collected with e.g. a web crawler would be needed to confirm the findings.

Furthermore, analysing what countries are mentioned in crisis related online content helps with identifying differences between local or regional emphases. Again, similarities and discernible differences go hand in hand. Most articles focused on a limited group of countries which were at the centre of the crisis' unfolding, namely Portugal, Ireland, Italy, Greece, Spain, Cyprus, Germany, and France. Though to a much lesser extent, the UK belongs to this group, too. In the latter case, it is not unlikely that the country's often controversial stance in debates on EU integration and the growing Euroscepticism in the British political landscape further boosted its level of relevance in EU- and crisis-related political communication. The USA, Russia, and China occurred frequently as well, due to their

status as influential actors in political and economic developments that concerned the EU, which highlights the global dimension of the crisis.

However, there is a quantitative and qualitative emphasis on the core countries listed above in crisis-related content (table 4). Especially Germany and Greece stand out as central actors *in* and sites of Eurozone politics. They were the most frequently named countries both individually and in conjunction with each other. The two countries also became representatives for each side of the economic and political divide between Northern and Southern EU member-states that emerged during the crisis. Germany, the EU's strongest economy and most important actor in decisions on Eurozone politics, was frequently included in content on the crisis and general debates on the EU's political framework. The same applies for Greece, which was the main site for Eurozone-related debates; the impact of decisions of key actors were felt the strongest here. Greece's crisis turned into an argument for the need to change the overall framework of the single currency and the EU for both pro-European and Eurosceptic positions. In other words, the two countries roles in crisis politics caused the level of attention they received across online platforms.

Specific combinations of countries that were often named together occurred throughout the crisis discourse, with the GIIPS as the most common one. Distinct cultural, political, and social spaces were reduced and clustered in relation to their economic common denominator, which was the sole fact that they all suffered from an extreme public debt and lack of growth; differences rooted in individual political cultures and historical developments were often neglected for the sake of simplicity and reductionist generalisations.

Table 4: EU members-states in N1

	EU Crisis-Related		Other Topic		
	Count	Column N %	Count	Column N %	
Nation-States	UK	918	12.8%	1128	19.1%
	Germany	2061	28.8%	1746	29.6%
	France	1208	16.9%	1129	19.2%
	Spain	1197	16.8%	811	13.8%
	Portugal	661	9.2%	424	7.2%
	Netherlands	416	5.8%	379	6.4%
	Belgium	118	1.7%	114	1.9%
	Poland	125	1.7%	155	2.6%
	Denmark	100	1.4%	133	2.3%
	Czech Republic	108	1.5%	163	2.8%
	Bulgaria	158	2.2%	227	3.9%
	Estonia	61	0.9%	77	1.3%
	Greece	5392	75.5%	3351	56.8%
	Lithuania	40	0.6%	62	1.1%

Italy	1566	21.9%	1119	19.0%
Hungary	99	1.4%	157	2.7%
Romania	94	1.3%	162	2.7%
Slovakia	122	1.7%	114	1.9%
Slovenia	77	1.1%	72	1.2%
Sweden	196	2.7%	255	4.3%
Finland	322	4.5%	247	4.2%
Latvia	64	0.9%	75	1.3%
Malta	56	0.8%	64	1.1%
Austria	280	3.9%	232	3.9%
Ireland	843	11.8%	566	9.6%
Luxembourg	220	3.1%	173	2.9%
Cyprus	574	8.0%	563	9.6%
USA	1031	14.4%	1097	18.6%
Russia	283	4.0%	385	6.5%
China	399	5.6%	408	6.9%

Many crisis-related online articles subsumed countries that differ in size, political standing, economic capability etc. under one label and portrayed them as somehow homogeneous on the basis of their economic parallels; for example, Ireland, a Northern-European member-state, was associated as part of the Southern sphere within the EU and Eurozone in the alleged North-South debate, since it was perceived as a struggling economy that relied on external funds.

There are a few differences between individual platforms that determined the degree of how often and intensive a specific nation-state's role was discussed. The news media sites are prime examples: they focused on the same set of countries in similar intensity (figures 7 to 10, the thicker the lines between two countries, the more often they were mentioned in conjunction); the perception of a strong relation between Germany and Greece can be identified across the British, French, German, and Greek news media platforms. However, the relevance of domestic political sentiments also determined what countries were discussed. For example, concerns over migration, which were a large part of the EU membership debate in the UK, led the *Guardian Online* to cover the accession of Bulgaria and Romania to the EU's free labour market. Each of the news media sites simultaneously emphasised the native country of their core audiences (i.e. UK, France, Germany, and Greece). This observation supports the hypothesis that convergences and differences are by no means mutually exclusive in the EU web sphere, at least not in this dimension. The same issues were debated from the perspective of a cultural and political angle that was in this case mainly adjusted by a nationally oriented perception of transnational developments. Nevertheless, in direct comparison, the networks of member-states and their contextualisation with their neighbours look almost the same. The situation seems similar on the other platform types; for example, the Greek blogger focused on the affectivity of the crisis on Greece from a Greek perspective, though he emphasised that he understands himself as a post-national/cosmopolitan world citizen. *Wirtschaftswurm* mainly discussed Germany's role in the crisis, while the Eurosceptic platform *Better Off Out* applied a British Eurosceptic perspective. Hungary in Europe delivered insights

into the perception and impact of EU politics from South-eastern Europe. However, none of these online platforms are representative of a “nation-state” as such; they are only one perspective within a wide spectrum of political positions. Their specific cultural and linguistic backgrounds were of fundamental relevance for their interpretation of political and social developments, but they cannot be generalised as somehow typical for a member-state, as no single online platform can grasp the total diversity of political opinions in hypercomplex modern societies.

The EU institutions published a considerable number of articles that mentioned no specific nation-states at all; if they did, description remained non-evaluative or positive. EU platforms seemed to largely avoid singling out specific member-states. This has at least two reasons, one is grounded in political-pragmatic deliberations and the other has an ideological background: first, the EU’s overall communication agenda tries to convey an image of unity and cooperation. Explicitly ascribing responsibility for either success or failure to an individual member-state or group of member-states would be extremely counterproductive for achieving this aim. It cannot risk to be seen as a divisive force by reproducing conflict lines between member-states but much rather aspires to overcome fault lines that emerged as a result of the crisis, e.g. by emphasising the urgency for coordinated actions, solidarity, and closer integration. Second, and closely related to this, the EU has an interest in being perceived as a key actor who is in control of political and economic developments within its sphere of competency; this applies to the EU as a general political entity but also for each of its branches and institutions. The content of public communication focused on the role and achievements of the EU (or the Council, the Commission, the EP, etc.), and not so much on individual member-states.

Figure 7: Countries in N1 on EKathimerini

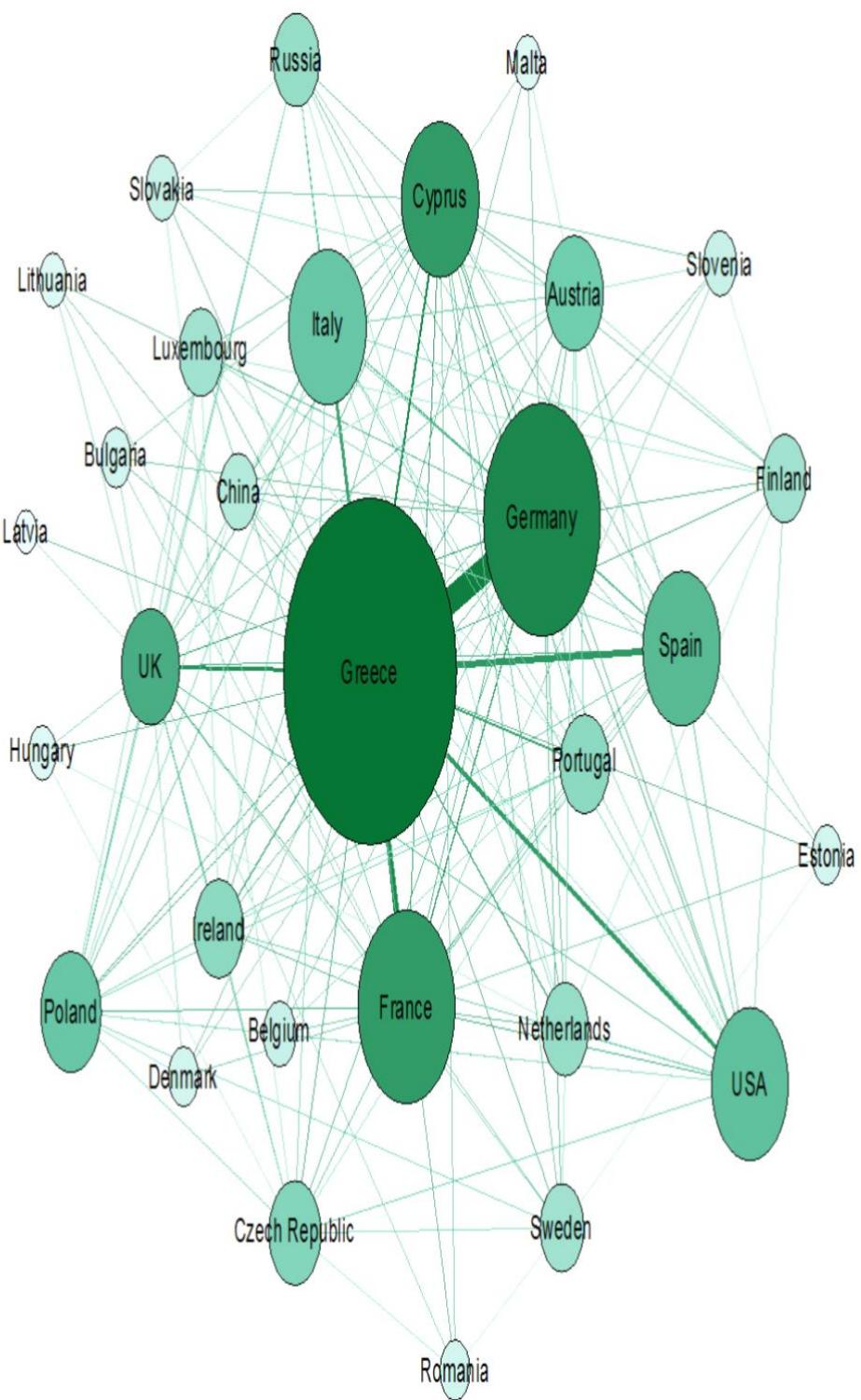


Figure 8: Countries in N1 on Guardian Online

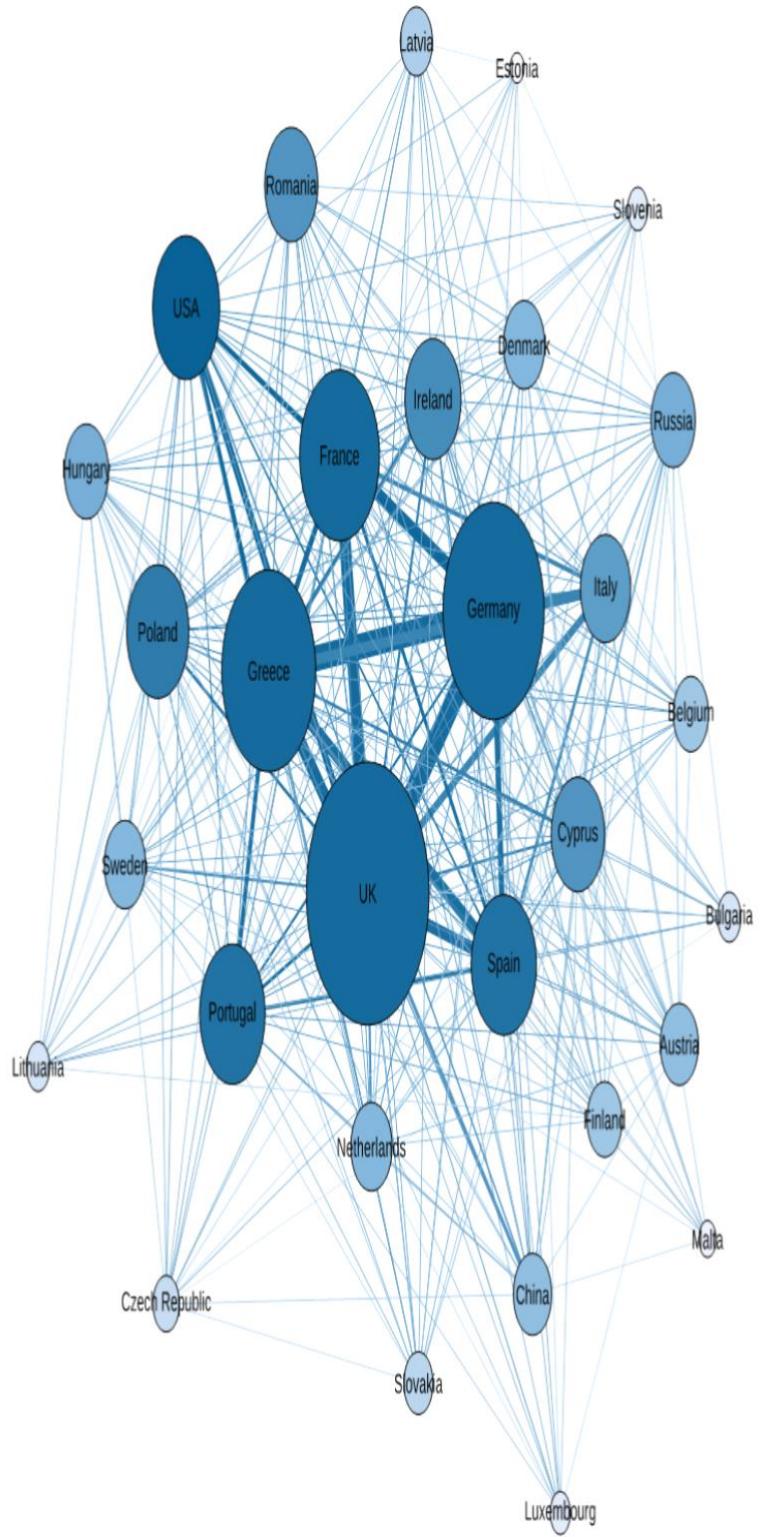


Figure 9: Countries in N1 on SPOON

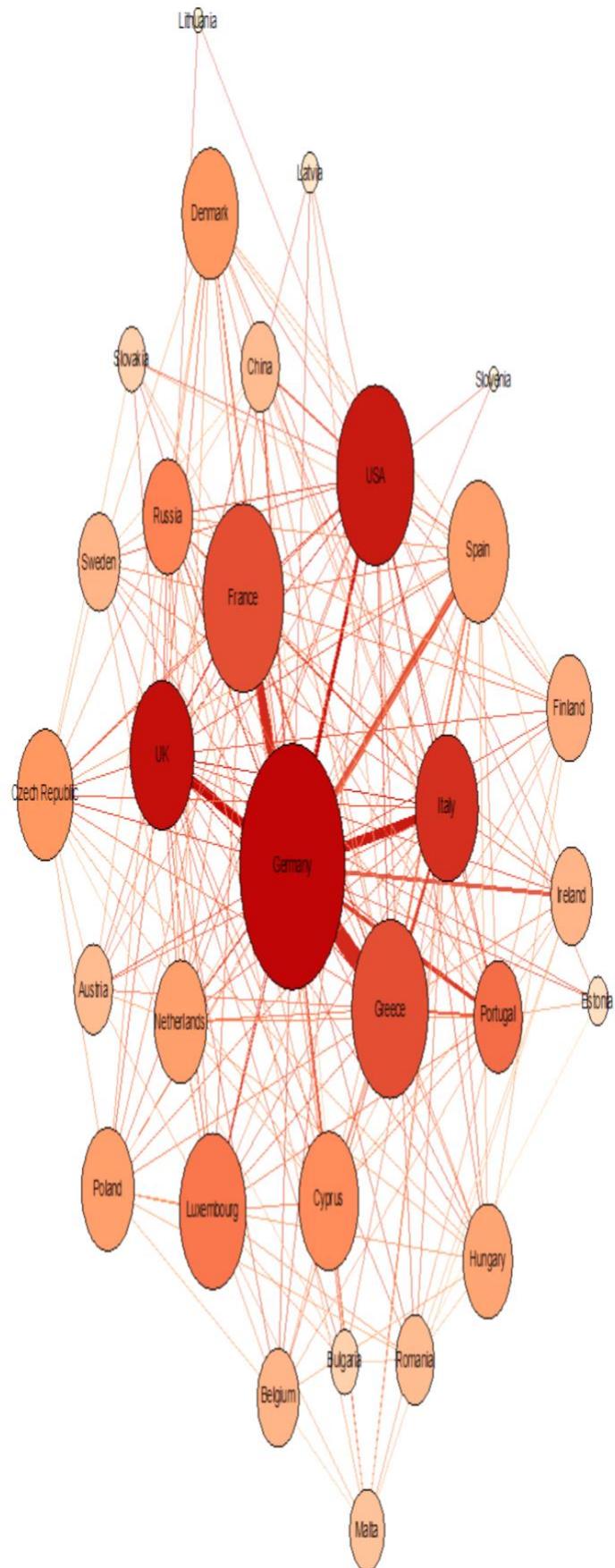
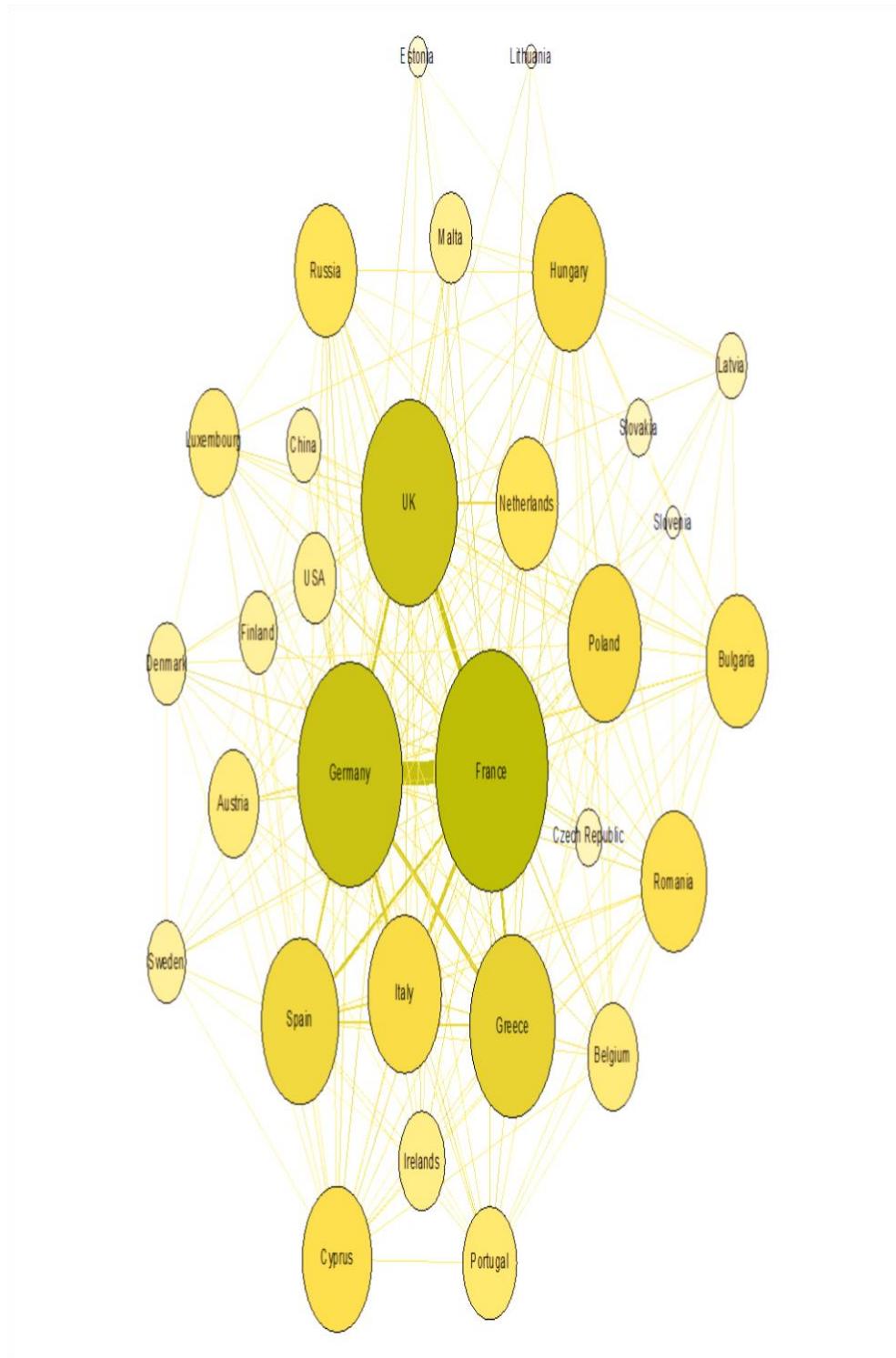


Figure 10: Countries in N1 on Le Monde Online



Mapping the general content areas and hyperlink ties shows that discursive convergence materialised across different types of online platforms that produced content on the EU and its crisis. The empirical observations support the claim that a transnational web sphere for the European context emerged during the years between March 2011 and March 2013, which was the most tumultuous period in recent European politics. The different communicators discussed largely the same general set of issues, and inevitably focused on the same spectrum of involved actors and nation-states that were at the centre of EU politics and the crisis. Their public online communication condensed into a web sphere of related digital content that was based on a variety of sub-clusters of online networks. The scope of this EU web sphere was genuinely transnational, as the central themes served as a shared context for communicators from different political cultures and linguistic backgrounds; they dealt with fundamental political and economic transformations that transcended the boundaries of individual nation-states. The Web provided public communicators of varying political weight and resources with the same communication tools to contribute to this EU web sphere, which partly levelled and “liberalised” access to digital transnational audiences. As a result, the diversity of available opinions, assessments, and thus frames, increased considerably. Interested users could theoretically pick, choose, and compare an abundance of political information.

Still, each platform had its own specific angle on areas of EU- as well as crisis politics and in many cases a specific national orientation. Differences emerged between platform types, as the political standing, perspectives, and social positions seemed to shape the actual communication strategy as well as agenda of an online communicator, i.e. a whole conglomerate of factors determined in each case to what extent an online platform implemented the potential of online technology for its specific goals and aims. News media sites displayed the greatest diversity in terms of topics covered in their EU sections and they were the most productive platforms, i.e. they published the largest quantities of content and attracted most user activity on the comment-level; they included only few links to other websites than their own and authors seldom engaged with their audiences in on-site debates. Furthermore, they observed transnational developments from a nationally oriented perspective. News media sites seemed to apply a top-down model of public communication, which implies only limited willingness to engage in genuinely multilateral online debates; explanations for this situation can be found in their structure and procedures for information processing and sharing, which are again heavily determined by economic motivations. The level of discursive convergence appears to be very similar to the tentative Europeanisation identified in offline newspapers, if it is not the same.

Except for the Eurozone Portal, crisis-related aspects formed a minority in most official EU content; they limited the inclusion of nation-states. The EU sites were even less interactive in terms of establishing multilateral communication flows. The various EU websites were interlinked with each other and it was relatively easy to switch between different EU platforms, social media pages etc. However, the pattern of hyperlinking is rather circular and limited to EU platforms, as links to other, non-EU-related websites were not included. It seems the EU failed to meet its goal of discursive integration and tended to apply a unilateral, public relations inspired approach to public digital communication. Admittedly, one reason for this observation could be that the EU offers a range of other web platforms for e.g. user participation. Still, considering its ambitious goals for improving its digital public communication in general, the findings so far support previous critical assessments of the efficiency of the EU online

campaign(s) (Sarikakis and Lodge 2013). The situation looks similar for the different government websites. Despite differences on the content-level (i.e. languages, topics etc.) the Greek, German, and British government websites shared striking similarities in the one-directional structure of their online media representations, which were little more than archives for digital press releases. The Internet's potential to overcome traditional patterns of political communication remained largely unrealised on these platforms.

The think tank websites applied a mixed approach that lies somewhere in-between uni- and multilateral digital communication strategies. Both show a relatively high diversity in their modes of hyperlinking and they tried to stimulate on-site debates via comment functions; occasionally, the authors engaged in discussions with their readers. However, they also frequently linked to their own "in-house" content or a specific selection of secondary resources that reflected their main work foci, which were in these cases economics, business, and fiscal issues. The same can be said about the NGOs and independent bloggers, though the actual degree of seclusion differed for each individual online platform. The level of political "conviction" and polarisation is one important indicator for assessing the level of isolation on the network level: for example, the extreme Eurosceptic websites almost exclusively linked to their political allies; this applied to their extreme Europhile counterparts, too. These online platforms seemed to contribute to an ideological fragmentation of the transnational discourse on the EU and its crisis in the sense that they did not establish immediate communicative links to opposing viewpoints in a technical respect via linking; they talked to some sort of assumed public but not directly to their political opponents (but about them, see next section). This observation applied to most platforms across all categories. Though the level of convergence was relatively high, tendencies towards segmentation appeared to mould the web sphere's hyperlink infrastructure; different political perspectives and communication agendas set clear limits to the degree of mutual hyperlink ties between various platforms.

To sum up, from a purely technical perspective a transnational political web sphere emerged for the EU and crisis context; different nodes shared a common context and thus the infrastructure for a digital public sphere, that means the circulation, exchange, and potential clash of different frames by different communicators, existed. The analysis of the technical properties and general tendencies in content already imply what lines of fragmentation, friction, and conflict materialised; it seems that convergence and integration are not mutually dependent. What are the implications for European integration? So far, the online media do not appear to stimulate convergence and the formation of transnational identities in the European context anymore than traditional mass media do; backgrounds and agendas that are not linked to Internet technology as such determine the perspectives communicated in the sphere. Events and developments that concern more than one nation-state trigger discursive convergence but local as well as ideological filters clearly determine each online platforms stance on Europe.

Only a more detailed, in-depth analysis of the content level reveals what frames dominated each platform and moulded the EU crisis web sphere. The involved online platforms and political actors each articulated different problem identifications, evaluations of the crisis, the attribution of responsibility/blame, proposed solutions and other aspects of frames in the crisis debate. Talking about the same issues was often the only "unifying" point for communicators and stakeholders with different political backgrounds, agendas, and ultimately goals that entered the transnational web sphere. Before the chapter continues with a detailed discussion of framing during the crisis, it is important to understand the

social composition and hierarchy of the discourse. It is indispensable to link dominant frames to their sources if the overall aim is to better understand why a conflict took shape and had its outcome; otherwise, the processes and motivations that cause the formation of frames remain inaccessible. Moreover, mapping the constellation of involved political communicator types allows searching for further tendencies towards integration and exclusion, i.e. to determine whether certain political groups are either over- or under-represented –or potentially even marginalised in transnational politics.

The Social Infrastructure of the Crisis Discourse in the Web Sphere

The crisis discourse displayed a high level of differentiation that was determined by the motivations and preferences of the involved first- and second level communicators, which in turn aggregated to the crisis' enormous complexity (first level communicators are the providers/editors behind an online platform, while second level communicators are all sources quoted in a text). There are hints for tentative discursive integration: Many platforms cited the same key actors in EU- and crisis politics, who transcended into a transnational sphere of political communication. Though a relatively diverse group of political actors contributed to the crisis discourse, only a handful of politicians and organisations eventually dominated the public stage. The diversity per communicator type varied considerably (the findings discussed in this section are based on sample N2 (=1347)).

Political communicators, i.e. individual politicians, political organisations, governments, or international/transnational institutions, formed the most common category of second level communicators (57%, table 4). Within this category an exclusive group of influential politicians dominated the web content in a quantitative respect. German politicians occurred particularly often, which reflected the central role they acquired in EU- and crisis politics: Chancellor Angela Merkel and Finance Minister Wolfgang Schäuble were either cited or mentioned in high frequencies across all platforms (screenshot 3). Other key players were IMF chief Christine Lagarde, British Prime Minister David Cameron, French President Nicolas Sarkozy, Greek successive Prime Ministers Antonis Samaras and George Papandreu as well as EU politicians Jose Manuel Barroso, Jean-Claude Juncker, Olli Rehn, and Herman Van Rompuy. Of the different EU institutions, the EU Commission was the most frequently mentioned branch, followed by the EU Council, and the European Parliament (figure 20). This order emerged from the level of active involvement in crisis politics: The Commission and Council were at the centre of crisis management while the EP's role was limited to an observing one in many cases; hence, fewer reference were made to the latter one. Due to its central role in the implementation of bailout programmes, the IMF was another frequently mentioned political communicator in crisis-related web content, either independently or as part of the so-called “troika”; the same applied to the ECB that gained in public exposure due to its political and economic relevance as a contributor to Eurozone rescue packages and as a potential supervising body in plans for a EU-wide banking union.

Protest movements and representatives of the civil society were hardly included on most online platforms; not even independent sites integrated them in their crisis coverage as quotable political communicators. Neither government websites nor the EU platforms mentioned specific protest groups. Politicians referred to the discontent citizens felt in e.g. Greece or Spain, but they did not actually engage

with them, i.e. there were no mutual communicative ties detectable. They explicitly or implicitly spoke about protesters but not with them. News media websites did not include them as equal discourse participants either but rather portrayed them as almost unpredictable reactions or ripple effects to decisions by the national and transnational political class (EK_2011/06/14; EK_2011/08/02; SPON_2013/03/23). This can be partly explained with the rhizomatic, anti-hierarchical “ad-hoc structure” of protest movements, which often materialise and vaporise in brief time spans. They tend to lack a singular public face and remain largely anonymous from top to bottom. This does not necessarily mean that they do not have explicit communication agendas. The few exceptions when protest movements were portrayed as coherent political units were e.g. union-groups who operated in local crisis theatres, such as Greece’s PAME (EK_2013/03/25). Still, even these more centralised non-political-establishment organisations were seldom provided with space to articulate their viewpoint and the category of protest- and alternative movements seemed underrepresented in the EU crisis discourse, at least as a type of interest groups with their own voices. To the contrary, they were depicted as some sort of faceless, uncontrolled occurrence or disruption not unlike a natural disaster. Significant feedback loops between professional online media platforms and alternative networks could not be identified within the sample.

Though the overall set of cited political communicators in the sample is relatively diverse (figure 10), these observations imply that considerable imbalances in terms of representation existed; the group of actual power players and decision-makers, who eventually determined the course of crisis politics, was small. There are indicators for a personalisation of EU- and crisis politics; for example, Angela Merkel was repeatedly depicted as the “face” of prevailing austerity policies and the primacy of fiscal discipline. The immediacy of crisis developments in member-states and the entailed implications for the single currency union as such is another relevant factor that explains why some political communicators received more public exposure than others. Greek political life in the covered time span is a primary example. Every domestic political development in Greece could influence crisis politics within the EU and vice versa; accepting or opposing bailout terms, remaining or leaving the Eurozone: the outcomes of these crucial decisions could have had unforeseeable consequences that were not limited to Greece but had broader implications for all member-states. Public attention frequently shifted to political debates in Greece, inevitably focusing its political class. The same accounted for Spain, Cyprus, Portugal, or Italy; whenever the “eye” of the crisis moved to another local theatre, the main political actors in each context became participants in and subjects of related political communication, i.e. gained in public visibility. The constellation of crisis-affected systems and the emerging fault lines determined what political communicators occurred and potentially dominated –in terms of quantity, not (necessarily) power– a related debate. This applies for the leading figures of the EU institutions, too, who gained in relevance as commentators *on* and actors *in* the crisis.

The focus of an online platform was equally important, as the political preferences of a first level communicator influenced what sources and political actors s/he included in content. For example, the Greek newspaper EKathimerini mainly focused on domestic politics in its coverage of EU politics during the crisis and thus included Greek political actors more often than the other platforms (figure 10). The British Guardian Online covered a potential UK referendum more frequently than most of the other news media platforms due to the immediacy of this issue for its main market, i.e. Great Britain; and since the UK referendum debate was one of the main political areas where the Eurosceptic UKIP raised its profile, its leader Nigel Farage subsequently occurred frequently in the Guardian Online’s EU coverage (*ibid*).

The same applied for David Cameron and other leading British politicians, who occurred more frequently in the Guardian's content than e.g. on German Spiegel Online. The other two news media platforms showed similar tendencies, which in sum confirms for these digital outlets what previous studies have shown for their offline counterparts: an emphasis on the national perspective in the EU coverage of most European news media (Hepp et al. 2012). Still, despite national preferences, all of the four European news media websites included a quite diverse and partly very similar transnational set of political communicators into their EU politics and crisis-related content, which is an indicator for limited discursive integration in the sense that EU politicians and/or politicians from another member-state entered nationally-oriented media debates (figure 10).

The Eurosceptic UKIP blogger is a vivid example for tendencies towards balkanisation on political blogs (Sunstein 2007). As a local UKIP politician, he mainly mentioned party colleagues – including Farage– or other, mostly like-minded, British politicians in his comments on domestic and EU politics; the same applies for self-proclaimed Eurosceptic NGO Better Off Out. Most cited political communicators on the UKIP blogger (88%) and Better off Out (86%) were national/domestic actors (*ibid*). When they referred to a political communicator who did not share their ideological background, it was mostly to discredit or ridicule a political opponent and to distance themselves from their positions. For instance, the UKIP blogger portrayed mainstream politicians like David Cameron or Vince Cable as ‘no real Eurosceptics’ and/or incapable of leading the country (DB_2013/01/24; DB_2012/12/03). Such tendencies towards discursive seclusion did not emerge on all online platforms and several websites included a diverse choice of political communicators in their EU crisis coverage (figure 24).

The official government and EU websites are prime examples for a different type of personalisation and exclusion: they mainly focused on the leading politicians at the top of the respective institutions/on themselves or other branches of the EU (*ibid*; table 13). The British government website's content almost exclusively cited the Prime Minister or other leading government officials, while its German counterpart could be described as the Merkel government's digital “mouthpiece”. The English version of the Greek government web platform seems to fulfil a similar function for the politicians currently in power. The inclusion of political communicators who were not part of the respective government was often limited to other heads of states and depended on the context, e.g. when David Cameron and Nicolas Sarkozy gave a joint press meeting or Merkel visited another member-state (GOV_2012/02/17; GER_2013/01/08). The situation on the EU institutions' main websites looks similar: the EU Commission's news pages frequently cited its President Barroso and the Council's online platform served for the dispersion of President Van Rompuy's statements. The European Parliament's main website shows a bit more diversity, due to its pluralistic structure, i.e. it included statements of various MEPs into its web content. Nevertheless, the set of cited political communicators was mainly limited to MEPs and seldom extended to other groups. Opposing or alternative political communicators were hardly mentioned at all.

Table 3: Frequencies and background of cited communicators per EU platform in N2

Platform	Same	% of	Other EU	% of	External	% of	Total

	Institution	Total	Institution	Total	Comm.	Total
EU Commission	38	51%	31	41%	6	8%
EU Council	25	22%	35	32%	52	46%
EU Parliament	307	71%	57	13%	66	15%
Eurozone Portal	45	48%	7	8%	48	52%
						93

A smaller group of second level communicators comprises of national and transnational political parties. National parties mainly occurred in domestic discourses on transnational developments and potential effects on a member-state. Examples are Greek national politics during bailout negotiations or the British debate about the country's EU membership (EK_2012/03/03; OP_2012/05/11c). In both contexts national political parties in and outside of the government tried to distinguish themselves in their agendas for EU (and crisis) politics from their opposition(s). News media websites included political parties in their EU coverage frequently, which underlined their primary role as stages for domestic political debate and contestation. Genuinely transnational political parties are alliances between ideologically similar parties in the European Parliament, such as the Christian-Democratic European People's Party (EPP), the Social-Democratic Party of European Socialists (PES), or the Eurosceptic organisation Europe of Freedom and Democracy (EFD). These groups occurred only in a few articles and played a negligible role in crisis politics. Another comparatively small category, both in terms of frequency and diversity, were national and transnational think tanks. Though several dozens of these organisations exist and try to influence EU politics, they remained largely invisible in public media debates, i.e. they were seldom cited or referred to as second level communicators; there were only a few exceptions, such as Bruegel and Open Europe.

Media communicators, i.e. individual journalists, print-/broadcasting and online media brands, form the second largest group of referenced communicators (14%, table 9). This category includes a wide range of national and international media outlets with different political backgrounds and reputations. The web sphere shows considerable diversity of sources, though discernable differences between the individual online platforms existed, i.e. some were more prone to include a comparatively pluralistic choice of sources than others (figure 24). However, as in the case of political actors there were considerable imbalances between the various media sources: though in sum over 200 different media communicators and/or media outlets were mentioned or quoted across the sample, again only a relatively small group of mainstream media dominated this section in a quantitative respect. German outlets occurred particularly often, such as tabloid Bild, news magazine Spiegel, and economy-focused newspaper Handelsblatt. The Financial Times was another notable outlet frequently cited in the EU web sphere, which is a status that was already confirmed for its print version in previous studies on European media discourses. Print products and their online versions representing the so-called "quality press" dominated the sample, accompanied by a few public broadcasting agencies such as the BBC or German ARD. Alternative media sources, whether online or offline, occurred only in low frequencies (e.g. Indy Media); the same applies to discussion groups in social media networks such as Facebook or Twitter.

Most media communicators are representatives of what is commonly labelled as the mainstream news media business and they were mainly included as points of reference for further commentaries on the respective online platforms. A primary example for this type of inclusion is Reuters, which was often treated as a neutral source of information and not a politically motivated commentator on the crisis. Other news media outlets were cited as mirrors or gauges for public opinion in a national and transnational respect. For example, the moderately Eurosceptic think tank Open Europe included summaries of media reactions across Europe to specific crisis-related events and developments into its web content as did the German news media website Spiegel Online (OP_2013/01/24; SPON_2013/03/23). In these cases a comparative look at analyses and commentaries in leading European news media outlets was applied to gain insights to general public sentiments towards concrete political and economic developments in different countries. The contexts in which media communicators were included vary considerably; one online platform may treat a particular news paper as an “objective” source of information, on another it is perceived as a window to public opinion, while in a third instance the same is regarded as a politically motivated or biased commentator. Further differentiation is needed between motivations for including media communicators in political web content and interpretations of their communication by an online platform’s operator.

The level of inclusion of media communicators and the choice of sources varies between online platforms. News media platforms tended to limit their inclusion of other media sources to special publications (e.g. transnational/international comparisons) and apparently refrained from doing so in most of their regular content. This corresponds with their hyperlinking behaviour: when they included a reference to news media articles and placed a link, it was in most cases directed to another in-house publication and not to a genuine secondary source. The economic logics in mainstream media business provide a potential explanation for this limited inclusion of other media sources and hyperlinks in professional news media content. Most major news media brands have an economic interest in promoting their own in-house content and to increase traffic on their own websites and internal linking is a central element in these online marketing strategies (e.g. search engine optimisation, click rates). The motivations to include potentially competing sources are therefore low.

Similar reasons seem to apply to other platform types as well. Government websites included media communicators only in cases where leading government officials were either cited or interviewed (GER_2011/03/10; HEL_2012/01/16). EU institutions tended not to integrate media communicators in their official web content but mainly directed to their own internal pools of public information. Mainstream news media websites and governmental bodies, both national and transnational ones, seemed to limit their choice of media sources. Furthermore, there was not a single instance among the sampled news media, governments, and EU websites where an independent online source or alternative information network was mentioned/referenced in their official political online communication. By contrast, independent bloggers, like Wirtschaftswurm or the UKIP blogger, did repeatedly include and link to other independent commentators, though these often shared a similar political outlook (figure 10). Non-mainstream online platforms showed greater flexibility and independent operators appeared more open towards alternative online sources. However, one has to further differentiate between individual platforms within each broader category, since some individual bloggers displayed a higher level of diversity than others. Somewhat surprisingly, the think tank websites belong to the most “pluralistic”

online platforms in the sample when it comes to the inclusion of a diverse set of media sources in purely quantitative terms (*ibid*).

Economic actors form the third largest category, which includes individual CEOs, companies, unions, but also, depending on the context, whole business sectors, such as the ‘banking sector’ or the ‘markets’. First- and second level communicators repeatedly characterised them as quasi-coherent actors that seemingly commented on and influenced crisis developments (PS_2012/07/02; OP_2012/03/30c). Such assumptions are not at all unproblematic considering the evasive character and inherent structural diversity of these “entities”. Banks from the so-called crisis countries occurred relatively often, due to their central roles in most bailout programmes; Cypriot, Greek, and Spanish banks were among the main receivers of rescue funding and retained a priority status in the prevailing crisis policies. International rating agencies, e.g. Moody’s, Standard & Poor’s, or Fitch, also gained public exposure, since their evaluation of economies and governments had an immediate impact on entire member-states and transnational strategies to overcome the crisis. Several Eurozone members lost their maximum rating between 2011 and 2013, which affected not only domestic politics but had broader implications for the Eurozone’s economic status. Their influence on fiscal and economic policies across the EU during the crisis eventually contributed to their position of relevance in transnational political communication.

Academics and academic institutions form a minority in the sample. This group mainly included prominent economists, such as Hans-Werner Sinn, Joseph Stiglitz, Yanis Varoufakis but also sociologists and political scientists like Jürgen Habermas or Ulrich Beck. Their points of contention largely concurred with the main conflict areas: some displayed themselves as Eurosceptics on primarily economic grounds, such as Hans-Werner Sinn (WW_2013/01/22), while others, like Paul Krugman, questioned the effectiveness of austerity policies (SPON_2013/03/27b); a third group, represented by e.g. Habermas, saw the prevailing crisis policies as another striking indicator for a lack of democratic accountability and primacy of national interests, i.e. the dominance of an intergovernmental approach in EU politics (GU_2012/08/09).

A network graph visualises the tendencies towards clustering in the inclusion of second level communicators across the EU crisis web sphere (figure 10).⁴⁴ Within the sample each website formed its own, distinguishable “cloud” of references, which displays structural similarities to their hyperlinking patterns. These clusters of references further imply that the web sphere was indeed partitioned along two main tiers: political preferences and diverging contentual foci, i.e. different emphases in the choice of covered conflict areas by an online platform. Moreover, the closer an online platform is located to the centre of the graph, the more references it shares with the other platforms –and if it is located further away from the centre, the less references it shares with the rest. Some examples for a relatively high degree of detachment from the core are the two Eurosceptic websites Better Off Out and Team Europe as well as their Europhile counterpart Europa Union Deutschland; all of them tended to include second level communicators who share a similar ideological background. Platforms that are closer to the centre share more diverse references. The group that forms the most frequently and widely mentioned political communicators across the sample are located right in the “midst” of the crisis discourse, i.e. at the centre of the graph (figure 10; 11). It includes all key actors in crisis politics: German, French, and Greek politicians and institutions, EU institutions, and the IMF. The “thickness” of an edge/connection implies how often a platform cited a political communicator. The important roles and crucial functions that these and similar political, economic, and social actors had during the crisis years, explains their central

positions within the network. This map of social constellations within the crisis discourse and its sub-areas, as reflected in the EU crisis web sphere, provides further indicators for the exclusion of certain political groups from the core of the general debate, even though they might dominate specific subsections of EU politics during the crisis.

Figure 10: Second level communicators network in N2

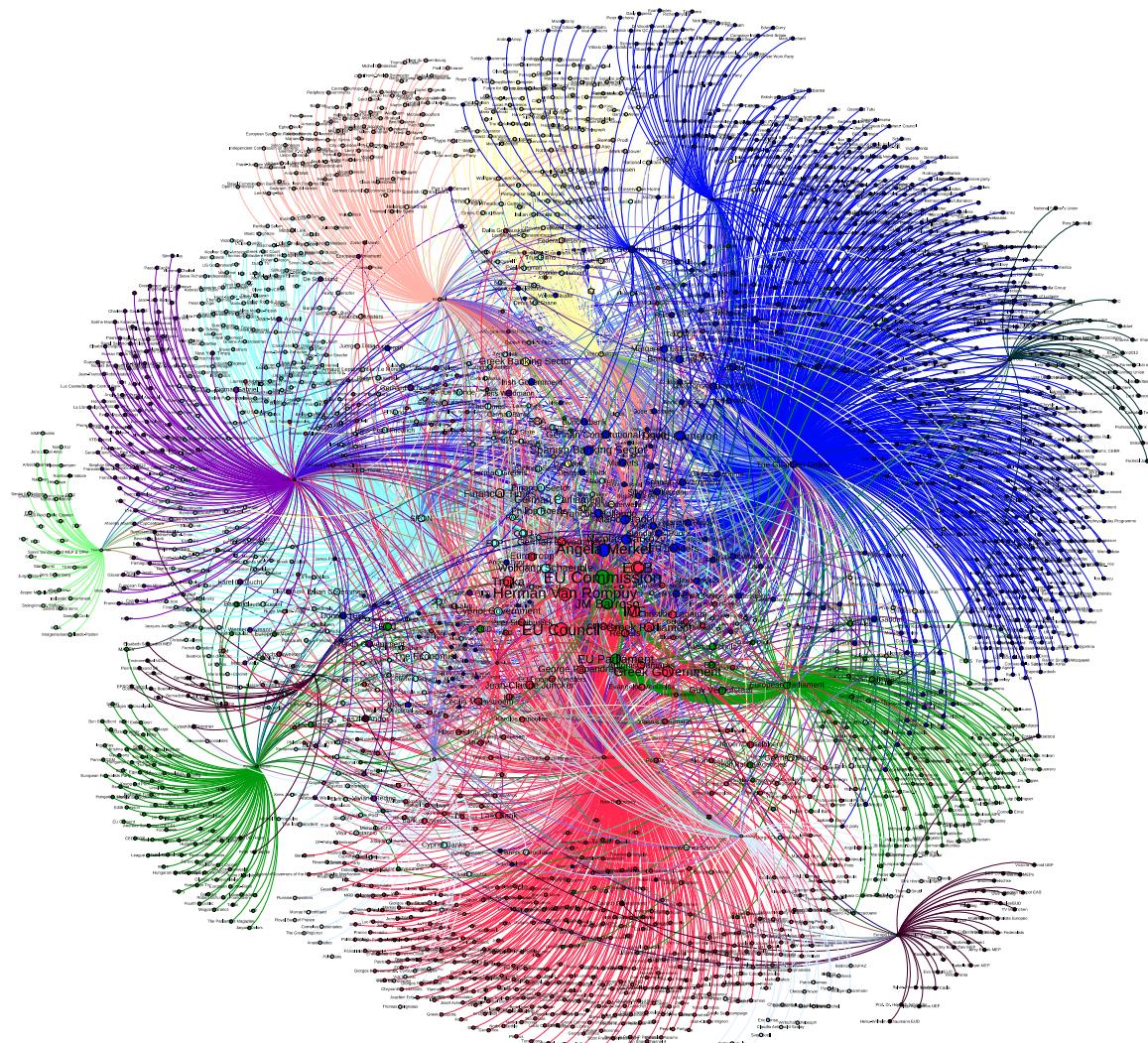
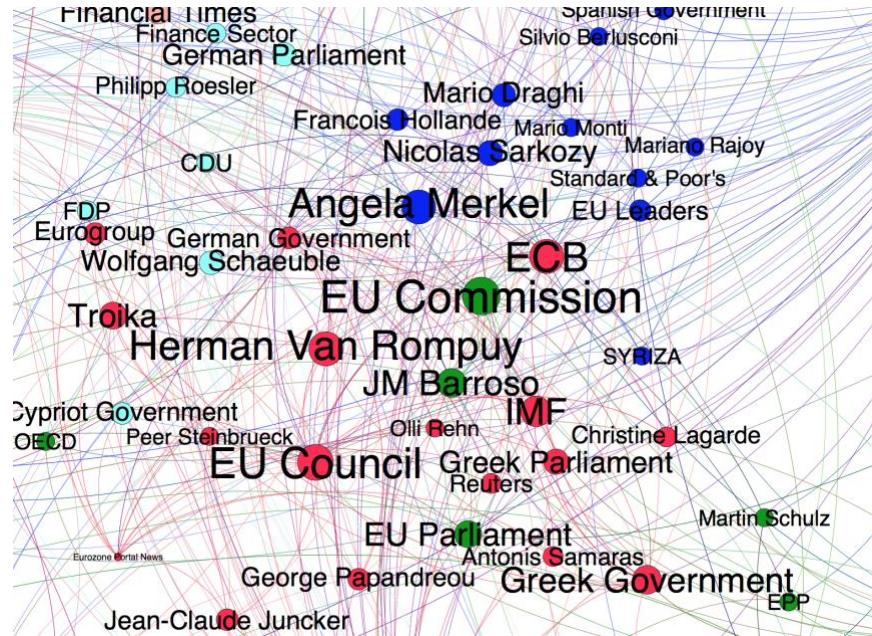


Figure 11: Centre of Crisis Discourse (re-scaled edges)



For example, despite increasing influence in national political landscapes radical Eurosceptics still appeared as a fringe group within the transnational EU crisis discourse. Nigel Farage and UKIP temporarily acquired relevance in British politics but they were not central actors with immediate influence on events, developments, and decisions in the general course of EU politics and the crisis. This does not mean that they did not exert any influence at all; to the contrary, in the British case the former “underdog” party heavily affected other mainstream parties’ strategies for EU politics, first and foremost the British Conservative Party. Hence, they indeed had a tangible impact on the overall development of EU politics. Yet they were not included in EU-related web content as dominant political communicators beyond their domestic context with the capabilities to directly influence the actual course of EU politics in a transnational respect, like e.g. German or French politicians. The same applies to explicit advocates of EU federalism and supranationalism. In this regard, the general EU crisis discourse shows tendencies towards exclusion, especially concerning the extreme ends of the political spectrum. Not to mention that alternative networks, e.g. protest groups, were hardly included at all.

Again, developments that imply discursive convergence and discursive fragmentation are not mutually exclusive. This especially applies to the official EU platforms and government pages, which mainly focused on their own representatives. This further indicates a function as an element in conventional public relations and political marketing rather than as tools for multilateral discourse. NGO platforms such as Social Platform or Europa Union Deutschland seem to utilise online media for similar reasons judged by their choice of references and methods for hyperlinking. Moreover, the “handling” of cited political communicators varied in each individual case between mere referencing, polemics, and endorsement. The political perspective of a platform and the ideological closeness to a cited communicator determined which mode was applied. News media websites stand out in this respect, since they seemed to take a more distanced, less evaluative and somewhat “objective” stance. This did not necessarily apply to opinion pieces, in which commentators were mainly concerned with the pervasiveness of their arguments. News media platforms included the most diverse selection of cited

political communicators, though the network graph shows their focus on specific national contexts, i.e. that each one included political communicators that may have some weight in domestic contexts but did not enter the transnational dimension to the degree as other, more influential key players did. Other relatively diverse online platforms are the two think tanks, Open Europe and Bruegel. Though both used their web platforms to disperse their interpretations and recommendations, they did not seem to limit their choice of sources to a political/ideological sphere but included references from a wider political landscape. This alone says little about their framing of these sources but implies differences in transnational openness if compared to the other non-news media platforms.

To sum up, the analysis of the constellations of cited second political communicators across the EU crisis web sphere showed that the situation for inclusion/exclusion was ambiguous and depended on a combination of structural and political factors: first, the focus of a platform determined what types of sources and references were included in the first place. For example, a blog with focus on economics tended to include economic experts (*Wirtschaftswurm*), while an NGO website for social issues selected political actors that were involved in policy making with a focus on gender, race and class (*Social Platform*). The covered conflict areas further defined the set of included actors. Platforms with a more open or “global” content agenda seemed to refer to the most diverse set of communicators; news media websites and, somewhat surprisingly, think tank blogs fall into this category. The assigned function that an online platform has must also be considered, as some platforms are primarily used to convey the agendas of their main representatives –the official government and EU institution websites are illustrative examples.

Second, the political background of a platform further determined what other sources it included and how it portrayed potentially opposing viewpoints (if they were included at all); political fringe groups and radicals appeared more prone to ideological balkanization. A prioritisation of national contexts emerged as another filter on many platforms. Thus, ‘multiple segmentation’ (Hepp et al. 2012) indeed moulded the EU crisis web sphere. Thirdly, the network of second level communicators shows what groups of political actors dominated EU politics and crisis-related developments and who remained in the overall discourse’s “periphery”. A relatively small section of leading European politicians and international organisations formed the core of actors whose perspectives, assessments, and actions were influential for the development of the crisis and its eventual impact on political and economic system(s) in the EU. It seems that alternative political movements did not gain access to this exclusive group, except for local manifestations of the crisis and related domestic political discourses. This is an ambiguous situation: discursive integration as a form of referencing the same or at least a similar set of political communicators across different European online platforms did emerge in the EU crisis web sphere; there is a transnational discussion including a transnational set of political actors and commentators. However, this group seems to be limited to a handful of influential politicians that occupied key positions in traditional power structures. In the case of the EU, this observation on the structural-social level alone would suffice to argue that its institutions have not yet succeeded to achieve their self-proclaimed aim of increasing communication with representatives of the civil society in the crisis (chapter 2).

A Multidimensional Crisis

The EU crisis triggered the emergence of a transnational web sphere, in which different political communicators reacted to irritations of transnational gravity in economy and politics. Though the empirical analysis is limited to a snippet of an abundance of political online content, there is sufficient evidence to support the argument.

The primary analysis provided a topographical description for this EU web sphere based on content areas and hyperlink patterns. Forms of clustering and fragmentation along political-ideological and national-cultural lines seemed to mould the web sphere's structure. The various online platforms shared a common "meta-context" but differentiation caused the formation of manifold sub-contexts, which depended on content foci and political backgrounds. Discursive convergence did not preclude further specialisation and different motivations determined what aspects communicators emphasised. Furthermore, online platforms have different procedures for content production and interaction with audiences; a news media website works differently from a personal blog or a government site and vice versa. Political online platforms host biased perspectives on crisis-related developments; each communicator provided subjectively construed observations. Finally, communicators may have talked about a similar, if not the same, set of issues yet they had quite diverse, potentially even opposing angles and did not necessarily talk or refer to each other. Still, their communication contributed to a shared yet loose transnational discursive context.

It does not suffice to analyse the "technical" dimension alone. Only a closer look at framing strategies reveals the social, cultural, and political interdependencies, potential impact(s), and societal relevance of web-based transnational public communication. Screening arguments, portrayals, characterisations, accusations, attributions, explanations etc. enables the evaluation of the crisis' scope and dynamics. Frame- and network analyses reveal the prevalent conflict areas, causal interpretations, evaluations, and recommended courses of actions; the explorative-qualitative analysis thus filtered the dominant frame elements. The resulting variable set served for subsequent hierarchical cluster analyses to determine complete frames for each platform. The qualitative examination additionally identified central themes in framings for the EU and individual member-states. Statements that included frame elements and recommendations for political actions were linked to their sources to differentiate between political communicators. The findings discussed in this section are based on sample N2 (=1347).

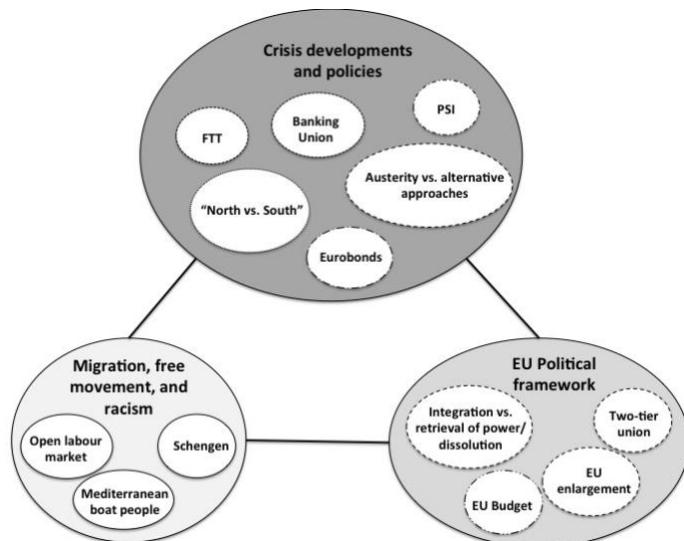
The EU crisis revealed how closely interwoven European economic and political systems are. Developments in one "national" economy influenced political decisions in another member-state and vice versa: a German politician's statement had an impact on domestic politics in Greece; the re-evaluation of a country's credit worthiness, by Fitch or Moody's shook the entire economic and political landscape; protesters in struggling Eurozone member-states were united in their anger over austerity politics, in their outrage over governments, and felt dominated by more powerful neighbour states. Simultaneously, national and EU politicians frequently cautioned that European economies were so inextricably interconnected that there was no valid alternative to tough reforms for achieving fiscal stability, which allegedly kept the Eurozone, and the EU as such, from falling apart: 'If the Euro fails, Europe fails' announced German Chancellor Merkel in 2010 (Bundesregierung 2010) and IMF chief economist Lagarde stressed: 'there is no alternative to austerity' (RTS 2013). The official handling of the crisis often implied a neo-liberal worldview that practically aspired to appeal to 'markets' and feared their reactions

to unpopular political decisions (e.g. PS_2012/07/02; OP_2012/03/30c; OP_2012/08/05b). “Markets” transformed into omnipresent though virtually intangible forces with a considerable impact on the design of economic and fiscal policies.

The lines between economy, and politics as well as the national and transnational dimensions blurred or simply dissolved at the different stages of the crisis. This illustrated the advanced level of interpenetration between economic, political, and social systems in Europe and the crisis. During the crisis, political communicators articulated different problem definitions, which translated into manifold interconnected conflict areas. These were determined by specific political/ideological aims and agenda-setting processes. The resulting sub-conflicts varied structurally and qualitatively, i.e. in the configuration of participating communicators as well as the set and tone of arguments applied to make a point. Above all, they gave insight to the enormous complexity of the crisis.

Conflict areas are the first type of frame elements and their analysis shows when stakeholders disagreed on the attribution of relevance to policy areas in the crisis context. In political online content, a conflict area emerges whenever a distinguishable, specific set of political, economic, cultural, or social issues was mentioned for which at least two potentially diverging positions exist. To reduce complexity, individually identified conflicts can then be allocated to general planes of contestation based on their contextual similarities. The explorative-qualitative analysis of crisis web sphere yielded three such general conflict areas: 1) *Crisis Developments and Policies*; 2) *EU Political Framework*, 3) *Migration and Free Movement* (figure 17). Each comprised of several sub-areas and none is completely isolated from the other.

Figure 12: Conflict area in the Crisis Web Sphere



Field of contestation I covered economic, political, and social issues directly related to *Crisis Developments and Policies*. It accounted for 70% of all conflict areas in N2. Examples are bailout-programmes or plans for optimising and reforming public finances, and economic performances across the Eurozone. A major fault line within this first field of contestation was the austerity/anti-austerity debate, in which proponents of fiscal discipline and supporters of economic stimuli opposed each other; a

third perspective disagreed with both and proposed the dissolution of the monetary union and/or the EU altogether. Central issues were questions of fiscal and economic policy on both the national and transnational levels and their potential merits or demerits for finding a solution to the crisis' local manifestations across the Eurozone.

The social consequences and the increasing pressure of austerity policies on European welfare-systems, and the cultural processing of the same developments, were further controversial topics. For example, the prioritisation of rescuing the banking sector in the official handling of the crisis and perceived neglect of social impacts of austerity politics caused critical reactions (PS_2012/10/03). Many saw banks as part or even causes of the problem, as a Greek EP member explains in 2012: 'the financial sector caused the current crisis, which will cost governments 4.5 trillion in bailouts, while it remains largely under-taxed compared to the real economy' (EUP_2012/05/22c). Still, proponents of budget discipline and austerity justified their policies by arguing that it was the only viable option to achieve fiscal consolidation (BR_2012/10/30b) and reforms would achieve this goal. The driving force behind fiscal consolidation was the conservative Franco-German tandem. The alliance between France's Sarkozy and Germany's Merkel dominated EU- and Eurozone politics until the French elections in 2012, which marked a turn in this special relationship. However, the German government continued to successfully pursue its policy strategy, even after the socialist Francois Hollande assumed position as the new French President. The implementation of fiscal discipline and the reduction of public spending in form of far-reaching reforms under the overall guideline of austerity became the central precondition for bailout programmes for struggling Eurozone countries (GER_2011/04/14). Leading decision-makers in the EU showed limited flexibility in this respect, though some repeatedly asserted that growth and austerity were not mutually exclusive (COSILIIUM_2012/05/14) –mainly to counter critics who pointed to the potentially devastating effects that austerity could have on weak economies and social cohesion, solidarity, and democracy (SP_2013/03/13; GU_2011/03/03).

Especially NGOs working in the social sector (e.g. worker rights, gender issues, social justice) bemoaned the one-sidedness of official crisis politics (SP_2012/12/12); Social Platform repeatedly criticised the EU's neglecting of the social dimension in favour of the economic one and articulated propositions for a more integrative-social approach (*ibid*). Protest movements against "top-down-style" austerity expressed similar sentiments but with greater emotionality, i.e. anger and rage, that partly even turned violent (BR_2011/06/17; EK_2011/12/01; EK_2012/11/07). Greek bloggers, who were "eyewitnesses" to the effects of austerity politics in their home country, reflected on the inefficiency of austerity politics as well, which one simply called 'inane' (PS_2012/10/03); the same blogger acknowledged that protests could do little to prevent their eventual adoption in the current political climate, which was dominated by the dogma of fiscal discipline and the 'misguided' belief that banks must be saved at all costs (*ibid*). Opposition to austerity politics was quite diverse and included representatives from the radical left (e.g. Syriza in Greece), the far right (e.g. Golden Dawn) and pro-European elements that proposed alternative crisis policies that place more emphasis on job creation, growth, and the preservation of social security systems.

Eurosceptic observers also tended to condemn austerity politics, calling them futile or harmful. The crisis became another argument to express their disapproval for economic and political integration in the EU (e.g. TE_2011/08/19). German blogger and self-proclaimed Eurosceptic Wirtschaftswurm argued that the main problem of struggling Euro-countries in the 'periphery' was their Eurozone membership but

the EU and German government sacrificed them to keep the monetary union together, which had disastrous consequences for the people affected by austerity measures (WW_2012/10/22). Furthermore, the pro-austerity/anti-austerity conflict revealed internal differentiations along political lines within governments and between EU institutions; for example, EU politicians' political and national backgrounds seemed to determine perspectives on austerity politics (EUP_2012/05/23; EUP_2012/12/17).

Other central questions concerned the limits of power and areas of competency for the EU and individual member-states in political decision-making within the Eurozone. Countries that share the single currency experienced historically unprecedented levels of integration but also displayed tendencies towards economic fragmentation with apparently insurmountable imbalances; it seems that this relationship of stress lied at the very heart of the overall crisis discourse.

The multiple-systems relevance of the crisis that triggered the condensation of related communication into a web sphere was largely determined by its actual and potential impact on the organisation of the Eurozone and the EU. *Crisis Developments and Policies* include a range of controversial economic and political issues that shaped the EU's and individual member-states' roles and strategies, i.e. policy choices, during the height of the Eurozone crisis. These were the creation of bailout programmes in form of the European Financial Stability Facility (EFSF), the European Stability Mechanism (ESM), Eurobonds, the Financial Transaction Tax (FTT), private sector involvement (PSI) in rescue packages for struggling Eurozone countries –e.g. Greece and Cyprus–, plans for a EU-wide banking union, as well as the alleged North-South divide in the Eurozone.

The banking union is another frequently mentioned sub-area. Proponents of the scheme portrayed the banking union as a central element in a successful crisis strategy (EUC_2012/06/26) that would cut the links between national budgets and the banking sector. The European Central Bank (ECB) should act as its supervising body and guarantee that past excesses would not happen again, while the entire system had to be transparent and democratic (EUP_2013/09/25).

Table 5: Conflict Areas within Crisis Developments and Policies⁴⁵

Conflict Areas within Crisis Developments and Policies	Frequency	% Percentage
EU Austerity/Anti-austerity	129	36.86
EU Banking union	44	12.57
EU Eurobonds	61	17.43
EU Private Sector Involvement	37	10.57
EU Financial Transaction Tax	29	8.29
North vs. South Divide	50	14.29
Total	350	100.00

Its critics, including Eurosceptic economic experts, argued that a banking union leads to bankruptcy in all Eurozone member-states. One key argument for this were the problems of the ECB's target-system, which supplied 'debt countries' with money and entailed dangers for more prosperous member-states, such as Germany, who paid the bill in the end (WW_2013/01/22); critics asserted that a banking union and the main bailout schemes ESM and EFSF made the Euro crisis even worse (WW_2012/12/18). Eurobonds

were an equally thorny issue. The idea of mutualising public debt within the Eurozone faced considerable opposition, especially in those member-states that saw themselves as net-contributors to the currency union, i.e. Germany, Finland, or the Netherlands (e.g. BR_2012/05/31b). German liberal politician Rainer Brüderle called them ‘whiskey for the drunk’ and a gateway to ‘interest socialism’ (Deutschlandfunk 2012), while proponents argued that Eurobonds could stop escalating capital flight from struggling Eurozone countries and that they were needed to save the single currency union (BR_2012/05/31b). Eurobonds became one of the most heatedly debated potential means to counter the crisis, which contributed to the reproduction of an alleged rift between North and South that would determine some of the major fault lines in the EU and Eurozone.

The plans for introducing a tax on financial transactions (FTT) in the EU was no less controversial and revealed yet another line of division within the union between eleven supporters of the scheme and eight opposing member-states, while the remaining eight kept their positions open. Supporters of the tax scheme, e.g. many representatives in the EP, argued that it ‘ensure[d] a fairer contribution by the financial sector towards the costs of the crisis, which it helped to cause’ (EUP_2012/12/11b) and that ‘the sector should pay back at least part of what the European taxpayers have pre-financed in the context of the bank rescue operations’ (EUC_2013/02/14). Moreover, it would not only significantly reduce expenses but may become an additional source for income for the EU (EUP_2012/03/23b; EUP_2012/05/22c). Though the FTT was not confined to the Eurozone its creation is not independent from the single currency’s crisis. The British government was a particularly vocal opponent to its introduction, as it tried to preserve London as an attractive location for global financial business (GU_2011/11/18c; OP_2012/12/13; EUP_2012/12/11b). The FTT debate became an indicator for the internal rift within the EU between closer and “not-so-closely” integrated member-states, such as the UK, that was symbolised and discussed as a ‘two-tier’ system of integration or a ‘Europe of two speeds’ (EUD_2013/01/23; PS_2013/02/22; BR_2011/03/25b).

Communicators across the web sphere fought over the merits and demerit of Eurobonds, the FTT, and other crisis policies by elaborating on their economic, fiscal, but also ethic or moral implications as well as their consequences for national sovereignty, transnational solidarity, and the future of European integration. Main actors in these conflict areas were representatives of the EU institutions and national governments. Other high profile economists and alternative political, academic, or economic actors seemed to be largely excluded. At best, their roles were confined to observers and commentators, i.e. their viewpoints, evaluations, and recommendations were publicly accessible but seemed to have only limited or no tangible impact on the political processes that translated into actual policy development and -implementation.

Furthermore, debates on economic policy and the potential effects of a banking union, the FTT or PSI, or any of the other economic schemes, reached high levels of discursive exclusivity concerning the amount of expert knowledge needed to understand and contribute to the discussion. Online platforms that explicitly focus on economics and fiscal policies such as Wirtschaftswurm and Bruegel are prime examples for this type of a sophisticated, fact-oriented, semi-academic level of argumentation and contestation. Examples include complex and abstract issues such as the TARGET II ‘trap’ (WW_2012/12/18) or what functions a European banking union should have (BR_2012/09/17b). Without proper background knowledge about key concepts, terms, and policies these debates remained largely inaccessible for laymen readers –a conjuncture that partly reversed their otherwise open accessibility.

Moreover, a high level of argumentative complexity does not automatically imply that there is no polemic character to the respective online content and/or stronger discursive integration; to the contrary, attacks on opposing framings were often no less pronounced than on other platforms, though the degree of complexity and level of expert knowledge applied to make an argument had a different quality. For example, economic expert blogger Wirtschaftswurm explained why he would literally ‘hate Keynesians’ (WW_2013/01/31), i.e. moderate economic and debt policies, or why a EU federation was an idea from the past that is no longer useful (WW_2011/09/16) with a degree of emotionality and profanity.

The various conflict areas are further separable regarding their more specific issues of discursive contestation, which were determined by the respective online communicators themselves: there are platforms that focused on the economic dimension of the crisis, which often require a considerable level of expert knowledge. They tended to deal with micro- and macro economic models, in-depth discussions of fiscal and economic adjustments, and policy-related aspects. Other platforms acknowledge that political developments cannot be seen as separated from economic developments but ultimately place more emphasis on the political dimension, i.e. they did not discuss economic models in great depth but rather elaborated on the potential consequences of political decisions and the crisis’ effects on political economy in the EU and within individual member-states. Primary examples are the business-oriented, slightly Eurosceptic think tank Open Europe or individual political commentators like the Greek Blogger, who seemed to specialise on the political implications of the crisis and related policies.

Other platforms narrowed their scope to a national level, i.e. they commented on the EU and crisis-related developments from a local perspective. This category includes national political actors such as parties or governments but also news media outlets. One particularly insightful example for the blurring lines between a national angle and transnational interdependencies is again the Greek crisis theatre and its coverage in the English version of Greek new media site EKathimerini: its crisis reporting was mainly concerned with domestic politics, since it dealt with reforms of administrative institutions, privatisations, and national elections. However, since the Greek government depended on bailouts from the EU and IMF, also known as the “troika”, almost every political development within the country was implicitly or explicitly linked to transnational processes. Illustrative examples were the regular “controls” conducted by troika representatives on reform progress in Greece. This relationship was not one-sided and developments in Greece had a tangible effect on transnational politics in the EU and crisis debates in other member-states, as for example seen in the extremely controversial and ultimately failed attempt of the Papandreu administration to call for a referendum on the Greek bailout programme in 2011. The type of coverage and the choice and complexity of arguments very much depended on the field of contestation and the involved communicators, i.e. politicians, journalists, experts, bloggers etc.

The closely intertwined yet distinct ***field of contestation II*** covers disputes related to the *EU’s Political Framework*, both in its current state and future.

Table 4: Conflict Areas within the EU’s Political Framework

Conflict Areas within the EU’s Political Framework	Frequency	% Percentage
EU Cohesion	79	34.96
EU Budget	68	30.09
EU Federation	13	5.75
Referendums	66	29.20

Total	226	100.00
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This was articulated in debates on how the union should be politically organised and to what extent integration should further advance or, from the opposing perspective, whether closer integration must be stopped and avoided. The conflict was mainly “fought” between proponents of intergovernmentalism, EU federalists, who tended to describe themselves as “progressive” (e.g. Europa Union Deutschland), and Eurosceptic groups that demanded a partial reduction or total dissolution of the political and economic union (e.g. UKIP). Political communicators argued in favour for a specific vision of the union’s future and tried to discredit their opponents, mostly by pointing to the disadvantages, inconsistencies, and infeasibility of their proposed solutions. None of these political perspectives was confined to one specific member-state or region, since “national” political landscapes across the EU have their own variations of each branch, who can form transnational networks to pursue their goals –even though they may represent a nationalist or anti-European perspective (e.g. Team Europe). Nevertheless, certain groups may have stronger influence in certain countries and enjoy more public support/acceptance than others, due to a complex conglomerate of historical contingencies that determine current cultural and political configurations. For example, Eurosceptic groups exist in almost every member-state of the EU, but during the crisis years the British version received greater public exposure and became more influential on the national, and potentially transnational, political landscape than e.g. their German counterparts. British pro-Europeans have been historically a minority among the UK political class, while in e.g. France and Germany EU federalists and proponents of closer integration are traditionally much more accepted.

Despite difference in the “reading” of the crisis, most communicators concurred that its economic impact was not limited to financial, fiscal, or trade-related problems and challenges but had a deep impact on the political dimension. However, beyond this shared assumption there was little agreement. The very infrastructure of the EU was subject of controversial debates that revived the urgency of questions about its political legitimacy, democratic accountability, and the limits to its areas of competencies, i.e. the power balance between union and individual member-state. The contrast between integration and preserving national sovereignty is somewhat characteristic for the second field of contestation. Politicians, parties, and economic communicators made repeated calls for all kinds of reforms, and online platforms in the EU web sphere frequently picked-up on the various circulating demands and scenarios. What these reforms should ideally look like was determined by the political background: for EU federalists “reform” meant closer integration, further democratisation, and ultimately a transfer of more powers to the transnational level (EUD_2011/03/22); for Eurosceptics the same word stood for a retrieval of competencies, a “rationalisation” and gradual reduction of powers from the EU (e.g. GOV_2012/06/29), though more radical perspectives basically described the EU’s dissolution as a form of reform (e.g. DB_2012/11/01). When leading European politicians spoke of reforms, they often meant spending cuts and market liberalisation. Political communication on the crisis showed that “change” can go in any direction and reforms, as a means of institutional improvement, became a central device in framing strategies for both pro-European and Eurosceptic political communicators, as the different contesting political positions claimed to have the ideal blueprint for fixing the crisis for the betterment of everyone involved. “Change” and “reform” were heavily contested issues themselves and communicators proposed crisis scenarios to either highlight the benefits of an approach or to criticise and

discredit potential counter-drafts. One of the most controversial and frequently mentioned manifestations within the contested area of EU politics and its overall framework was the debate on the EU budget, which was due for an update in 2013. It is another example for how divisive EU-related issues became and illustrated what stakeholders tried to put forward which kind of claims in attempts to prevent others from taking something from them. National politicians from leading member-states were keen to distance themselves from the EU, the Eurozone, further integration, and argued in favour of strict limits or even reductions to the current EU budget. A primary proponent of cuts was the British government and its Prime Minister, who repeatedly vowed in public to push for EU budget reductions and whose position was subject of debates across the web sphere (GOV_2013/02/11; OP_2013/02/08b; OP_2013/02/08). However, this position was not limited to EU-critical/Eurosceptic politicians but included pro-European governments, e.g. in the Netherlands or Germany, too. It became increasingly difficult to convince European taxpayers that in times of austerity the EU budget needed to be increased, especially since many had to suffer under the consequences of fiscal discipline and spending cuts themselves. Opponents to these sceptical or refusing positions were mainly representatives of the EU Commission or the EP, who often had a centre-left background (EP_2013/03/13); they justified more spending on the EU to better equip it against the manifold negative effects of the crisis. The dispute on the EU budget was somewhat exemplary for the general conflict between proponents of moderate integration, advocates of more integration, and those who would like to stop or even reverse integration.

National governments and local political systems were heavily criticised and scrutinised during the crisis, which was often a result of their interplay with transnational politics on a EU level. Political, economic, and social turmoil in varying shades and forms had a tangible impact on domestic politics. The Greek political establishment was heavily criticised by its electorate for leading the country into the crisis and displaying what some perceived as a worrying inaptitude to get the country back on track. The Greek case is exemplary for other struggling Eurozone members. Frustration over systemic inefficiencies was articulated in protests not only on the streets of Athens but also Madrid or through the sudden political success of alternative political movements (GU_2012/01/26g), such as the Eurosceptic Five Star Movement in Italy (GU_2013/02/27) or its other right-wing competitor Lega Nord (GU_2012/01/26k). Countries that were not immediately affected by the crisis also saw a rise of anti-European sentiment and growing discontent with the so-called “political establishment”, as the growing popularity of the far-right Front Nationale in France (GU_2012/01/26l) or Partij voor de Vrijheid in the Netherlands illustrated (SPON_2012/09/11). Even a traditionally pro-European Germany experienced how debates on EU integration was re-fuelled by the crisis, which reached a climax in the initial success of the first German anti-Euro party AfD in early 2013 (GU_2012/01/26i; AfD 2014). The emergence and success of Eurosceptic groups is one important indicator for the increased level of mutual affectivity between transnational and national spheres of economics and politics. In other words, it revealed the high degree of interconnectedness in contemporary Europe and how public, media-based communication was stimulated by events and developments that are of fundamental relevance beyond the national context.

The third sub-area dealt with the notion of a two-tier EU. The entailed debates concerned central questions of EU integration, the balance of powers, and the preservation of sovereignty but place further emphasis on the growing imbalances between member-states at the EU’s “core”, such as France and Germany, increasingly distanced countries like the UK, and its political and economic “periphery”, which mainly consists of member-states in the East, Southeast, and South of Europe. This area partly intersected

with discussions on the overall organisation of the EU, including the EU budget negotiations, and crisis measures such as the FTT, which were developed under the assumption that closer integration helped to solve the crisis –an assertion heavily contested by member-states outside of the Eurozone, most importantly the UK. Political debates about reforms, a retrieval of powers, a limit to EU spending, and a potential referendum initiated by British politicians were symptoms of this internal rift within the EU that separated closer integrated and less integrated member-states.

The fourth sub-area covers processes of EU enlargement with potential candidates in the Balkan region and in Eastern Europe; the extremely controversial debate on Turkey’s accession to the EU was another crucial aspect of this comparatively small yet distinguishable subsection. It further included plans to gain more members to the Eurozone, despite its crisis. Positions can be divided into those who opposed further enlargement on political, economic, or, as in the case of Turkey, cultural grounds, and those who supported the exact opposite by very much reversing the same set of arguments. Governments of countries that favoured more integration seemed to be more cautious about further accessions to the EU than those who would like to reverse a range of decisions that centralised power in Brussels; for example, while German politicians, especially in the conservative government, appeared reversed or sceptical about Turkey’s prospects for full EU membership (SPON_2013/02/21), their British counterparts took the opposite position and tried to speed up the accession process (GOV_2012/04/04). The second field of contestation moves a step away from actual crisis policies and the related sub-areas focus on more fundamental political questions about the EU’s organisation and future.

Field of contestation III is the smallest conflict area and concerns the highly controversial issues of migration and free movement, which gained in brisance and relevance during the crisis. It includes at least three distinct sub-areas that deal with different manifestations of migration: first, challenges posed by migrant waves that were triggered by the Arab Spring and the subsequent attribution of responsibility for “new arrivals” at the Southern shores of the EU. In search for better economic prospects and political stability in Europe thousands left their home countries in Northern Africa and the Middle East. Entry countries in the EU’s South, most importantly Italy and Greece, were practically caught off guard by the rise of migrants trying to reach their borders, who often have the intention to venture forth to another EU member-state in the North, e.g. Germany, the UK, or France. The Italian island of Lampedusa, a primary destination for Mediterranean “boat people”, was exemplary if not symbolic for the entailed challenges (SPON_2011/03/29; GU_2012/04/11). The developments caused a heated debate about current EU regulations for the handling of migrants and the Schengen agreement. Entry countries, which had to struggle with the immediate effects of austerity politics, fought with their EU partners about financing border controls, refugee camps, and the processing of asylum requests, including repatriation schemes (e.g. EK_2012/06/01; EC_2011/05/26). Though the EU tried to emphasise that migration was a shared burden that needed joint actions (CONSILIUM_2011/04/15), cooperation between member-states was limited and politicians in Greece and Italy felt that existing EU schemes remained insufficient. The crisis brought especially Greece to the limits and the country struggled with preventing illegal migrants from entering the EU; insufficient border controls and incapability to deal with growing migrant communities were the most obvious symptoms.

Simultaneously, conservative politicians in destination countries, argued that border controls should be reintroduced and that those EU countries where migrant first set foot in were responsible for them in accordance with the Dublin II agreement (EUP_2012/06/14). The metaphor of the ‘fortress

Europe' became somewhat symbolic for this debate (GU_2011/04/27) and in 2011 France, Germany, Denmark, and Italy initiated a dispute about a temporary suspension of border free travel (EK_2011/04/11; LE_2012/04/26; SPON_2012/04/20). This triggered a controversial debate about the EU's overall infrastructure, function, and meaning, since pro-European groups saw this as another attempt to undermine the union by prioritising national interests (EUD_2011/06/14; EUD_2011/05/20; EUD_2011/05/26). This continued to affect solidarity and effective cooperation in the EU. Most attention was drawn to economic and political developments in face of the crisis and insufficient measures to deal with the problems that came with migration contributed to conflicts and even outbursts of plain racism; the success of right-wing parties in Greece, Italy, France and other European countries must be assessed against the background of mounting problems with migration in the context of the crisis and rising unhappiness with economic policies.

The second sub-area is concerned with migration movements of often highly skilled, well-educated young people from crisis countries to more stable member-states within the EU. Thousands of young Greeks went to Germany or the UK to find jobs adequate to their education (EK_2011/11/03); other struggling economies, such as Portugal and Spain, experienced a similar kind of "brain drain". The crisis and the consequences of economic reform programmes directly triggered the movement of potential labour to other, seemingly more prosperous markets within the EU where it helped to fill gaps in the host countries' economies. The issue was seemingly less conflict-loaded and "emotional" than migration from outside the EU but this impression might be deceiving, as comments from leading European politicians sparked controversy; for instance, David Cameron threatened to close the UK's border for Greek citizens if the Greek economy would have defaulted in 2012 (Huffington Post 2012).

A third sub-area deals with EU internal migration flows from the Eastern/South-eastern member-states to the EU's core countries. The opening of other member-states' labour markets to Romanian and Bulgarian citizens in early 2014 is one example for this controversial issue. Both countries occurred almost exclusively in migration-related contexts and their addition to the open labour market was often met with scepticism and, depending on the radicalism of the communicator, outright hostility. Though stereotypes and defamatory portrayals of Romanians und Bulgarians materialised in political communication across the EU, mainly produced by conservative and right-wing politicians and groups, the UK stands out in this respect due to the almost hysterical character of the debate, which was linked to the rise of Eurosceptic sentiment in the country. This was largely a result of the increasing dissatisfaction of many British voters with their government's handling of migration issues in general as well as growing discontent with the EU and its rules for free labour movement. An illustrative example was the fear of Eurosceptic commentators that "floods" of Eastern Europeans would enter the UK in January 2014. The mass media played a key role in co-creating and stimulating this hysteria with largely exaggerated or even false stories about airplanes and busses fully booked with work migrants who were ready to take away British jobs and/or to exploit the UK's welfare system (Daily Mail 2013).

Racism, migration, Euroscepticism and the crisis are closely interwoven areas that were mutually affective and formed an integral part of the overall crisis debate. Three groups with opposing argumentations on migration emerged: opponents to migration, free travel, and the open labour market who often had a Eurosceptic background; proponents of moderate EU internal migration as part of the single market/open labour market; supporters of free movement who that framed migration as economically beneficial. The first group tended to portray the EU as the root of migration problems, since

it forced its member-states into accepting unlimited numbers of migrants who would put already strained labour markets and welfare systems under further pressure; these fears and allegations were not limited to political fringe groups but were articulated by leading government figures from mainstream parties as well (e.g. Cameron in the UK, Sarkozy in France, Friedrich in Germany). The second group argued that the right type of migrants, i.e. people with skills from outside and within the EU, were beneficial to national economies but that illegal and “unproductive” migration needed to stop or at least tighter regulation. The third group saw a borderless EU and open labour market as a great human achievement that was undermined by national political interests and portrayed migration as an asset for the EU, if not an economic necessity.

To sum up, mapping the main fault lines in the EU crisis web sphere had two aims: first, to show what issues exactly caused the formation of conflicts and controversial debates, i.e. to define the most important categories for the first class of frame elements; secondly, to indicate what groups and political streams were involved in each of the different conflict sections. It also provides the basis for the inductive development of categories for the other types of frame elements in the following subsections. There is a cacophony of voices that all point to another related yet distinct dimension of the crisis. As a result multiple fields of contestation materialised within the EU crisis; it basically consisted of numerous interrelated partial crises: economic and/or political crises in many of the involved member-states, a general economic crisis in the Eurozone, and a political crisis of the EU, which came under fire for shortcomings in its political infrastructure and was almost brought to the threshold of dissolution, due to discord on its future political course and functions. The analysis shows that three larger fields of contestation mainly shaped the content of the EU crisis web sphere. Each one included a set of sub-areas in which opposing political viewpoints confronted each other. The EU crisis and its various manifestations formed a complex network of intrinsically linked yet distinguishable conflicts and the partaking political communicators focused on advancing their arguments concerning a contested issue.

The identification of the fields of contestation paradoxically implies that an awareness for shared economic and political systems but also social lifeworlds existed among European political communicators, even if some participants were reluctant to accept this, i.e. refrained from embracing this fact and rather criticised it, or, as in the case of many Eurosceptics, actively worked on reversing this condition. Forms nationalism, including ethnic notions, became part of transnational discourses. The materialisation of the conflicts alone is, to a certain degree, evidence for the shared context in which many Europeans live and work; it implies a constantly increasing mutual affectivity between European political and economic systems. Web content on the EU crisis provides detailed insights into the enormous complexity of multi-layered transnational interrelations. Online media indeed enabled a variety of different communicators to comment on and distribute their readings of the crisis they had to face collectively, which, to complete the paradox, had potentially devastating effects on the sense of solidarity and communalinity within the EU.

Framing the Crisis

How the crisis was perceived and portrayed by different stakeholders; the main frames that emerged in the sampled online content and what it tells us about the quality of the transnational discourse; how transnationalism and nationalism affected each other.

Attributions of Responsibility and Portrayals of Key Actors I: the EU

Political communicators conveyed a diversity of causal interpretations regarding the attribution of responsibility for crisis-related developments. In the web sphere, seven general types of causal interpretations emerged: 1) *the EU is responsible for political, legal, and economic developments and strategies*; 2) *nation-states are responsible for the crisis*; 3) *the financial sector caused the crisis*; 4) *the crisis is multidimensional*; 5) *the crisis worsens*; 6) *the EU and Eurozone are bound to each other*; 7) *the EU and its member-states are mutually dependent*. Most of these types consist of sub-categories that address specific aspects of the crisis' social, political, and economic dynamics.

The first group includes statements that assign primary responsibility to the EU's institutions and leading European politicians, i.e. national politicians with influence on a transnational stage, such as high representatives of the German or French governments. This includes responsibility for the crisis' enfolding, affectivity, persistence, and finding solutions. Transnational institutions and powerful national governments were in charge of designing and maintaining the overall political-economic framework in Europe. This was mainly achieved through policy development and the implementation of regulations, e.g. counter measures in form of economic and fiscal policies but also concrete actions, such as rescue programmes that largely determined the crisis' development and consequences.

Table 7: Causal Interpretations in N2

Type of causal interpretation	Frequency	% of Total
EU and Eurozone are bound to each other	6	2.4%
EU and member-states are mutually dependent	43	17.3%
EU crisis is multidimensional	15	6.0%
EU crisis is worsening	61	24.5%
EU financial sector caused/catalyses crisis	9	3.6%
EU is responsible for crisis strategy and development	101	40.6%
Nation-states are responsible for crisis/crisis solution	14	5.6%
Total	249	100%

Political communicators across the web sphere expressed these causal interpretations, irrespective of their political backgrounds. Other examples that are not directly related to the crisis are contexts in which the EU is portrayed as an enforcer of social and economic regulations and standards, e.g. consumer rights or environmental laws.

Other statements allocate main responsibilities to national governments. These causal interpretations occurred in much lower frequency and the respective communicators often tried to pin some sort of “guilt” to specific member-states in the crisis context. For example, various communicators argued that Germany was the driving force behind austerity politics and the primacy of fiscal discipline. Others argued the crisis was fuelled by inefficient administrative and economic systems in member-states across the Eurozone’s so-called periphery. The attribution of responsibility shifts from the EU and thus transnational level to a national, local one.

Another frequently occurring causal interpretation describes the financial markets as the originators of the crisis (BR_2012/05/07; BR_2013/03/29). Greek socialist MEP Anni Podimata’s assessment is typical for this: ‘[t]he facts are indisputable. The financial sector caused the current crisis, which will cost governments €4.5 trillion in bailouts [...]’ (EUP_2012/05/22c). Though it is difficult to define a single group of “perpetrators”, most statements that fall into this category argued that the banking sector created an economic bubble that lead to the sovereign debt crises across the Eurozone, which eventually caused the single currency crisis. Moral hazards and ethically questionable behaviour in the private sector and the political class form a distinct sub-section within this category; statements tended to discuss EU- and Eurozone crisis-related events in the context of the global transformations in economic and financial systems.

The second largest class of causal interpretations is concerned with the scope of the crisis, which various communicators regarded as inherently multidimensional: the crisis was neither limited to a specific geographical area nor “just” economics. To the contrary, it was genuinely transnational in reach and impact. Moreover, the crisis had a string of spill-over-effects from the economic area into political, social, and cultural dimensions. For example, various communicators argued that the economic crisis in a relatively small country like Greece would have lasting consequences for larger economies such as Germany and the entire Eurozone. Others implicitly or explicitly stated that the EU crisis had long left the field of economics and shifted towards fundamental questions about the future of political organisation within the union. Several communicators focused on very specific aspects of EU policy work, such as the crisis’ social consequences for marginalised groups, i.e. the unemployed, the elderly, migrants, and women (e.g. EUP_2011/03/28b). Statements subsumed in this category assert that the crisis was not just an economic challenge; it rather comprised a multi-layered network of “hot spots” and problems. The perception of the crisis’ overall gravity and solvability varied between communicators: some argued the crisis could lead to a break-up of the Eurozone and potentially the EU in general, while others asserted that the crisis was not unique and only temporary; more optimistic voices maintained the EU emerged even stronger from the crisis. Others pointed to the inseparable links between the EU and the Eurozone. A prime example was the debate about the renewal of the EU budget in 2012. The budget was officially used for all EU member-states but, as some communicators explained, the same funds were needed to overcome the crisis which, at least in strict economic terms, was still limited to parts of the Eurozone. The controversially disputed plans for a financial transaction tax and other measures for more economic and fiscal integration are further examples in which communicators expressed this causal interpretation. As

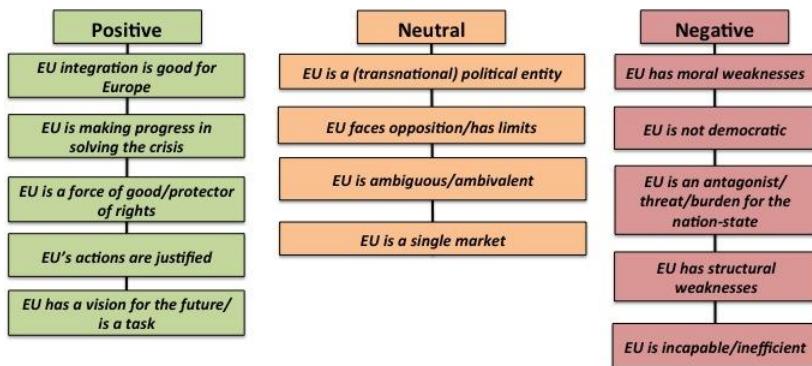
mentioned above, one recurring area of contestation evolved on the question of what kind of EU would emerge from the Eurozone's crisis and some commentators articulated their fears that as one result the two-tier union would be further solidified.

The largest category of causal interpretations comprises of statements that saw the crisis worsening; it continued spreading with considerable negative consequences for the political framework and level of solidarity in individual member-states and the EU. Several communicators described the crisis as a virus that threatened to contaminate the entire Eurozone (BR_2011/10/26; BR_2011/08/22) or plainly stated that the economic and political challenges remained unresolved despite various efforts made by transnational and national decision-makers (OP_2012/05/30; SP_2013/02/05; BR_2012/03/14b); growing uncertainty about the crisis' future development was another repeatedly debated theme (OP_2012/05/07). Others argued that the crisis strained the relations between different member-states to the point of open conflict (OP_2011/06/07b; WW_2011/12/29); the crisis was perceived as the cause for rising unemployment rates and there was growing unwillingness among EU citizens to pay for and/or accept more rescue programmes (OP_2011/08/16b; OP_2013/03/17c). These assessments agreed that the crisis would continue to influence EU politics and economics. EU- and government websites rarely communicated this type of causal interpretation, while think tanks, NGO websites, and individual bloggers did so frequently.

The last category of causal interpretations includes statements that illustrated the level of interdependency between the transnational EU dimension and national contexts; related communication covers the potential effects of domestic political decision on the transnational politics. One example was the German constitutional court ruling on the EFSF and ESM schemes in 2012 (e.g. BR_2012/09/25b; OP_2012/08/24). Other statements concern the EU's influence on national economic and fiscal policies, such as the EU Commission's package of recommendations for sustainable domestic budgets and economic policies introduced in 2012 (EUC_2012/05/31).

Three general classes for evaluations of the EU emerged in the web sphere: neutral descriptions, positive portrayals, and negative/critical evaluations (figure 13). The last class differentiates between generally pro-European criticism and distinctively anti-European criticism. The category for neutral descriptions of the EU covers four sub-categories that neither explicitly condemned nor applauded the EU but remained non-evaluative and "fact-oriented"-descriptive: 1) *the EU is a transnational entity*; 2) *the EU faces opposition/has limits*; 3) *the EU is ambiguous*; 4) *the EU is a single market*. It is the smallest group of descriptive statements and its various manifestations occurred across the political-ideological landscape. Most communicators agreed that the EU mainly was a political and economic entity that has competencies on a transnational level, affecting different nation-states with its policy decisions. It dissolves internal borders while simultaneously expands its external ones. What shape or *Gestalt* it had, further depended on the conflict area in which it was debated.

Figure 13: The three main categories for evaluative statements about the EU in N2



Two descriptions stand out: it was either portrayed as a political, legal, social and economic space, or as a political actor with a specific agenda. This implies a dual character in the perception of the union's structure and appearance that constantly shifts between notions of room/space and those that portray it as an acting entity. Several communicators asserted that the EU as such had limited powers and had to deal with opposition from its member-states and civil society on a regular basis; others argued that a system of checks and balances controlled the EU institutions and guaranteed a degree of transparency (EUP_2012/12/11b; CONSENSIUM_2013/02/08). "The" EU could not simply do as it wishes but was held accountable at various levels. Communicators implicitly deconstructed arguments that framed the EU and its different branches as undemocratic and quasi-authoritarian.

A similar set of arguments addressed the difference between political cultures and the degree of democratisation between member-states, especially between the core and more recent additions in the Southeast of Europe (EUD_2012/07/30). Other instances include statements on the internal rifts that determined many areas of EU politics, such as the collision of net-contributors and net-receivers in the negotiations of a new EU budget (OP_2012/11/23) or the relation of tension between integration and sovereignty that formed the background for the intergovernmental approach. The last category of neutral descriptions placed emphasis on the EU's function as a collective economic space and single market for goods and labour (BR_2011/10/10; GOV_2012/06/29). Statements that are categorised as neutral aimed for a structural description of the EU and did not convey any evaluative sentiments in form of explicit approval/support or rejection/hostility.

Table 5: Frequencies for "non-evaluative" descriptions in N2

Neutral description	Frequency	% of Total
EU faces opposition/has limits	41	25.31
EU is a (transnational) political entity	77	47.53
EU is a single market	28	17.28

EU is ambiguous	16	9.88
Total	162	100.00

The group of positive portrayals of the EU includes five larger sub-categories: 1) *EU integration is good for Europe*, 2) *the EU is making progress in solving the crisis*, 3) *the EU is a force of good/protector of rights*, 4) *the EU's actions are justified*, 5) *the EU has a vision for the future/is a just cause*. Genuinely positive and supportive statements about the EU and Eurozone were rarely expressed in the web sphere. Aside from EU representatives, it was mostly explicit defenders of the EU and proponents of a EU federation who argued in favour of the union despite all political, economic, and social challenges. A few of these communicators asserted that the crisis was a chance for progress and an opportunity to implement reforms towards more integration (EUD_2011/12/20; EUD_2012/11/27). EU representatives argued that integration was a catalyser for social, economic, and political betterment in the member-states and a solution to the crisis (EUP_2012/11/21d; CONSLIUM_2011/12/09); Integration ensured fundamental political rights as well as legal and social safeguards for EU citizens. Cooperation in fiscal and economic policies would eventually overcome crisis.

Table 6: Frequencies for positive evaluations for the EU in N2

Positive statement	Frequency	% of Total
EU actions are justified	1	0.39
EU has a vision for the future/is a task	9	3.53
EU integration is good for Europe	37	14.51
EU is a force of good	114	44.71
EU makes progress in solution of crisis/may become stronger	94	36.86
Total	255	100.00

However, political communicators disagreed over the measures that they subsumed under integration. While proponents of more fiscal and economic coordination supported more integration in these areas, they did not go as far as EU federalists who argued in favour of a genuine EU federal state (GER_2011/08/24). Representatives of most European governments communicated positive and supportive positions towards the EU while they simultaneously kept their preferences on an intergovernmental approach: Germany's Merkel frequently vowed her allegiance to the "European idea" and demanded that more integration in certain areas was needed. However, these concessions were somewhat limited by the priority of national politics that emerged in her decisions and comments on the handling of the economic crisis. Positive statements about the EU by the ruling political classes are distinct from pro-European sentiments communicated by advocates of a EU federation and/or super-state; the latter actually argued that the former did little more than make empty promises and keep European integration on a very cursorily level that still promoted national interests and in sum hurt the union's cohesion, efficiency, and future.

Other statements implied that the EU was making progress in solving the crisis through concrete political and economic actions such as the various rescue programmes and policy improvement. Again, representatives of the EU articulated such sentiments (EUP_2011/06/28). They admitted that the crisis was a challenge of unprecedented gravity but that efforts made to overcome its negative effects would bear fruit; even small steps in individual rescue programmes or partial decisions in transnational treaties like the EFSF/ESM schemes were portrayed as signs of progress (EPN_2012/10/08; CONSILIUM_2012/06/22; EUP_2012/07/03). Statements portrayed the crisis as a chance or argued that “things got better” and that the Eurozone would survive (BR_2011/11/18b; GER_2012/10/18). Official EU websites focused frequently on the efforts made by its leading politicians to develop and implement viable solutions to the various partial challenges that were entailed in the crisis and almost never communicated any critical reflections on the EU’s own actions or implied that the crisis was unsolvable. A notable exception were articles published on the European Parliament’s website that provided summaries of leading MEPs’ assessments; due to the institution’s pluralistic structure, these included critical perspectives from the political fringes on the left and right and even some Eurosceptic voices (EUP_2013/01/16). Other political communicators who seemed to prefer a positive reading of crisis-related developments included influential national leaders such as Germany’s Merkel and Schäuble (GER_2012/10/18; GER_2012/12/28c); however, the same politicians were also keen to emphasise that a lasting solution to the crisis must be based on strict discipline and hard work, which meant the implementation of fundamental reforms and extensive austerity measures in many struggling Eurozone countries (GER_2012/08/24; GER_2011/04/14).

Further positive statements characterised the EU as a force of good in political, economic, and social terms. Again, mostly EU representatives and other pro-European political communicators conveyed such evaluations: the EU ensured democracy and equality within its member-states, such as basic human rights, freedom of movement, and freedom of speech (CONSILIUM_2011/12/09; EUC_2012/08/20). Closely related arguments pointed to the quality of European welfare systems, aid programmes for the economically weak, and a focus on solidarity (e.g. EUP_2012/10/25c; EUC_2011/12/27; SP_2013/02/26), even though some of this suffered under the dominance of austerity politics and the trend towards fiscal discipline.

A similar argumentation shifted focus to the economic benefits of the single market, the open labour market, and transnational funding programmes. The EU was, despite the crisis, still a very wealthy part of the world with considerable economic power on a global scale, an exemplary infrastructure, and reliable laws. Others pointed to the EU’s function as a role model for lasting peace, though this did not necessarily include social peace (EUD_2012/12/10). Most official EU platforms and representatives avoided critical evaluations but focused on positive aspects; this is quite different from other platforms and communicator types. The low quantities in which positive evaluations were dispersed across the web sphere imply that the crisis’ development and political handling offered more points of contention and criticism than instances for articulating consent or support.

Critical evaluative statements formed the largest category. Criticism on the EU’s political, economic, and social structure and actions varied in severity and the underlying communicative goals, which again depended on the background of political communicators. For example, the Greek Blogger was very critical about the EU and its leading politicians’ handling of the crisis (PS_2012/09/03) but he did not question, attack, or condemn the basic idea of the union as did explicit anti-European

communicators (TE_2012/08/22; DB_2012/10/16). Five broader categories of critical/negative statements emerged in the web sphere: 1) *the EU is incapable/inefficient*; 2), *the EU is an antagonist/threat/burden for the nation-state*; 3) *the EU is not democratic*; 4), *the EU has moral weaknesses*; 5) *the EU has structural weaknesses*.

Many critical voices bemoaned that the EU leadership suffered from a general incapability to solve the crisis and was not able to find reasonable reforms; its decisions and actions worsened the situation in the “crisis countries”, which in turn led to a tangible loss of credibility and ultimately declining popular support. Critics argued that EU’s leaders miscalculated the costs of the crisis or tried to deceive taxpayers. Opponents of austerity politics argued that it made an economic recovery for the affected member-states virtually impossible. Both pro-European and anti-European communicators expressed this kind of criticism.

Table 7: Frequencies for critical evaluations of the EU in N2

Negative/Critical Evaluation	Frequency	% of Total
EU Structural weaknesses	353	40.16
EU incapability/inefficiency	363	41.30
EU is an antagonist/opponent/burden/threat to the nation-state	93	10.58
EU is not democratic	56	6.37
EU moral weaknesses	14	1.59
Total	879	100.00

Considerable differences emerged in the interpretations of this situation: one group of communicators expressed partly harsh criticism on the EU leadership’s political choices and asserted that the union was ill-equipped to overcome its crisis; they argued that the status quo needed change but they did not ask for a dissolution of the EU; some of the staunchest pro-European communicators expressed fundamental criticism (e.g. Jürgen Habermas, Peter Bofinger, and Julian Nida-Rümelin, GU_2012/08/03). Yet they did not want to dismantle the union but rather promoted integration as a solution to the crisis and urged decision-makers to find alternatives to the prevailing crisis strategies, which often favoured intergovernmentalism and austerity policies. The other group of critics did not demand reforms but a halt to further integration or even an abolition of the union.

Strong Eurosceptic perspectives portrayed the EU as a sort of anti-pole to the nation-state; the union became a political and financial burden, an antagonist, or even a threat to its individual member-states. Its decisions alienated member-states, an aspect that even pro-European communicators mentioned. British Eurosceptics, whether moderate or extreme ones, were among the harshest critics of the EU, though Eurosceptic groups in other member-states, such as Team Europe or Finland’s True Finns, applied similar arguments to advance their cases. Especially UKIP supporters dispersed negative, partly overdrawn portrayals of the EU. They repeatedly described the EU as a foreign invading power or enemy force that threatened the UK’s national sovereignty; another recurring theme described EU membership as a waste of tax money and source of unwelcomed migrants that steal jobs and put further pressure on the already strained British social services. British Eurosceptic positions tried to pin various negative developments to the EU to further discredit the union and gain more support for a much-desired

UK referendum. At the core of these statements were often fears of losing national sovereignty in political, economic but also cultural terms. UKIP bloggers are exemplary for this: ‘I was mortified and could not get over the fact my elected government was under the orders of a foreign organisation which the British electorate had no democratic control over’ (DB_2011/12/06). Such sentiments were not limited to UKIP and other “extreme” organisations but emerged among British mainstream conservative politicians, too. UK government official Ian Duncan Smith declared, for instance, that the EU was pooling resources and power from the national level while its institutions remained unelected and unaccountable (OP_2011/09/30b). The UK government was caught in a field of tension that emerged against the background of growing Euroscepticism and anti-EU sentiment in the domestic political context. On one hand the UK government tried to counter political advances of the growing UKIP and their own Tory backbenchers by positioning itself as a Eurosceptic member-state that demanded reforms and a retrieval of powers from Brussels to Westminster. At the same time its representatives argued in favour of EU membership in a reformed union. However, David Cameron’s attempt to portray himself as an avowed “Eurosceptic” failed to convince the core of the Eurosceptic movement in the UK, first and foremost among UKIP members who maintained that he was a Europhile in disguise (DB_2013/01/24).

Other critical evaluations shifted focus to the economic dimension. Eurosceptic blogger Wirtschaftswurm repeatedly argued that the Euro was an inefficient, counterproductive currency that caused more costs than it had benefits for German taxpayers and thus addressed the issue of economic unfairness. The EU’s alleged moral weaknesses were also frequently mentioned. Explicitly Eurosceptic communicators included moral evaluations in a shared narrative that outlined the alleged unethical character of the EU’s political class: the leadership only worked for its own advantages, favoured profits for political and economic elites and disregarded the needs and wishes of citizens. Some of the more vocal critics portrayed the EU as a corrupt apparatus or its representatives as deceptive, i.e. that the EU deliberately lied to European taxpayers. This often co-occurred with allegations that the EU was undemocratic i.e. lacked mechanisms for participation of the demos. Characterisations range from rather moderate, not entirely new criticism on the lack of democratic inclusion in EU political decision-making to more hostile statements that equate the EU with a totalitarian, quasi-fascist regime that exploits its member-states. This resembles different types of stronger (‘hard’) and weaker (‘soft’) Euroscepticism as proposed by Taggart and Szczerbiak (2000; 2002). Despite differences in the radicalism of criticism, all of them described a lack of transparency and sense of detachment that many communicators felt; other critical positions shared this perception and described the crisis as a culmination of these underlying problems and that it was, at least to an extent, inevitable.

The final category of critical evaluations includes statements that pointed to structural weaknesses in the overall design of the EU and the Eurozone. Various communicators argued that the political and economic problems were the result of systematic failures in the substructure of the EU and the single currency union. One recurring argument asserted that the economic union advanced without a real political union (PS_2011/09/27). European leaders pursued the wrong type of integration and the prevailing intergovernmental approach was controversial, ineffective or harmful (HIE_2013/03/04). Similar statements argued that the EU leadership itself worked on a flawed, impractical political vision (OP_2011/12/13) or that it was an artificial construct, often with the implication that the nation-state was somehow the “real” and natural counterpart. Other critical statements were concerned with the internal divisions of the EU political structure and maintained that leading national governments, i.e. Germany

and France, repeatedly bypassed the EU Commission (OP_2011/08/31b). Slightly different criticism saw the union and the Eurozone as already fragmented, and the crisis merely revealed long existing fundamental inconsistencies and problems (BR_2012/08/29; OP_2012/10/05). Another sub-section shifted focus to problems in the EU's and Eurozone's economic systems, which lacked competitiveness, growth, capital, and/or resources.

The secondary content analysis shows that further differentiation is needed between varying types of EU criticism and Eurosceptic sentiment, which can be based on the subject of critical communication and the degree of “radicalism” or “intensity” of criticism, comparable to different EU-attitudes detected in previous studies (de Wilde et al. 2014): first, there are self-proclaimed Eurosceptics who mainly focused on economic and fiscal issues and argued that it was wrong to introduce the euro; the single currency should be abandoned or that at least no further countries should be admitted to the currency union. Their main arguments focused on the economic disadvantages of the euro; it was the actual cause for the crisis, as it bound together very different, incompatible national economies. These positions are literally “Euro”-sceptic. However, they did not explicitly argue for a total dissolution of the EU. A second, similar yet paradoxically more pro-European type of Euroscepticism includes voices that argued for EU membership in a reformed and “reduced” EU with focus on strengthening the single market and a retrieval for a range of powers, most notably in the regulation of labour markets and migration/free movement. The moderately Eurosceptic think tank Open Europe and the British government under David Cameron would belong to this group of moderate Eurosceptics; they proposed that the EU should be preserved as an economic space with some basic legal and trade collaboration but must not transform into a genuine federation, since that would undermine national sovereignty. The aim was not to destroy but to change the EU to some sort of “light version”.

The most radical form of anti-EU sentiment applied exaggerations and partly even unfounded assertions and distortions of facts to discredit the EU and demanded not only a withdrawal from the union but even its complete dissolution. Proponents of this extremely EU-hostile position were political communicators in the right-wing fringes of member-states; a very influential and prominent example is said British UKIP. The respective communicators seem to have a rather modernist, container-like understanding of the traditional nation-state and perceive the EU as a real threat to the independence of their country. Aside from the costs of EU membership and legal integration focused shifted also to migration. The EU was often blamed for growing numbers of migrants; accusations claimed it had bereft its member-states of their borders and contributed to the demise of national identity. The most radical critics did not differentiate between the various branches of the EU and often condemned the union in total, even if their main arguments applied only to one or two specific EU institutions. This is another significant manifestation of oversimplified portrayals for the EU, which in fact consists of a variety of different departments, each with different competencies and powers. Based on these observations it becomes possible to identify six major types of political communicators that comment on the EU and its crisis: Genuine Eurosceptics and Europhobes, moderate Eurosceptics, EU-pragmatists, critical EU-supporters, genuine Europhiles, and proponents of the status-quo.

These backgrounds further determined what recommendations for actions and demands the different communicators articulated. Eight broader categories emerged in the web sphere: 1) *EU integration/cooperation is the solution*; 2) *EU should not intervene/no further integration/no*

enlargement; 3) EU must change crisis strategy; 4) EU must ensure social stability; 5) EU must show solidarity; 6) EU must provide protection; 7) EU needs reforms; 8) EU has no need for reforms.

EU representatives, European government officials, and pro-European communicators repeatedly demanded that the member-states should increase the level of integration, though the type and extent for the proposed measures differed vastly. German and French leaders favoured an intergovernmental approach on integration that included closer cooperation in an economic and fiscal respect to solve the crisis, especially with an eye on strict regulations; however, they refrained from creating a genuine political federation.

Table 8: Frequencies for Recommendations directed at EU in N2

Type of recommendation/demand	Frequency	% of Total
EU integration/cooperation is the solution	173	19.95
EU must change crisis strategy	421	48.56
EU must ensure social stability/focus social issues	31	3.58
EU must provide protection	8	0.92
EU must show solidarity	22	2.54
EU needs reform	175	20.18
EU no need for further reforms	7	0.81
EU should not intervene/no integration/no enlargement	30	3.46
Total	867	100.00

Critical voices saw this as short-sighted and asserted that any such moves would inevitably lead to closer political integration and thus a transfer of power from the national to the EU level (PS_2013/02/24). Europhile political groups wanted to go further and argued that a genuine EU federal state was the answer to current and future problems (EUD_2011/03/22; EUD_2012/04/19). Despite these differences, such recommendations base on the assumption that deeper integration and coordination of actions on the transnational level was needed to solve crisis-related problems.

Their counterparts argued that integration in any form was to be avoided or even reduced. Different types of Eurosceptics shared a similar attitude towards the perceived demerits of further convergence for national sovereignty and questioned its effectiveness to solve political and economic problems. Blogger Wirtschaftswurm discerned that the idea of a United States of Europe was a thing of the past and no longer an adequate political solution (WW_2011/09/16). Related statements included recommendations for countries that considered joining the EU to refrain from becoming a member (TE_2012/01/10).

A frequent type of recommendation aimed for concrete crisis policies: the EU must adjust, change, improve, or abandon a related course of actions. The issue of finding efficient solutions to the crisis and its entailed challenges was so complex and controversial that it caused the emergence of multiple lines of friction, which again lead to the articulation of diverse potential political instructions. Various politicians from relatively stable Eurozone countries demanded that austerity measures must remain part of recovery programmes in crisis countries and the EU's general economic strategy. Its opponents maintained that austerity was counterproductive and potentially harmful for people who lived

in the affected member-states and thus had failed (SP_2013/02/05; PS_2012/06/12). Same antagonisms emerged in discussions on almost any other scheme, such as Eurobonds, the FTT, ESM etc.

Many EU- and government officials placed emphasis on growth, jobs, and competitiveness; they frequently demanded that the EU and individual member-states must do more to achieve these aims as key elements in a successful crisis strategy (EPN_2012/04/26). Proponents of austerity politics argued that cuts and reductions were a necessary precondition before growth measures could be applied to reinvigorate the economy; growth measures and fiscal discipline must go hand in hand (e.g. GOV_2012/01/24). Especially British, German, and French government representatives communicated this strategy.

Alternative perspectives that did not share the neoliberal approach also demanded a shift towards job creation, stability, and growth but with emphasis on the ‘missing link’ to social justice and solidarity (SP_2012/06/27). Critics of the crisis’ handling by leading politicians demanded that the EU’s leadership should not punish the public but financial sector for the economic problems that the Eurozone had to struggle with –something prevailing policies, such as the involvement of private savings in the Cypriot bailout, would not do (e.g. PS_2012/10/03; EUP_2012/10/18). Another type of demands argued the EU’s leadership needed to do more to solve the crisis, i.e. that it should increase its political and economic efforts (e.g. EUP_2012/02/01; EUC_2011/09/02). Eurosceptic communicators almost never articulated any of these recommendations to change the overall crisis policy “productively”.

NGOs and representatives of the political left asserted that the EU must ensure social stability -it had a special role to play in providing safeguards for the politically and economically weak (EUP_2012/09/13; SP_2013/02/05). Euro-friendly political communicators insisted that the EU needed more solidarity: first, more solidarity on a transnational level in form of greater devotion to a common EU identity or the willingness to contribute more funds to the EU budget for the common good (HEL_2011/09/27; EUD_2012/04/19; EUD_2011/03/28); second, Europeans had to overcome cultural barriers and cooperate on solutions to common challenges (PS_2012/12/13). Similar statements shifted focus to the EU’s role as a protector of rights.

The last two categories include recommendations for reforms. Communicators discerned that the EU’s political and economic framework needed fundamental change beyond temporary crisis measures. This type of demand/recommendation was articulated across political viewpoints and the proposed reforms or institutional changes varied accordingly. Statements aimed for a diverse set of areas that involve EU institutions: Eurosceptic communicators demanded free travel must stop (DB_2013/01/14), while less radical but still very critical ones argued the EU budget needed cuts (OP_2012/10/30). Pro-European voices demanded the EU institutions must become stronger and/or more independent (EUP_2011/04/26c) or that they should play a stronger role in foreign politics (EUP_2011/03/02). Euro-friendly communicators asked for more democratisation, transparency, and inclusion of citizens (BR_2011/12/05b; EUD_2011/03/28; SP_2013/02/26), while others declared the intergovernmental approach was undemocratic and needed change (PS_2012/09/03); fewer mentioned it was crucial to create a transnational public sphere (EUD_2011/12/20). The diversity of political perspectives demanding reform in one form or the other implies that the EU was often perceived as somewhat insufficiently equipped or partly even ill designed. At the very least, this shows how the EU’s overall framework was subject to constant contestation and negotiation. Far fewer communicators insisted that the EU needed no further reforms and the respective statements were largely limited to issues of migration and free travel in

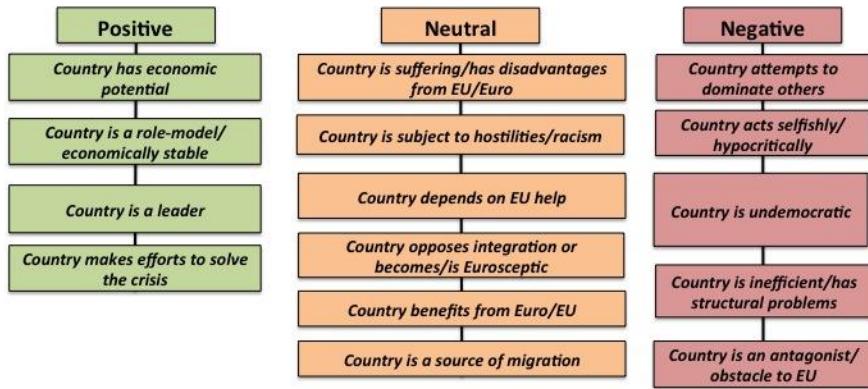
the sample; for example, EU officials contended that the Schengen treaty must remain untouched (e.g. EUP_2011/05/04; EUP_2011/05/13). Still, no one asserted that the EU political or economic framework would not need any changes at all.

Attributions of Responsibility and Portrayals of Key Actors II: the Member-States

Evaluative statements about individual nation-states are divided into three broader categories of fact-oriented/“neutral” descriptions, positive portrayals, and critical/negative characterisations. The analysis focuses on the then 27 EU member-states, whose portrayal was context-dependent. For example, British Eurosceptics described their country as a victim to the EU and its own political establishment, while others saw it as an antagonist to integration; critics of austerity politics portrayed Germany as an imperialistic power that attempted to subjugate the rest of the Eurozone through harsh bailout programmes, while advocates of fiscal stability maintained it had a role model function for the Eurozone.

The category for neutral descriptions covers six different types of portrayals: 1) *Country is suffering/has disadvantages from EU/Euro*; 2) *Country is subject to hostilities/racism*; 3) *Country depends on EU help*; 4) *Country opposes integration or becomes/is Eurosceptic*; 5) *Country benefits from Euro/EU membership*; 6) *Country is a source of migration*. As in the case of neutral EU evaluations all statements in this category did not explicitly or implicitly denounce or praise a specific country in any form but attempted to describe it in a factual manner. The first category includes statements that asserted a particular country had political and economic disadvantages from being a member of the EU and/or Eurozone. Eurosceptic communicators but also opponents of the prevailing crisis strategy and bailout programmes were the two largest groups who expressed such perceptions.

Figure 10: Three main categories for evaluative statements about nation-states in N2



EU-critical communicators argued that the crisis countries suffered under systematic imbalances in the Eurozone. A prime example is the Greek Blogger, who could be described as a non-nationalist, non-anti-EU critic of EU politics and crisis strategies: he pointed out that the Greek crisis was not caused by the country's insufficient economic sector and culture but rather the result of flaws and inconsistencies in the Eurozone's infrastructure. Greece was a symptom but not the cause of the crisis. Other statements implied that the crisis countries had limited options for solving the crisis due to the confinements of their EU- and Eurozone membership (BOO_2011/10/24). Such evaluations were not limited to the GIIPS countries but occasionally applied to their stable counterparts. For instance, according to German Eurosceptics economically prospering member-states carried the burden of costs for maintaining the EU and EMU and were trapped in a losing bargain (WW_2012/12/18). Similar arguments in the British context referred to the costs and political concessions that EU membership involved (DB_2011/09/19); these went hand in hand with negative evaluations of the EU as an antagonist to the nation-state. One major sub-category depicts individual countries as victims of the EU and its most powerful member-states. Two quite different political perspectives put this argument forward in their agendas: explicitly Eurosceptic ones who promoted referenda to regain national sovereignty –which they perceived as lost– and critics of the status-quo in the union, who favoured a more balanced political relationship between economically more and less powerful member-states.

Further descriptive statements focused on negative consequences for transnational solidarity and portrayed individual member-states as subjects to hostility and racism. The strained Greek-German relations during the height of bailout negotiations are a primary example: in both countries, political and media communicators expressed frustration, contempt, and even downright hatred in form of stereotypes, overdrawn comparisons, and plain insults. Leading German politicians were depicted as Nazis who planned to subjugate Greece and German flags were burnt during mass protests in Athens. German media and representatives of the political class constructed and dispersed the notion of lazy, inefficient, corrupt, and ultimately ungrateful Greeks (BR_2011/06/29; PS_2012/02/17; PS_2011/11/25). A few

communicators addressed this problem analytically and called for a measured tone in the debate (*ibid*), though they were a minority in the sample.

The second largest category includes statements that asserted the country in focus depended on external assistance from the EU to solve its economic, social, but also political problems. This almost exclusively applied to the crisis countries. The third largest group portrayed individual countries as opponents to integration, sometimes with the implication that Eurosceptic sentiment was on the rise; this includes comments on the rejection of policies and schemes by a member-state, e.g. the UK's opposition to the financial transaction tax, or about growing resentment towards the prevailing crisis approach and bailouts. Though statements in this category aimed for very different conflict areas, they used a similar description of the respective country as opposed to steps towards collaborative actions. Content that implied member-states would benefit from integration occurred to a much lesser degree but still emerged as a distinguishable category. Mainly government representatives and EU officials conveyed such perceptions by outlining various economic and political merits of being a member of the EU and/or the Euro, mostly expressed with "keywords", such as stability, democracy, prosperity, security, and wealth (EPN_2011/12/12; EUP_2013/01/30b; GER_2011/03/10). EU-critical communicators hardly articulated such sentiments, as it basically contradicted their main arguments of either reducing or leaving the EU.

Positive evaluative statements occurred least frequently and consist of four categories: 1) *Country has economic potential*; 2) *Country is a role-model/ is economically stable*; 3) *Country is a leading power*; 4) *Country makes effort to solve the crisis*. The first category covers statements that implied a specific country had considerable resources and potentials that remained unrealised due to the crisis but made it virtually rich nonetheless –all it needed was proper management (PS_2011/12/28). The second category is mainly limited to statements about Eurozone members who remained economically stable, such as Germany, the Netherlands, or Finland (GER_2012/10/18). However, it occasionally included countries that managed to overcome their crises through reforms, such as Ireland (EUP_2013/01/16). Some stated that these member-states should serve as examples for how to reform fiscal and administrative policies to overcome economic problems (EPN_2012/04/26).

Connected to this are statements that argued certain member-states were adequate leaders during the crisis, precisely due to their political and economic status; again, Germany is the one country to which this applied frequently. The largest category of positive evaluative statements about individual countries includes forms of praise for efforts made to overcome the crisis or prevent economic problems. Especially EU officials and government representatives praised two types of "actions": first, the application of reforms in crisis countries (GER_2011/04/14; EPN_2012/10/08; CONSILIUM_2012/09/14). EP president Martin Schulz spoke of 'heroic efforts' made by Greece in the context of structural reforms, fiscal discipline, and privatisation schemes (EUP_2012/05/23). Emphasis was placed on those countries that suffered directly under the crisis and the effects of austerity politics, in order to convey a sentiment of solidarity and empathy. Second, consensus among member-states such as ratifying schemes for the transnational coordination of economic policy or agreeing to bailout proposals.

Critical evaluations of nation-states form the largest class judged by sheer frequency. Five broader categories emerged: 1) *Country attempts to dominate others*; 2) *Country acts selfishly/hypocritically*; 3) *Country is undemocratic*; 4) *Country is inefficient/has structural problems*; 5) *Country is an antagonist/obstacle to EU*. Several negative statements asserted that individual nation-states used their power to dominate other countries and tried to enforce their political-economic visions.

EU critical and Eurosceptic communicators articulated such perceptions that mainly applied to Germany and, though to a lesser degree, France (PS_2011/09/27; DB_2011/08/17; BR_2011/03/25b).

Other related yet distinct statements implied that a particular country acted selfishly or even hypocritically. A few communicators argued that Germany and other stable economies in the Eurozone would demand more austerity in Greece, Spain etc. but introduced the same policies only gradually in their own economies (BR_2012/05/07). This includes blame shifting between member-states –or to be more precise between media representatives, politicians, and popular movements in the involved countries– (PS_2012/08/12c), the re-introduction of border controls (EUP_2011/05/04), or attempts by governments to protect domestic interests (e.g. EUP_2012/12/11b).

The most common category includes assertions that particular nation-states suffered from structural problems. Communicators primarily focused on crisis countries (EUP_2011/04/26c; PS_2011/08/11; DB_2011/04/08; WW_2012/03/13) but occasionally included larger economies such as France and Italy or even Germany. Some were concerned with economic and fiscal inconsistencies; they maintained that certain member-states lacked competitiveness, innovation, and growth or suffered from corruption and other inefficiencies. For example, Eurosceptic blogger Wirtschaftswurm called Greece a ‘weak state’ (WW_2012/08/02) while Open Europe argued Greeks themselves would not trust their own government and political class (OP_2012/07/31b). Most of these statements attempted to appear fact-oriented by applying forms of policy and development analyses in the political and economic areas and seemingly avoided cultural judgements. However, some communicators maintained individual countries had cultural dispositions that made them more prone to the crisis, since they promoted inefficient economic and political policies.

There are five types of recommendations and demands directed at nation-states: 1) *Country should stay in EU*; 2) *Country should leave EU*; 3) *Country should leave the Eurozone*; 3) *Country should advance integration*; 4) *Country must apply reforms/accept bailout terms*. Discussions about the usefulness of remaining in the EU or Eurozone emerged for several member-states. The two most notable instances were the UK’s referendum debate and Greece’s future in the Eurozone. Mainly pro-European communicators, most mainstream politicians and EU officials strongly recommended that these member-states should not leave the EU or the single currency union, respectively. Europhile Europa Union Deutschland asked the UK to remain vital part in a EU federal state (EUD_2012/11/27), while the British Prime Minister envisioned the country as part of a reformed and reduced union. In the Greek case, Eurosceptic communicators maintained it was for the best of all if it left the single currency union, an assessment vehemently opposed by leading politicians in the EU institutions but also German and Greek governments. Especially Eurosceptic perspectives postulated an exit from the union, though the respective communicators varied in their degree of radicalism and applied different arguments to bolster their claims. For example, UKIP supporters used a specific brand of nationalism to advance their case for regaining sovereignty from the EU, while German Eurosceptic Wirtschaftswurm implemented economic and fiscal analyses to support his recommendations of reverted integration. The exact opposite are statements that asserted increasing steps towards integration helped a member-state to overcome its crisis. Again, EU officials and pro-European communicators articulated such recommendations and they aimed for different political or economic areas. However, these recommendations are a minority in the web sphere.

The largest sub-category asked member-states to apply reforms to their economic policies and administrative bodies, which was a central precondition for external help in form of bailout programmes. Especially EU officials and European government representatives who were involved in the negotiation and implementation of rescue packages articulated such proposals. Examples are abundant: EU Commissioner Olli Rehn called the Greek government to ‘accelerate implementation of structural reforms to strengthen its economy and growth’ (EPN_2012/01/24c), The EU council recommended the Greek parliament to approve reform programmes to receive bailout funds (COSILIUIM_2012/05/14), and the German government demanded that Greece must meet the troika’s targets for reforms and spending cuts before the country receives any money (GER_2011/08/24); former Eurogroup President Jean-Claude Juncker urged Spain to reform its banking sector to ‘contain the situation’ (COSILIUIM_2012/05/14) and German Finance Minister Wolfgang Schäuble plainly stated that only reforms could help Eurozone countries to overcome the crisis (GER_2012/10/18). However, these demands for reform, i.e. improvement and optimisation, were not always limited to smaller Eurozone countries but also included some of the larger, more powerful ones such as France (e.g. BR_2012/02/06b; BR_2011/05/04b).

The Main Frames in the EU Crisis Web Sphere

The previous in-depth analysis explored what frame elements in form of conflict areas, evaluations, causal interpretations, and recommendations (Entman 1993) were communicated in the crisis web sphere. The inductively derived variables formed the basis for cluster analyses to detect dominant frames per platform (chapter 4). This final step of the analytical process bridges the qualitative and quantitative dimensions (Terfrüchte 2011: 246). The results of the cluster analyses are presented in summarised form and show that frames largely corresponded with the three main fields of contestation and the three classes of evaluative statements for the EU, while the platforms focused on different sub-categories.

The dominant frames on the official EU websites were mainly concerned with the EU’s positive-active role in solving the crisis (APPENDIX 1). There were only few differences between the EU Commission, the EU Council, the European Parliament, and the Eurozone Portal: The Eurozone Portal News website exclusively focused on economic policy, the single currency’s framework, and counter-strategies for the crisis. Three main frames were identified: *the EU/Eurozone faces a crisis, the EU will overcome the crisis and provide stability, and the EU institutions lead the crisis’ management*. The platform discussed and portrayed the EU as an economic space that was in need for better regulations; it also emphasised that cooperation must be part of the solution; moreover, the EU was portrayed as capable of solving current challenges. The website simultaneously characterised the EU institutions, primarily the EU Commission and ECB, as the only political actors able to enforce transnational programmes for fiscal stability and economic recovery and recommended that member-states should increase their efforts to boost job creation, growth, and competitiveness – a goal that was best achieved through structural reforms. The other EU platforms show a bit more diversity and different emphases in the spectrum of frames that emerged in their web content, which is linked to the broader fields of responsibilities that each of these larger institutions has. On the EU Council website four frames emerged: *The EU is a force of good, the EU’s role in the crisis, crisis strategies and the financial transaction tax, and the EU is*

responsible for the crisis' management. It prioritised the positive aspects of EU integration and asserted that plans to overcome the crisis existed and were executed. The EU Commission's site reproduced the same messages; four frames could be identified, which were *EU integration is good, the EU will solve the crisis, the EU develops crisis strategies and solutions*, and *the EU is in charge of crisis management*. Both websites included issues related to the EU's political framework more often than the Eurozone Portal News platform, such as the union's potential future as a federation, the political cohesion of the union, or budget issues. However, *crisis developments and policies* still was the dominant frame category in both platforms' content. The same applies for the EP's website, though *migration, free movement, and racism* formed another distinguishable frame; the European Parliament covered aspects in its web content that none of the other EU platforms mentioned, such as the discord over the EU budget or Schengen policies. Six frames could be identified on the EP's website: *the EU needs improvement, the EU faces a crisis, The EU leads the crisis' management, the EU has migration problems and free travel is under threat, the EU needs adequate funding*, and *the EU is a force of good*.

The Eurozone Portal, Commission and Council's pages provided the least critical content about the EU and preferred to present "sober facts" or highlighted positive aspects of their institutions' work. A positive framing of the EU dominated their web communication with the implication that it was the guarantor of specific rights and freedoms but also the solution to political and economic problems. Self-critical statements about its policy decisions or other shortcomings hardly occurred. Together with obvious tendencies towards personalisation, this further solidifies the impression that their websites served as digital outlets for conventional public relations and political marketing, i.e. strategic communication purposes. The situation for the EP's website looks a bit more complex. It has the most diverse set of cited communicators in all EU websites, due to its function as a democratic forum for different European political parties. This includes critical perspectives about the EU. Though positive statements occurred comparatively often, neutral and critical positions were frequently included, which implies a more diverse picture of EU- and crisis politics; for example, the EP's website reported when MEPs criticised leading EU officials. Most of this criticism did not discredit or reject the EU as such – except for explicitly Eurosceptic MEPs – but seemed to aim for the improvement of procedures and policies. The EP's online platform appeared more self-reflecting and critical than the other EU platforms and provided a window to political debates in the parliament; still, the vision of the EU as a force for the common good emerged as a discernible frame. The EU was portrayed as a democratic political and economic space based on the constant re-negotiation of responsibilities, rights, regulations, resource management etc.

The EU Commission included no evaluative statements about individual nation-states and no frame elements could be found in this dimension. The EU Council's website integrated more information about member-states and dispersed positive portrayals for individual countries. It frequently stressed the efforts EU member-states made to overcome crisis-related problems. This does not mean that EU officials would not articulate any critical comments at all; to the contrary, they did so as cited political communicators on other platforms but their own websites avoided controversial statements about specific countries. The same mainly applied for the Eurozone Portal news site, which reproduced positive frames for member-states; especially countries that received bailout funds were lauded for their efforts. Again, the EP's web content was more ambiguous, as it also included negative and neutral-descriptive portrayals for individual nation-states. Negative statements mostly aimed for structural problems in specific

Eurozone countries or bemoaned self-interested political decisions, while positive statements focused progress made to solve crisis-related problems. The comparatively high degree of diversity is linkable to the politically diverse substructure of the EP and its website's coverage of different MEP's opinions.

To sum up, the official EU platforms mostly reproduced frames related to *crisis developments and strategies* and *the EU's political framework*, which reflects their focus on the political handling of economic problems and the structuring of the union through treaties and regulations. The EU's institutions conveyed positive framings of the EU that emphasised its constructive role in the crisis' management and solution but also political, economic, and social life in general. Some exceptions emerged in the European Parliament where MEPs of different backgrounds expressed criticism on political decisions in the EU Commission or Council. The type of criticism, i.e. whether it was constructive or deconstructive, depended on the party affiliation of the respective MEP, though generally pro-European EU criticism to improve current procedures outweighed Eurosceptic calls for devolution. Most official EU platforms avoided mentioning individual member-states and produced few evaluative statements about them; it seems they rather tried to talk about EU politics and the crisis from a general angle. If they included references to member-states, positive evaluations outweighed negative ones, with the more diverse EP's website being an exception. The level of communicative openness towards political communicators outside their institutions was relatively low across all EU platforms and there were no noticeable feedback loops with alternative discourse participants from the so-called civil society. Instead, these platforms seemed to serve specific strategic purposes for the dissemination of selected information, i.e. to communicate the EU institutions' official perspectives on current issues; this increases transparency but the analysed content also implies that web platforms are utilised for disseminating positive messages about the EU. Simultaneously, their public communication provided insights into the origins of systemic irritations that caused the emergence of the crisis and served as references for follow-up communication on other websites. The EU platforms opened windows to their agents' readings of the EU and the crisis and contributed to the construction of the transnational discourse. However, they did not change the flows of communication determined by the political hierarchies in the EU that favoured a top-down framing of relevant issues and actors.

Government websites are structurally similar to the EU platforms: first, none of them provided any options for multilateral communicative interactions or cited non-governmental communicators to any notable extent; their platforms remained closed for external flows of communication and served as digital press outlets and pools for public information. On-site options for discursive-integrative debates did not exist. The reproduced frames depended on the political background of the leaders currently in office (APPENDIX 2). The German government mainly used its website to disperse its view on the crisis and to convey precise recommendations for further actions to improve EU politics and overcome the economic challenges. These assumed that fiscal discipline and structural reforms are the way forward; if struggling Eurozone countries wanted to achieve economic stability and growth, they had to cut spending and promote the privatisation of markets. EU-related content transmitted four major frames: *the EU faces a crisis, austerity and reforms, the crisis affects the political framework, and private sector involvement is part of the solution/the EU needs integration*. The German government under Merkel favoured the intergovernmental approach and tried to strike a balance between pro-European sentiment/closer cooperation and serving its electorates (assumed) aspirations for limited transnational liability. The portrayal of the EU was rather positive if not pro-European. The same applied for evaluative statements

about member-states: they were “friends” and partners. However, that did not keep leading politicians from advising member-states, such as Greece, to address their economic problems through reforms. Still, Angela Merkel and other government officials declared that Greece must stay part of the Eurozone. The German government website frequently commented on events and developments in other EU member-states, especially in those who applied for bailout funds.

The Greek government’s website (English version) seems little different; at least in the few available publications, as no meaningful frame analysis could be conducted due to the low frequency of content production. It seemed to mainly focus on crisis developments and strategies and chronicled the government’s role and perspective on current events without providing any space for alternative viewpoints. Most articles outlined what measures government officials planned to apply for solving the crisis. The government emphasised that the troika acted as an equal partner and Greece was not limited to the role of a passive subject dependent on external support –a notion repeatedly constructed on other platforms. The EU was discussed as an economic and political partner and the general sentiment was pro-European, though some cited officials argued other member-states should show more understanding for the country’s difficult situation. It included only very few references to other member-states, so no particular frames emerged.

The British government’s website differed little from the other two platforms in terms of structure and function. Its role was limited to a digital resource pool and press outlet; the posted articles included few external communicators. The positioning towards the EU was more distanced and mirrored the government’s political agenda for European politics: the EU was portrayed as an economic and political space that needed reforms to create a leaner, less integrated, and more trade-focused union with the single market at its core; powers must be returned to the national level and the EU budget must be cut. Three frames were detected in its “EU section”: *the EU needs structural improvement*, *the EU’s political framework*, and *the EU budget needs cuts*. The UK government was the only official administrative website in the sample that articulated critical assessments for the EU and vowed to defend national interests. It mentioned few individual member-states and largely avoided evaluative statements about them. The platform made only few references to the UK referendum between 2011 and 2013 and it could not be detected as an individual frame.

To sum up, the three government websites placed emphasis on *crisis developments and policies* and *the EU’s political framework*; migration-related issues were only occasionally mentioned. The framing of the EU was mainly positive on the German and Greek platforms and reflected both governments’ stances towards the EU. The German government favoured an intergovernmental EU with closer collaboration in certain areas as needed but made clear that Eurozone countries must “play by the rules” to keep the union together. The Greek government described the EU (and IMF) as a partner in times of crisis and underlined the efforts made by the country to solve its problems and “take responsibility”; it almost seems as if it tried to counter portrayals of Greece as dependent and unable to govern itself while indirectly acknowledging that the country relied on external help. The UK government websites basically reproduced British mainstream-conservative Euroscepticism that would like to return powers from the transnational level to Westminster and a EU focused on trade. What all government platforms shared was the level of relevance they assigned to economic growth and competitiveness as key elements in lasting solutions to the crisis; the German government added its preference for fiscal

discipline and austerity politics to this list. None of the websites discussed any alternative ways to overcome current economic, social, and political challenges.

The two think tank blogs' focused on *crisis developments and policies* and the *EU's political framework* (APPENDIX 3). Both platforms were much more critical in their assessment of the EU and the official crisis strategy. On Bruegel five specified frames emerged: *the EU's political framework in the crisis, the EU's crisis strategy is flawed, the EU is responsible for the crisis' management, the EU/Eurozone have structural weaknesses, and the crisis is worsening and strategies fail*. The EU was mostly portrayed as an economic and political space that faced a fundamental crisis whose outcome remained unknown but caused irreversible transformations in the union and individual member-states. Bruegel provided partly extensive analyses of economic developments from a policy-focused perspective and integrated recommendations for how to improve the EU's and Eurozone's infrastructure. Both were portrayed from a mildly pro-European though quite critical perspective; it repeatedly argued that EU leaders applied insufficient or even counterproductive means to approach the crisis and regularly addressed structural problems in specific Eurozone countries and the implied economic risks. A considerable amount of content on the platform maintained that the crisis revealed many inconsistencies in the Eurozone's political and economic infrastructure.

Its moderately Eurosceptic counterpart *Open Europe* was more aggressive in its assessment of EU- and Eurozone politics and not only criticised inadequate crisis strategies but pointed to structural problems in the underlying institutional framework. This was reflected in five main frames: *the EU's political structure in crisis, the EU is responsible for the crisis' development, the EU/Eurozone have structural weaknesses, and the crisis is worsening and strategies fail*. As a UK-based business think tank it supported a reduced version of the EU and argued "ever closer union" was no longer a goal worthy of pursuit. The focus should instead shift towards economic growth and the improvement of markets. Open Europe's blog frequently discussed British domestic politics and its relations to EU politics and the UK Referendum subsequently emerged as a noticeable sub-frame. Moreover, EU critical and negative statements dominated its content and mostly aimed for alleged structural weaknesses. It included a far more diverse set of cited political communicators and provided a broader picture of the crisis discourse landscape. The think tank blogs frequently integrated statements and references to member-states into their web content. Critical assessments of economic and political problems dominated this dimension; on both platforms the negative/critical frame for country portrayals outweighed positive ones. Both think tank platforms are prime examples for a type of political communicators who implemented online media as cost-effective tools to outline and disperse their perspectives among a wider public. Furthermore, they show how economists and the private sector perceived EU- and crisis politics –two groups who were often at the centre of crisis developments. Most notably, their web communication challenged crisis narratives reproduced on official EU- and or government platforms and show how perspectives on and assessments of current developments diverged.

The three NGO platforms provide further empirical evidence for this (APPENDIX 4). The Eurosceptic Better Off Out campaign website discussed only issues related to the EU's political framework and the entailed implications for the UK to highlight why a referendum on its EU membership should happen sooner rather than later; over 75% of the analysed articles dealt with a UK referendum. Unsurprisingly, the framing of the EU was entirely negative. The union was depicted as an antagonist to the nation-state, which puts enormous pressure on British taxpayers and takes away their independence.

This was reflected in three main frames: *The EU's role and a referendum*, *The EU's is flawed and inefficient*, and finally *The EU is a threat and burden to the nation-state*. The platform served to disperse critical statements about the EU to discredit the union and to convince voters that leaving was the best option to British voters. Crisis-related developments were only occasionally mentioned to portray the EU as incompetent. There were no recommendations in the sample that implied the communicators behind the campaign might consider negotiating the current political and/or economic structure of the EU except for abandoning it altogether. It is an illustrative example for the instrumentalisation of online media by political fringe groups for sharing their narratives with a potentially unlimited public. The web platform of the transnational Eurosceptic NGO Team Europe showed similar tendencies and reproduced negative portrayals of the EU as incompetent, undemocratic, and unwanted in three main frames: *The EU is fundamentally flawed*, *The EU is in crisis*, and *The EU is undemocratic and a threat to the nation-state*. On Better Off Out's platform the dominant country frame focused on the UK and described it as a victim to EU politics, while Team Europe focused on a greater variety of countries and argued that Euroscepticism was on the rise across the continent.

The direct counterpart to Eurosceptic websites is Europa Union Deutschland's blog, where frames related to the *EU's political framework* and *crisis developments and policies* also dominated its web content but whose authors argued in the exact opposite direction: the EU needed change and reforms in form of closer integration and a real federation. This was expressed in four frames, *free travel is under threat*, *the EU has a crisis (of trust)*, *the EU has structural problems*, and *EU integration and federalism are the solution*. The group argued that different speeds might apply to different member-states but the goal must be an ever-closer union. They did not engage with Eurosceptic sentiments except for the moderate mainstream version represented by the UK government. Most of the website's content reproduced a positive EU framing that highlighted various benefits of transnational cooperation. However, it included criticism on European leaders as well, who would not do enough to promote and implement closer integration. The handling of the crisis, for example in the Cypriot case, rather hurt than helped strengthening the EU. It further portrayed the crisis as a chance to re-think the EU and create a genuine political union that was much needed to avoid new crises in the future. Articles regarding member-states mainly accumulated to negative portrayals for countries; the respective content asserts that developments in specific nation-states opposed or reversed steps towards closer integration or harmed transnational solidarity.

Content on Social Platform's website accumulated to four frames that implied an ambiguous stance towards the EU caught between approval of transnational cooperation and criticism on prevailing EU policies: *the social effects of austerity*, *the EU has a positive role*, *austerity policies are inefficient*, and the *crisis is worsening*. The platform's content placed emphasis on social policies, since the NGO is a EU-wide cooperation of groups that are active in the social sector. This area was directly affected by the economic crisis and the political as well as social consequences of spending cuts, privatisations, and other similar reforms. Its framing of the EU was ambivalent: on one hand the website's communicators portrayed the EU as a central political and social actor who could ease the situation for marginalised groups that suffered most from economic turmoil and cuts in welfare systems; on the other, they frequently criticised the EU for failing to accomplish exactly this objective. This is a typical stance for political communicators who are not necessarily Eurosceptic but nevertheless dissatisfied with political decisions and the crisis' management on the EU level. Since the platform did not make any evaluative

statements about member-states, no frame elements were identified for this area. To sum up, NGO platforms illustrate how special interests determined perspectives taken on the EU and the crisis and how political agencies utilise online media for strategic communication with specific agendas (to achieve a referendum, improve crisis policies, reform political structures etc.).

The independent blogs specialised on selected partial issues of the EU crisis and contextualised EU- and crisis politics against specific national contexts (APPENDIX 5): the Greek Blogger focused on the Greek context and the mutual affectivity of domestic and transnational politics; four dominant frames were detected in the platform's content: *The EU has structural weaknesses*, *The EU is incapable of solving the crisis and is divided*, *The EU is not democratic*, and *austerity is the wrong strategy*. His evaluation of the EU was critical, especially regarding its leading politicians' strategies to solve the crisis' various challenges. In fact, he repeatedly argued the prevailing approach was enforced on the struggling Euro countries in an undemocratic, top-down fashion. Though he asserted that the EU suffered from fundamental flaws in its political infrastructure, he is not a Eurosceptic in the sense that his recommendations aimed for the dissolution of the union. To the contrary, his articles rather conveyed suggestions for improving the political framework and correcting systemic inconsistencies. Descriptions for member-states were mainly critical or neutral-descriptive, while there was no positive framing to speak of. The blogger discussed administrative problems in Greece and its mainly passive role in bailout programmes or critically reflected on the implications of Germany's dominance in crisis politics. Content on the independent blog Hungary in Europe placed emphasis on the four frames *EU Politics are divisive*, *The EU is a transnational institution and determines the crisis strategy, limits of EU actions*, and *the EU's political framework*. Critical statements about the EU outweighed positive ones but the blogger is not Eurosceptic either, as his content included positive portrayals of the EU. Both bloggers are EU-pragmatists or critical EU-supporters, respectively.

By contrast, the UKIP Blogger and Wirtschaftswurm represent genuinely Eurosceptic sentiments: main frames for the EU on the British UKIP blog were *the EU is a threat to national sovereignty*, *the EU is undemocratic*, *the EU has structural weaknesses*. The framing of the EU and its various institutions was entirely negative and the blogger, who is a local UKIP politician himself, limited his recommendations to the single demand of leaving the EU. His exclusively negative portrayals of the EU included metaphors that linked the transnational union to totalitarian regimes or compared it to a foreign invading power. The UKIP blogger specialised on the single issue of a UK referendum on EU membership and only referred to the crisis or other administrative procedures on the EU level to discredit the union as inefficient and undemocratic. The blog almost exclusively focused on the UK and constructed a descriptive portrayal of the country as a victim or being caught in a disadvantageous relationship of dependence.

German Eurosceptic blogger Wirtschaftswurm took a similar stance but applied a different set of arguments that emphasised economic and fiscal factors; five frames dominated the platform's EU reporting: *The crisis is worsening/intensifying*, *the EU/Eurozone have systemic flaws*, *the EU is incapable of solving the crisis*, *the EU's political framework is contested*, and *the EU is undemocratic and cripples national (economic/fiscal) sovereignty*. Wirtschaftswurm addressed the implications of EU- and crisis policies for the German context while constructing negative frames for the EU that pointed to structural weaknesses and costs for member-states. The general sentiment was that EU integration, most importantly the Euro, catalysed the crisis and crippled economic growth in Europe. Bailout programmes

only prolonged the inevitable break-up of the Eurozone and were a waste of money and time; devolution and exclusion of struggling Eurozone countries were the only efficient solutions for the crisis and could stimulate economic recovery. Altogether, the independent political blogs provided partly very personalised views on EU politics and the crisis. What frames they reproduced depended on their social and cultural relation to the EU and/or Eurozone as well as their personal political viewpoints. They extended the spectrum of available opinions articulated in digital public spaces by providing access to alternative perceptions and narratives. Most bloggers disagreed or disqualified official readings and interpretations of the crisis perpetuated by the EU's central institutions and leading European governments.

News media sites covered the most diverse selection of EU-related topics and opinions; thus, they formed the broadest "mirrors" for EU politics during the crisis years (APPENDIX 6). The diversity in their agenda settings results from structural specifics as professional news media agencies; each news media site has a trained journalistic staff and greater resources at its disposal, not to mention that their entire infrastructural logic aims for the constant production of news items, which inevitably widens their agendas, expands the set of cited political communicators, and eventually causes the emergence of a wider spectrum of frames. In this respect, similarities emerged regarding their EU reporting. However, local contexts determined the overall coverage of each outlet in the sample, i.e. the Guardian Online focused on the British context and the Spiegel on the German one etc.

On Greek EKathimerini five main frames were detected for the EU and the crisis: *crisis developments, the EU is responsible for the crisis's management, the EU has migration/racism problems, the crisis is worsening, crisis and austerity politics, and the EU determines the crisis' unfolding*. Most articles thematised the implementation as well as consequences of bailout programmes and mainly accumulated neutral-descriptive or critical frames for the EU; positive portrayals were a minority. The EU's central institutions in the bailout programmes, the Commission and ECB, were perceived as controlling instances on whose assessment the country depended, since they decided together with the IMF whether it received rescue funds vital for economic survival. At the core of EKathimerini's "crisis anthology" was the complicated relationship with the troika and the fundamental transformations in Greece triggered by a sovereign debt overload, economic decline, and the disruption of social peace. The economic problems and resulting political chaos in how to handle and solve the crisis overshadowed all of the platform's content. Except for commentary pieces most articles did not include any explicit evaluations for the EU and other member-states. However, most articles implied that with the eruption of the crisis, Greek politics was no longer in the hands of Greek politicians alone but subject to transnational negotiations and influences. Two examples were the impact of European politicians' decisions on the design of bailout conditions and the contributions of troika officials in actively reforming the country. EKathimerini closely monitored every statement of influential actors in crisis politics and outlined the implications for the Greek context. The overall picture for the country remained either neutral-descriptive or critical, i.e. a considerable number of articles covered weaknesses and inconsistencies in Greece's economic and political infrastructure and administration. This does not mean that the crisis was framed as an outcome of inefficient Greek policies alone, as some articles referred to systematic flaws in the Eurozone. Oppositional political parties' reactions to crisis policies were equally relevant issues and domestic struggles for power stimulated by the crisis and bailout programmes' affectivity form an important section in Ekathimerini's coverage. Greek political discourse in the years 2011 to 2013 was

moulded by the ideological struggle between proponents of neo-liberal austerity politics and privatisation schemes and the anti-austerity stance of radical-left parties like Syriza as well as the rise of nationalistic-anti-European groups, e.g. Golden Dawn. Left-wing groups justified their anti-austerity stance by pointing to the negative effects of spending cuts in social services and privatisations for the electorate, while their right-wing counterparts placed emphasis on the loss of national sovereignty. The successive Greek governments appeared rather as executors of the troika's instructions than as active co-creators of recovery programmes. Moreover, the terms of bailout programmes caused internal lines of division within mainstream parties, too, which partly paralysed political business in Athens. Cited political communicators were more direct in articulating their evaluations: politicians and economists openly praised or criticised actions and/or statements of political organisations and individuals. Greek government officials emphasised the efforts and progress made to overcome current challenges and occasionally appealed to national solidarity among citizens as well as transnational solidarity among member-states in the Eurozone. Its opposition often demanded alternatives to austerity politics and in some extreme cases even threatened to leave the Eurozone if they got elected. External commentators' statements ranged from support for Greece to warnings that the country must stick to bailout agreements and apply reforms; various EU officials and other European leaders did both, i.e. politicians pledged to help Greece to overcome the crisis while they demanded that it met all agreed bailout goals in time. EKathimerini projected the crisis discourse in its different facets and dimensions for the Greek context from a local vantage point that was compelled to be wide open for the transnational level and mirrored domestic as well as transnational conflicts.

On Spiegel Online eight frames for the EU were detected: *The EU has systemic weaknesses, migration problems and the multidimensionality of the crisis, the EU's crisis strategy is inefficient, the EU faces a crisis, the EU is responsible for the crisis' management and development, the crisis affects all member-states, the crisis is worsening/intensifying, and the crisis' unfolding*. Like its Greek counterpart, the German platform linked developments and potential consequences of rescue packages, regulation schemes etc. to the German context. Assessments for potential future scenarios, such as a Greek exit from the Euro and wider implications for the Eurozone, received considerable attention as well. The focus was placed on the Greek crisis theatre, including developments in the country's political landscape and how the EU and German political class reacted to these. The platform highlighted the level of interconnectedness within the Eurozone, as it repeatedly outlined how a failure of crisis policies in struggling member-states could trigger unforeseeable consequences for the rest of the single currency union and Germany. Neutral-descriptive and critical statements about the EU outweighed positive ones. Most articles reproduced a general characterisation of the EU as an economic and political space that faced unprecedented challenges and experienced potentially fundamental transformations, of which some were the results of structural problems in the Eurozone. The platform portrayed the EU as an acting entity, whose decisions determined the outcome of the crisis; this mainly applied for content that dealt with bailout programmes and the involvement of EU institutions in the troika. The analysis yielded no information for positive portrayals of individual member-states either, but several articles and comment pieces referred to alleged weaknesses in some countries' political and economic infrastructures or criticised them for applying the wrong crisis strategies. This included Greece, Cyprus, Spain, Portugal, and Italy. Other instances where critical evaluations emerged were articles that covered Germany's leading role in bailout negotiations and depicted the country either as economically strong or, as some

comment pieces did, acting egoistically; several commentaries questioned the usefulness of prevailing crisis strategies and criticised the austerity drive as well as intergovernmental approach. The platform also discussed the UK in the context of Euroscepticism or as opposing further integration. Still, most member-states' portrayals remained descriptive and pointed to the crisis' affects and entailed political measures. The most notable differences to the other platforms is the strong emphasis placed on the EU crisis' effect on German domestic political discourse and the differences between political perspectives in the government and its opposition.

Eight major frames determined the Guardian Online's EU- and crisis coverage: *the Crisis is worsening/intensifying, the EU is responsible for the crisis' management, migration and racism problems, the crisis affects the EU's political framework, the crisis affects all member-states, the EU faces a crisis, the EU crisis strategy is inefficient, and the EU's political framework and prospects for a referendum*. The platform put focus on the Greek and Cypriot crisis theatres as well as the alleged North-South divide, British EU Politics and a UK Referendum, and also included aspects related to migration/free travel. The news site paid close attention to the Eurozone crisis' development and covered related issues in great frequency and length; it outperformed the other platforms in sheer quantity of content provided on EU- and crisis politics for the analysed period. Most articles portrayed the EU as an economic and political space internally divided between countries within and outside the Eurozone. Statements about the EU remained largely descriptive, though critical ones frequently occurred as well; content containing frame elements that articulated a positive view on the EU were a minority. In the British context, EU politics gathered centre stage in political discourse, not least to the success of the Eurosceptic UKIP and growing estrangement with "Europe" in the UK. The British government's demands to reform the EU towards a less-integrated, lighter version were covered and discussed in detail and the platform integrated reaction from other European leaders to these developments. The issue of migration, especially concerning people who arrived from other member-states in the EU's East and Southeast, was another crucial factor that determined the relevance of EU- and crisis politics. The intrinsic link between transnational developments and their reprocessing in the national context moulded most of the Guardian Online's EU coverage, which made it structurally very similar to the other news media websites. The cited second level communicators represented a wide spectrum of potential political stances on these issues, which implies a relatively pluralistic portrayal of the EU discourse. Europhiles, EU-pragmatists, mild Eurosceptics, and opponents of EU membership all found a "stage" on the Guardian Online. The news platform mainly served as an arena for pro-EU/EU-pragmatic perspectives and their Eurosceptic opponents. Comment pieces and editorials further reflected on the course of EU- and crisis politics and questioned the primacy of fiscal discipline, austerity policies, and the intergovernmental approach. Overall, the results of the analysis imply that the Guardian Online appeared to fluctuate between EU pragmatism and a very critical but still moderately EU-friendly position.

Seven frames dominated the EU section on Le Monde's website: *The EU is responsible for crisis strategies and its development, the crisis reveals systemic flaws in the EU/Eurozone, the EU faces a crisis, the crisis transforms the EU, the Crisis reveals the EU's limits, austerity in the crisis, and the crisis affects EU politics*. Most articles linked these issues to the French context and outlined the role of France's government in the development and implementation of crisis strategies. As on the other platforms, most articles were neutral-descriptive in their portrayal of the EU as a political and economic space and actor, respectively. Frames for member-states were largely descriptive or mildly critical in the

sense that they pointed to structural problems that caused and catalysed the crisis in specific countries, with Greece and Cyprus at the centre of most crisis-related articles. Others scrutinised political decisions in the context of crisis policies. Commentaries mainly articulated criticism on the handling of the crisis by leading EU powers, especially France and Germany; they were particularly critical about the special relationship between the Sarkozy and Merkel governments and demanded alternatives to prevailing austerity politics, arguing that there was need for greater solidarity between member-states.

The four European news media sites mirrored the ambiguous character of the EU crisis: it had a tangible effect on all member-states but how this affect materialised eventually varied considerably in each local context. Historical contingencies in the evolution of political cultures and their influence on contemporary political landscapes mainly determined the perspective on EU-related issues on each news media platform, for which the national context still is the main point of reference and orientation in the coverage of political and economic developments on the transnational stage. Thus, certain fields of contestation, causal interpretations, and/or evaluations were more relevant on some platforms than on others. They included a broad spectrum of political viewpoints in their web content and provided access to different frames in the context of EU- and crisis politics. Since most content took a “reporting”, i.e. somewhat objective/non-evaluative, stance, conflicts occurred not so much between platforms as first level communicators –for example as a clash of Spiegel Online vs. Guardian Online– but rather among second level communicators with diverging viewpoints. However, comment pieces or editorials that convey explicit assessments and evaluations provided more detailed insights into the general orientation of a news media platform; the composition of topic agendas and the entailed selection of frames reveals further difference in the attribution of relevance between the different news media outlets. Tendencies of discursive convergence and integration materialised for the crisis context, as they shared various intersecting areas in their EU- and crisis reporting. This seemed to go hand in hand with localised contextualisations through specific underlying political perspectives. The sample was limited to newspaper brands that share a somewhat similar liberal political outlook (except for EKathimerini) –an important limitation to consider in the interpretation of the analysis’ results. Still, the comparison of the different news media sites shows how mainstream platforms displayed the crisis discourse and its various sub areas through a filtering lens and how they opened access to discursive arenas with a strong local fixation but equally distinct transnational alignment. Most importantly, they perceived the crisis as a multidimensional, unprecedented challenge that might overstrain the EU.

To sum up, online platforms that contributed to the EU crisis web sphere reproduced different frame selections and distributed partly opposing portrayals of the EU, its institutions, and leading politicians. The motivations and strategies for using online technologies and hence for sharing perspectives and evaluations are determined by the political-ideological background of a communicator. The same applies for the cited political communicators whose statements were incorporated for praise, criticism, or served as points of reference. The frame analysis shows that the EU and its crisis were highly controversial issues that caused the emergence of multiple fault lines, which in sum shaped the overall crisis discourse’s structure and dynamics. For some, the EU was the solution to current problems, though it might need extensive restructuring and improvement; for others, the EU and the Euro were the source of the crisis and most other current problems. Based on the previous analysis, one can distinguish between recurring dichotomies in the perception of the EU: *Enemy/Partner*; the EU was often portrayed as either an enemy of the nation-state or a political-economic partner of the same. *Evolving/Flawed*; the

EU was described as undergoing constant processes of eventually positive change or as ridden by systemic inconsistencies. *Problem/Solution*; the EU was either perceived as an obstacle or enabler of progress. The different shades of critical EU statements dominated the crisis web sphere, which highlights the divisive character that debates about EU politics and the crisis had. Most importantly, it illustrates how the pressures coming from complex economic and political challenges revealed the manifold hot spots and deficiencies that preoccupied the entire political landscape in Europe. The central aspect the various positions shared was the inclination to see the EU as undergoing significant changes and that the crisis was an opportune moment to outline and advance their agendas in public communication, which in turn contributed to the complexity, fragility, but also dynamics of the discourse network that underlies transnational politics. However, as many different opinions there might have been (and still are) available in the digital public sphere, the degree of openness in EU- and crisis politics appeared relatively limited; eventually only a handful of powerful actors and institutions determined the design of transnational strategies to overcome current challenges. Austerity/fiscal discipline and growth-oriented, market-friendly reforms were deeply ingrained in the various bailout negotiations, in hope to save the Eurozone and lead it back to economic growth. Delivered and applied in a top-down fashion, this approach was heavily contested but ultimately prevailed.

The situation for member-states is no less complex and controversial. A few notable examples from the frame- and cluster analysis for the most frequently mentioned member-states illustrate this: one recurring conflict area was the alleged economic and political rift between the Eurozone's North and South that divided member-states along the binarity of economically able/unable; this notion was repeatedly expressed in varying forms of stereotyping, oversimplifications, and even racism. This field of contestation emerged especially in the context of bailout negotiations and overshadowed most areas within crisis developments and policies. Economically, socially, and culturally quite different areas of the EU were subsumed under a simplified label and treated almost synonymously based on their fiscal problems and lack of economic growth. The sole fact that all struggling Eurozone economies applied for external help from the other member-states in form of bailout loans sufficed for some communicators to speak of an economic-political binarity in the Eurozone's infrastructure, which was revealed by the crisis. Greece, Spain, Portugal, and Cyprus appeared as slightly different versions of the same problem, only the degree of emergency differed (APPENDIX 6). However, Greece acquired the status of the main representative for the "GIIPS/PIIGS" group; admittedly, the Greek crisis theatre was particularly insightful for this conflict configuration that moulded public political communication on bailouts, referendums, and reforms. Greece was by no means the only Eurozone country that struggled with a stagnating economy and increasing debt problems but it was the one member-state where the crisis hit hardest and that received the most extensive EU/IMF rescue packages. Between 2011 and 2012 it quickly evolved into the main stage of the crisis and international media coverage of political developments in the country, and the reactions of the EU to these, became top news daily. Every decision made by the EU, the Eurozone's leadership, and the IMF inevitably affected national political debates and processes in Athens and vice versa; non-national political actors appeared as influential for the country's political future as its own political class. Greece was depicted as incompetent, corrupt, and to a large extent passive during the crisis and the bailout programmes; it was both victimised and scapegoated. More compassionate commentators maintained the entire country was subjugated to foreign intervention, control, and even domination. Most first- and second communicators portrayed the country as depending on others and

being at the mercy of external forces. The three successive Greek governments during the crisis had often no other option than to give in to demands of their international lenders to receive bailout payments that were vital to the survival of the country's economy and state; subsequently the whole political class was perceived as if they were not really in charge of the country's political fate. All of this illustrates how the national and transnational dimensions of political decision-making are not separated but rather as mutually dependent. Media discourses, both off- and online, reflected and reproduced the underlying ideological conflict constellations that moulded the general crisis debate. The political handling of the crisis in Greece further highlighted the degree of exclusion in political processes and the limited potential for alternative frames to influence or change the course of crisis politics –despite the availability of an unprecedented set of flexible and powerful communication tools that extended the political opportunity structure, facilitate framing processes, and enable mobilising structures (Karatzogianni 2006: 53). The Greek crisis became iconic for the North-South divide, with Germany depicted as its main antagonist in the bailout negotiations and reform programmes. Laziness, inefficiency, corruption, inaptitude and a lack of willingness were only a few of the negative attributions attached to the group of bailout countries; in any case, most countries during the crisis were portrayed as dependent units and net-receivers from EU- and Eurozone funds. A more positive but similar characterisation implied that the same set of member-states were victims to the dominant political and economic powers at the “core” of the EU.

“Northern” Eurozone countries became subject to forms of stereotyping, too, though their portrayals had a different quality. Economic prowess, stability, productivity, and growth were recurring descriptions for these “non-crisis countries”, which included in variable combinations Germany, the Netherlands, Austria, Belgium, and Finland. However, occasionally Northern European countries became targets of critical or negative characterisations. Finland was portrayed as an increasingly Eurosceptic member-state that got tired of bailing out its struggling neighbours; Germany was subject to criticism and even open hostilities. The country was described as the new European hegemon or an imperial power finally realising its long-planned subjugation of the continent as the clear beneficiary of the crisis. Some argued Germany enforced austerity over crisis countries to gain economic and political profits. Especially Eurosceptic and other EU-critical communicators articulated such negative sentiments. Germany was often singled out as the most important representative of EU- and Eurozone net-contributors who paid for rescue packages. Systemic failures and controversial actions of political actors triggered the articulation and circulation of stereotypes bordering on the lines of open racism in some cases; as a result, cultural fault lines emerged that were maintained by oversimplified and potentially false correlations and attributions of responsibility. This provided easy answers to over-complex developments but also mislead some commentators to condemn what they perceived as coherent social and cultural units, i.e. peoples – even though there was little to no empirical evidence to support such claims. Online media played a central role in these processes, since they served for dispersing frames of EU- and crisis-related issues determined by such perceptions. The official EU online platforms hardly commented and/or denounced this problem, though they occasionally addressed this aspect at least implicitly when EU officials called for greater transnational solidarity. Still, voices that argued the case for closer integration and cooperation did seldom comment on the assertion that the EU was divided into two unequal parts, let alone put them into perspective.

Portrayals for the other three large EU member-states, i.e. France, Italy, and the UK look quite different. France was relatively often mentioned in crisis-related content but not quite as much as

Germany. Under Sarkozy the country was mostly associated with its powerful neighbour as one of the central leaders in EU- and crisis policies. The journalese blend ‘Merkozy’ symbolised this special relationship and it was often used as a synonym for both member-states; it even became a temporary signifier for the dominant intergovernmental approach in the EU and the prevalence of austerity politics. This situation changed between 2012 and 2013 with a new French government and increasing reports that the country’s economy was not as stable as assumed; in fact, several communicators portrayed it as one of the next crisis theatres, whose economic downfall could trigger even worse consequences than the problems in the “periphery”. Others argued it was merely some sort of junior partner to its economically and politically more influential neighbour. For Italy similar characterisations emerged, as it was repeatedly discussed as the next domino stone in the crisis chain, due to its inefficient administrative apparatus, stagnating economy, and growing sovereign debt problems. One major argument asserted Italy was too big to be rescued and if the situation worsened the Eurozone was finished. These assessments were not limited to Eurosceptic positions. Other EU-critical voices, including generally pro-European ones, pointed to the same problems. The UK is in several respects a special case: though not directly involved in the Eurozone, the British government repeatedly commented on and even tried to influence the choice of crisis policies by giving advice at various points. The Prime Minister and other high representatives commented on crucial issues such as the FTT, Eurobonds, and austerity politics. However, the most important issue to most UK communicators was the heatedly debated referendum on the country’s EU membership. Many of the prevalent areas of dispute concerning the EU, i.e. economic decline, migration, political reforms and budgeting, were linked to the question of the UK’s future in the EU or its withdrawal from the union. Due to this fixation on its own role, gains, and losses from EU membership, other European first- and second level communicators in the web sphere portrayed the country as increasingly Eurosceptic and partly even argued it was an obstacle to necessary steps towards closer integration; some discerned it already was and will remain on the other side of the two-tier EU.

Certain areas of the EU were hardly mentioned at all. This particularly applies to Eastern and South-eastern member-states. In the crisis web sphere Poland, Lithuania, Slovakia, Slovenia, Estonia, Latvia, Hungary etc. were part of the outskirts of EU- and crisis politics; no descriptions emerged for these countries except for the frame of their apparent irrelevance for many issues in the eyes of most communicators. If at all, Romania and Bulgaria were discussed in the context of EU internal migration, opposition to the open labour market, and debates on the Schengen treaty. This implied another type of two-tier EU that separates member-states whose governments’ perspectives and actions matter from those who are apparently not central to many transnational political decisions.

To sum up, the analysis of nation-state portrayals provides hints for further lines of internal friction in the EU and one can identify three groups of member-states in political online communication: first, there were the countries at the crisis’ core, which can be further divided between those who received rescue packages and those who did not. Second, there was the UK as a commentator and observer who had a very lively internal debate about EU membership, was involved in negotiating the EU’s budget and overall framework, and even attempted to influence crisis policies in the Eurozone but who was ultimately not as involved in these issues as e.g. Germany. Another example for this second type of “engaged observers” would be Denmark. Third, there is a group of outsiders that hardly occurred at all due to their apparent distance to and/or limited influence in the crisis discourse and entailed areas. These three groups were portrayed in form of recurring dichotomies: *leader/dominator*; Germany is exemplary

for this framing as either a role model/leader or oppressive hegemon in EU politics. *Victim/underdog*; the GIIPS states fall into this category. Greece, for instance, was repeatedly portrayed as either a helpless victim or discriminated and unfairly treated by more powerful member-states. *Rebels/cheats*; several countries were portrayed as bucking the trend and defending their national sovereignty, such as the UK in the referendum debate, Denmark in the Schengen discussion, or Greece in bailout negotiations. However, for the same actions countries were also described as hypocritical, “egoistic”, or even unreliable/treacherous.

The EU Crisis Web Sphere: A Network of Political Fields of Contestation

The secondary content analysis and subsequent frame- and network analyses have shown that the crisis debate displayed an enormous complexity; there was not one but a whole network of partly very specific discursive areas. Each partial discourse involved a slightly different configuration of partaking communicators and thus conflict constellations. Yet all of them were intrinsically linked to each other; none of the different fields of contestation and the entailed reproductions of frames are isolated but were mutually affective.

Based on the empirical analyses, it is possible to distinguish between the following types of crisis communication: *Public Relations and Political Marketing*; this mode of crisis communication dominated most official EU and government websites, since they served as unilateral digital press outlets and not as forums for reciprocal flows of communication. The main purpose of online communication was to state and distribute official viewpoints and agendas. *Political Analysis and Commentary*; various communicators provided their assessments of crisis-related developments from a political angle with a focus on power relations, hierarchies, as well as chances and limits to transnational democracy. Especially news media sites served as platform for this. *Economic Analysis*; several online platforms placed emphasis on the technicalities of fiscal and economic policies and discussed hard financial-economic data in detail. These expert discourses included all political positions and economic data became an argument for or against the EU and prevalent crisis policies. Think tank online platforms, blogs, and news media sites were the primary stages for these debates. *Premediation*; this type of crisis communication often overlaps with political and economic analyses but focuses more on the construction of potential future scenarios that can take any form between dystopias and utopias for a post-crisis Europe. Hypothesising or proclaiming expected outcomes occurred in all communicator categories. *Mobilisation and Campaigning*; the crisis developments stimulated various political groups across the ideological spectrum to act. To initiate change, grassroots movements and NGOs used online media to create a public stage, connect with audiences, and organise political actions. *Accusation and Defamation*; though plenty of facts and sober analyses circulated in the crisis web sphere, more conflict-oriented forms of communication dominated large parts of the discussion. Blame-shifting, distortion of facts, exclusion, and in a few cases even racism emerged as concrete manifestations across all online platforms.

If one applies the Habermasian blueprint of democratic-integrative criteria for public discursivity on the crisis web sphere, it becomes quickly apparent that there is considerable room for qualitative improvement. The clash of opposing frames without objective, reasoned criticism on polarising

arguments largely rejects normative propositions for public deliberation. The struggle for meaning prevails, not the synthesis of consensus. The lack of inclusion and missing feedback loops between political systems, media businesses, and alternative networks are additional normative deficiencies. The potentials for liberal, pluralistic public discursivity remain only partly implemented; though virtually anybody could contribute, only a small group of powerful political agencies and a few capable, highly educated and invested communicators determined the overall crisis discourse. Even fewer actors decided the course of crisis politics and policies; the analysis of the second level communicator network shows that the crisis leadership consisted of only a handful of influential politicians and that their official strategies remained closed for alternative perspectives. The often-bemoaned democratic deficit became clearly visible in the handling of the crisis, particularly in the Eurozone's South. Discursive imbalances did not only apply to the uneven relationship between national politicians, EU representatives, the civil society, and electorates; they affected interactions between whole governments as well. The political hierarchy that emerged from the bailout programmes for e.g. Greece illustrated this quite strikingly. The crisis shows yet another ambivalent, seemingly self-contradicting quality: it indeed triggered communicative activities across the continent, if not the globe, and stimulated partly very emotional debates that reflected the entire spectrum of affected social areas and political perspectives; it caused a multifaceted discourse in which different narratives circulated. Simultaneously, only a few political actors eventually dominated the respective debates and decision-making processes. Still, online media –blog platforms in particular– provided spaces where non-establishment communicators could at least express their criticism and perspectives.

Descriptive models help to explain why specific issues become subject of public political communication and enable the identification of major fault lines and conflict areas, especially in combination with the frame analysis for structurally mapping the web sphere. Due to its multidimensional-transnational scope that spanned over the economic, political, social, and cultural sectors, the crisis was indeed ‘multi-systems-relevant’ (Kohring 2006) and therefore of urgency as well as topicality for public discursivity. The frame analysis shows how this multi-affectivity materialised and how the crisis was perceived from social, political, and local angles. The crisis quickly turned into a unifying, central reference for a variety of debates that concerned different sections of transnationalised society in Europe; it was not only an economic or political conflict but rather resembled a constantly shifting network of differentiated fields of contestation. The perception and processing of its local and regional impacts further stimulated the particularisation of related yet distinct discourse areas; the entire political debate on the UK’s future in the EU was one important example. Over the analysed time span the crisis’ scope and affectivity on multiple areas constantly grew and the network of partial conflicts became more complex; its “evolution” often appeared erratic and somewhat contingent, since it was determined by irritations on various levels of European politics and economy. Examples are plentiful and include government plans to hold referenda over bailout programmes, the re-evaluation of various Eurozone member’s credit worthiness by international rating agencies, the sudden success of parties from the far-right and -left etc. The parallelism of crisis-related events and developments in form of manifold hot spots made the crisis so overwhelmingly complex, while online media provided access to both a general but inevitably reduced picture and detailed insights to specific sub-sections (bloggers, NGOs). ‘Premediations’ (Grusin 2009) of all thinkable outcomes for the crisis and entailed policies further contributed to a climate of insecurity, anxiety, and volatility; though public communicators somewhat

delimited the set of expectable scenarios they paradoxically did not reduce confusion and disorientation. It is also important to consider differences in the structure and organisation between public communicators and their online platforms. The analysis shows that political backgrounds, societal standings, resources, and work agendas determined how exactly communicators utilised online technologies. Most sampled websites tended to specialise in certain areas of EU politics and -economy; this particularly applied to think tanks, NGOs and most individual bloggers. Local lenses further adjusted each platform's focus. In the case of news media sites, it was one of the most important filters that shaped their otherwise comparatively wide agendas for EU-related issues. The findings support the argument that the implementation of online strategies may be based on the same set of technological options but remains ultimately extremely variable in its actual manifestation and can only be properly understood if one considers the full spectrum of social, political, and cultural factors; these determine how a communicator communicates what about Europe to whom, i.e. why certain frames are constructed in media communication, clash with each other, and eventually prevail. A purely descriptive, systems-theoretical approach is too limited for the interpretation of these frames and for explaining the potential motivations of communicators to construct them. However, conflict/contestation-focused models allow the contextualisation and deciphering of frames transmitted via online media during the crisis; the frame analysis seems to confirm several assumptions outlined in the arena model (Gerhards and Neidhardt 1990) and cyber conflict theory (Karatzogianni 2006). Most importantly, achieving goals via strategic communication appears to determine the behaviour of most first- and second level communicators, with only few exceptions. Leading EU politicians promoted integration and supranational cooperation as a solution to the crisis, while conservative European governments placed emphasis on austerity policies and structural reforms; their political opponents on the left demanded job- and growth oriented solutions and less cuts to public spending, to preserve social cohesion and re-vitalise the economy. Eurosceptics mainly used the crisis to advance narratives of the EU's destructive impact on national sovereignty and its eventual demise. Online media platforms served in most cases as transmitters for ideologically defined frames. News media sites are an exception, due to their more complex function in public discourses. They included voices from a wider spectrum of political communicators with local emphases in each case; news media fulfilled a dual function of observing the crisis discourse from a specific political-cultural angle and providing stages for other second level communicators, e.g. as references in reports or by publishing their original comment pieces. Nevertheless, the reproduction of frames and narratives is inherent to news media content, too; the procedures and filters for public communication are just more differentiated. Altogether, arguing the case for a specific reading of the crisis and implicitly or explicitly denouncing opposing positions via framing moulded public discursivity in the transnational EU crisis web sphere. The results thus corroborate Karatzogianni's hypothesis (2006) that the postmodern potentials of the Internet for alternative ways to interact with citizens, the civil society, and other relevant social and political entities remains dormant and conventional modes of political communication, i.e. mainly contestation, persist.

The frame- and network analyses helped to portray the crisis discourses as a network of fields of contestation in which different frames were advanced by a diversity of potentially polarising political perspectives. The results imply that a transnational media public sphere emerged as a reaction to the crisis, though it did not necessarily have an integrative function in the sense of building stronger discursive ties between European polities or between them and the EU as a governing body. Nevertheless,

the emergence of this discursive network alone implies that an advanced level of transnational convergence determined the course of politics and economy on the continent and that public communicators are aware of this fact; however, they may diverge considerably in the way they embrace, accept, or reject this situation. From an analytical perspective, this inevitably leads to the question of how the transnational and national can be theoretically conceptualised and empirically “measured” in public discursivity. So far, the discussion shows that one cannot speak of a binary either-or categorisation and that both emerge and affect each other in varying forms through communication.

EU Politics and the Internet: A Multilayered Sphere of Discursivity

The findings of the frame- and network analyses provide the empirical basis for establishing different categories of national-transnational alignment of individual online platforms. Extreme nationalism and advanced transnationalism or cosmopolitanism serve as the two poles of the gauge applied for the evaluation of the sampled websites; different nuances and mixed combinations are gradations within this scale. It is important to keep in mind that all online platforms with a EU focus are latently transnational *per se*, in the sense that they observe and comment on events that transcend national contexts. What the present section attempts to accomplish is to assess how the different online communicators perceived, accepted, or rejected transnational transformations and articulated their positions. Manifestations largely depended on the political-cultural background of a communicator and corresponded with evaluative stances towards the EU; these ranged from pro-EU sentiments, through EU-pragmatism, to extreme Euroscepticism.

Unsurprisingly, the group that repeatedly reproduced nationalistic narratives with partly ethno-centric implications were the explicitly Eurosceptic websites. For example, British Eurosceptic communicators frequently referred to the nation, the people, and national sovereignty as quasi-natural counterparts to the EU, which was perceived as an artificial, undemocratically imposed construction. The nation-state and the people were the genuine and organically grown social environment for most citizens; proponents of a cosmopolitan, post-national society were wrong, if not plainly deluded. A common language, culture, and moral code cohered this national community, which needed to be preserved from manifold transgressions of the EU. This mainly concerned political self-determination and the right to protect borders: Firstly, a transfer of powers to Brussels would bereave member-states of their democratically ensured rights to regulate their social and geographical spaces independently, without any external intervention. Integration on the EU level was often framed as an illicit action by a foreign invading power that undermined the nation-state and the will of the people (DB_2012/01/10). The EU would neither represent nor respect the wishes of the electorate, which was betrayed not only by faceless EU bureaucrats but also by its domestic political class (*ibid*). Voters remained powerless and could no longer determine the course of politics and economy for their own country. Secondly, this resulted in a loss of control over a country’s borders, geographically, politically, socially, and culturally speaking. In this regard, the right to free movement and the various socio-economic effects of migration emerged as the main points of contention. The EU would force countries to abandon their national borders and pressed them into a new transnational super-state without seeking consent from national communities or “the people”. The influx of migrant waves from across the globe and other EU member-states, especially from the East, had negative consequences

for host societies in economic and cultural terms. For instance, Eurosceptic communicators maintained that rising migration rates were a direct result of EU membership and that it would potentially transform the national character to such an extent that countries eventually became barely recognisable as e.g. British, French, or German. The respective debates were often very emotional as well as polemical and reveal a fear of losing control over the nation's destiny, social fabric, and cultural traditions. In some cases, this led individuals to the legally ineffective yet highly symbolic step of officially renouncing their EU citizenship (DB_2012/03/30); after all, they had never been asked to have it nor would they support it. Others praised the diversity of cultures of past decades that was allegedly lost when border-free travel was introduced in the EU. Nostalgia, patriotism, and a romanticised view on national culture and history are common among such perspectives, who referred to the very same as evidence for the naturalness of the national community and the artificial character of the EU. The former was based on a common history and identity; the latter had no such cultural and emotional roots and was a foolish project ruthlessly enforced by blinded politicians in a top-down fashion (DB_2011/06/17). Team Europe, an ironically Pan-European coalition of Anti-European organisations, repeatedly celebrated the increasing rejection of potential EU membership in countries like Norway or Iceland; this was interpreted as a triumph of nations and national sovereignty (TE_2011/19/08).

Most websites in this category echoed attributes of ethno-nationalisms in their Eurosceptic content, combined with aspects of civic nationalisms –especially regarding the allegedly undemocratic character of the EU that compromised the democratic nation-state as a community of free individuals who shared a linguistic, cultural, and ethical bond. Democracy, or to be more precise the perceived lack of democratic participation on the EU level, became a central aspect in the reproduction of national narratives; the independent nation-state was the only entity that could ensure a truly democratic and cohesive society, though, as some argued, it needed to be freed from its corrupted leading political caste. Only radical groups on the extreme right fringes, such as Golden Dawn in Greece and other European nationalist-racist organisations that were included as second level communicators, reproduced even more explicit ethno-national sentiments. The nation-state is the primary social context for citizens and portrayed as a community of fate that was distinguishable due to its cultural closedness; the metaphor of the container state is thus deeply ingrained in these perspectives. They also show that forms of extreme Euroscepticism and nationalism are likely to go hand in hand; this does not necessarily mean that all forms of Euroscepticism are nationalistic but that extreme nationalistic positions are often Eurosceptic. Altogether, the Eurosceptic platforms were sites for the articulation of mix-forms of quasi-ethnic and civic nationalisms as immediate reactions to and a rejection of transnationalising tendencies in Europe; these probably existed long before the crisis but the economic-political turmoil between 2011 and 2013 may have catalysed the communication of such sentiments, as it was repeatedly interpreted as a confirmation of Eurosceptic hypotheses (DB_2012/08/03). In a sense, recourse to nationalism and national identity turned into a form of resistance for Eurosceptic political communicators, who saw integration and migration as threats to their social environments. The repeated calls for referenda and devolution of EU integration identified in the frame analysis illustrate this quite strikingly; the networks they form with mainly like-minded, nationalist organisations further support this observation. Their transnational alignment is “weak”, as the immediate national context is the clear priority.

A slightly different group of Eurosceptics shifted focus from ethno-cultural factors to seemingly purely economic ones. For example, blogger Wirtschaftswurm and think tank Open Europe represented a

type of quasi-civic nationalism that argues the case for less integration and more national independence to efficiently cope with challenges in global economy. The nation-state remained the main reference and is portrayed as the central entity in transnational negotiations and political processes; however, it is not primarily an ethnic-cultural or linguistic community that determined nations but rather their economic and political systems. The transnational outlook is slightly stronger, since the respective communicators accepted that nation-states are trapped in a global network of economic flows and that at least some basic coordination on a European scale was needed. In the case of Open Europe, the stance on migration is more liberal; it promoted an influx of skilled workers to boost the UK's economy. It showed a general openness for transnational flows of communication, too; it observed and commented on developments and events across the continent and included a diversity of European second-level communicators. Nevertheless, it still placed emphasis on a decidedly British perspective and did not promote the formation of a cosmopolitan EU. The single market was the absolute maximum of acceptable integration in Europe. Wirtschaftswurm did not address migration as a issue, nor did he include any qualities of ethno-centric nationalism in his publications. However, he also wrote off the idea of a post-national Europe as being out-dated and postulated that nation-states fared best if they tended to themselves. Both platforms shared the view that further political and economic convergence were to be avoided and member-states should apply policies that serve their own national interests and not a transnational utopia; the level of transnational solidarity in economic, political, and cultural terms is thus rather limited.

Government websites communicated notions of civic nationalism more implicitly and no notable traces of ethnic-nationalist versions could be found in the sample. However, one has to differentiate between different cultural backgrounds and political perspectives. For example, the conservative German government had a generally more pro-European outlook than its British counterpart. The perspectives taken on EU integration seemed to be mainly determined by an underlying cost-benefit calculation that looked different for each member-state due to variable economic and political positions in the transnational system. Preserving the Eurozone and partially increasing transnational cooperation was described as crucial for Germany's economic well-being and the government's public communication reflected this position; on the British side, transferring further powers to Brussels was deemed undesirable, both politically and economically. These diverging contexts determined not only general stances towards the EU as such but also influenced the discursive reproduction of national contexts and collectives. For instance, representatives of the UK government frequently vowed to defend national interests on the EU level and secure the best deal for the nation (*ibid*); the benefits of the nation-state were a political priority and the British government took an altogether critical position on transnational integration. The German government applied a similar argumentation but from an opposite direction: finding a coordinated solution and convincing other member-states to apply structural reforms was sold as the best option to preserve national economic interests. Despite qualitative differences in their approach on EU integration, both platforms still shared the basic assumption that nation-states were sovereign, independent units and the primary social as well as political references. The Greek government's web content is similar, as it repeatedly appealed to national solidarity in times of crisis; however, it simultaneously evoked the motif of European solidarity as a precondition for solving common problems. The German and Greek government's public communication illustrated that the reproduction of national collectives and a limited European-transnational one are not necessarily mutually exclusive. The level of transnationalism is somewhat ambiguous for both, since they are at the same time actors in transnational

politics as well as economy *and* represent the modernist ideal of the sovereign nation-state as a somewhat closed unit. To an extent, the same applies to the UK government, which was also frequently entangled in EU- and Eurozone politics due to its status as a core member-state; however, the degree and quality of how it addressed the priority of national interests reflected its relatively Eurosceptic stance, if compared to the other two governments.

There are no indications in the data that the four national news media sites distributed any enunciations that might hint at forms of ethnic-centred nationalism. This can be partly explained with their mainly liberal political backgrounds, which often precludes nationalist tendencies in a European context. Furthermore, most content applied a reporting, non-evaluative tone that reflects journalistic ideals of objectivity and impartiality; commentaries are the obvious exception. In most articles journalists seldom explicitly expressed their personal opinions, which were the main transmitters for nationalistic frames on e.g. extreme Eurosceptic platforms. The format and qualitative standards for content production left limited room for the articulation of emotional appeals to national identity. The expression of national affiliation and evoking forms of national sentiment was mainly limited to second level communicators quoted in reports, e.g. when politicians outlined what they perceived as vital interests of the people and nation to be defended in EU politics. Editorials and commentary pieces also occasionally contained elements of national narratives; both staff members and guest writers, e.g. analysts and politicians, provided such op-ed articles. Still, the reproduction of national contexts did not primarily materialise through explicit national narratives but more implicitly by constructing politically and culturally delimited windows to public discourses; in this regard, language and specific social as well as political contexts that served as the main reference points are major factors. The nation-state formed the most pronounced background for the contextualisation, discussion, and interpretation of transnational developments.

Yet the construction of national communication spaces happened more indirectly via agenda-setting processes and networking patterns; language borders also demarcated the assumed main audiences. The network analysis of second level communicators (chapter 4) provides further insightful evidence for the differentiation of nationally-framed partial discourses that evolved on news media platforms: each one included a diverse set of political, private, and media references that were relevant on a local/regional level but not necessarily on a transnational stage. For example, news media sites in part reported on the affectivity of the crisis on politics and economy in very local dimensions. However, stories involving e.g. local politicians in Greece or Germany and their comments on the crisis did not always spread into the broader transnational media sphere; not all debates on EU politics in Westminster, the Bundestag, or the Hellenic Parliament made transnational news. The prioritisation of different fields of contestation, i.e. the varying intensity of coverage of specific sub-sections of the crisis, was another central indicator for the construction of nationally demarcated discursive spaces. Observing EU politics and economy was often combined with a distinct back-coupling to the respective national dimension, e.g. when the *Guardian Online* outlined the UK's position in EU budget negotiations or *EKathimerini* reported about Greek reactions to new Eurozone policies. However, none of the sampled news media sites can be seen as representative for the entire German, British, Greek, or French media landscape but only provide a particular snippet of much more complex discursive settings (Hepp et al. 2012); they are only a few of a multitude of European media outlets of which each has its own political as well as cultural preferences. Still, they are exemplary for the dual functionality of modern news media sites, which seem to reproduce

nationally framed discursive spaces while simultaneously linking them with the broader transnational dimension and vice versa.

Again, one has to differentiate between each individual news media outlet, mainly in regards to their structural properties: For example, the British Guardian Online is regarded as one of the most popular news media sites worldwide and attracts millions of visitors from around the globe (Guardian 2014); providing its content in English is a crucial prerequisite for reaching such a global audience. Furthermore, the platform frequently publishes guest commentaries from international and European politicians who seek a global stage for sharing their assessments and propositions. During the crisis EU-, German, and Greek politicians as well as commentators shared their views on bailout programmes, reforms, policy decisions, etc. In many respects, the Guardian Online has a more international outlook than its counterparts, which does not preclude a strong emphasis on the domestic British context. German Spiegel Online and French Le Monde are comparatively limited in their global scope, since they publish content primarily in their native languages, which simply cannot compete with the global distribution of English; admittedly, both also maintain English versions of their websites, but these appear to be mere supplements and most activity takes place on their national main platforms. Such structural differences inevitably affected each platform's scope and thus potential for transnational-cosmopolitan discursivity, which seemed smaller on the French and German news media platforms than on their British counterpart. EKathimerini's English page also has greater accessibility in linguistic terms. Altogether, the news media sites' transnational alignments appear quite ambiguous. They provided access to and participated in a strongly transnational discourse, e.g. by citing and/or providing platforms for communicators from across Europe and the globe, while nationally-oriented perspectives continued to determine how they processed and contextualised transnational developments. Still, the quality of transnational openness is greater and more diverse than in the case of e.g. governmental public communication and could be described as of "medium strength". After all, despite discernible differences resulting from localisation processes that filtered each platform's crisis coverage, the previous analyses have also shown that a common discursive context with a shared catalogue of topics as well as references emerged between the sampled news websites. For similar reasons blogger Hungary in Europe would fall into the same category of "medium strong" transnational openness.

The Bruegel think tank displayed a stronger transnational outlook. Its content conveyed an analytical view on fiscal policies and political developments in a variety of member-states and the EU in general. Nation-states were thus recognised as political units with their own cultural and, more importantly, economic properties, but the authors did not reproduce any national narratives or worldviews. Much rather, they contextualised their interactions against the background of transnationalised flows of communication in politics and economy. Moreover, the website provided content in three European languages, which are English, German, and French – produced by authors from across Europe. It aimed for a transnational audience with an interest in developments and trends in the EU. The transnational alignment is strong, since the site attempted to provide perspectives from a decidedly European meta-perspective and to stimulate a transnational discourse; it did not display any explicitly or implicitly nationalist angles in its EU- and crisis coverage. To an extent, the same applies to the EU institutions' websites, which repeatedly highlighted the benefits of transnational cooperation and did not include any notable traces of nationalistic narratives in their web content. This is hardly surprising, as the EU's spirit and purpose practically preclude the articulation of such sentiments but place emphasis on transnational

political and economic interaction. Most content rarely referred to individual member-states; if at all, countries were mainly included in neutral-descriptive or positive contexts and not as subjects of criticism and/or controversy. Instead, the sampled online platforms reproduced motifs of EU-wide collaboration and solidarity. EU institutions predominantly dispersed their views and plans to solve current problems; its online platforms served as biased windows to its daily procedures and what the respective EU branches perceived as newsworthy, relevant issues and developments, which are transnational in nature. However, nation-states as member-states somewhat retain their roles as the most important political elements in EU politics. After all, they form the basis of the union, which promotes the preservation of political and cultural diversity. Leading figures argued that national sovereignty and transnational cooperation is not mutually exclusive but well combinable, yet they struggled to propose a convincing compromise. The crisis rekindled the debate on the still unresolved question of how and to what extent member-states in the EU should continue integration, i.e. what an ideal balance between national seclusion and efficient convergence should look like. A triangulated conflict between Eurosceptics, pragmatic intergovernmentalists, and outspoken EU federalists moulded the discourse on the EU's future political organisation. Regarding the articulation of national sentiments, the EU parliament is a bit of an exception. Since it occasionally included statements from Eurosceptic parliamentarians, certain arguments that reflected nationalist positions became part of its web content. However, these were clearly assigned to specific politicians and did not represent the EP's general political outlook, if anything like this exists; in fact, such statements were balanced by citations from other political positions that represented more moderate views or even genuinely postnational perspectives. In sum, the transnational orientation of the EU institutions as political communicators is very strong due to their active role in constructing and maintaining transnational spheres of interaction and the promotion of a sense of a European collective identity. However, except for a few individuals, such as EP president Martin Schulz, the EU representatives were not the most outspoken cosmopolitans or even EU federalists in the sample. To the contrary, key figures articulated only moderate support for postnational scenarios or even dismissed the idea in favour of intergovernmental pragmatism; for example, ECB president Mario Draghi proposed limited transnational convergence without creating a genuinely political, fiscal, and economic federation in the context of the Eurozone crisis. Hence, one needs to distinguish between individual political perspectives and concrete problems and conflicts in the evaluation of transnational attitudes among EU representatives.

The Greek Blogger and EU federalist NGO Europa Union Deutschland articulated the most pronounced transnational-cosmopolitan identities. The former explicitly criticised the very idea of the nation-state and national identity, while the latter was mainly concerned with outlining its agenda for increased integration – with the goal to establish a genuine EU federation. However, despite certain parallels both communicators displayed discernible differences: The Greek blogger presented himself as a general opponent of national identity, including a supranational European version (PS_2013/01/22). A European transnational identity as proposed by the EU was structurally and functionally little different from traditional national concepts of “us” and “them”; it would simply expand the cultural and geographical dimensions for social and political exclusion as well as “othering” to a European level. Thus, Stavrou argues, it was undesirable to pledge allegiance to a European supranational identity if the actual goal was to overcome modernist concepts in a postmodern, globalised world. He practically attempts to overcome what Thiel (2011) describes as ‘bounded transnationalism’, i.e. the formation of an

exclusive EU identity on a transnational level but with certain cultural, political, and geographical borders that exclude all those deemed non-(Western-)European. Hence, the type of post-national self-perception displayed on Protesilaos Stavrou's blog must not be confused with support for the EU in its current state. Quite the opposite, articulating a cosmopolitan worldview neither automatically translates into a pro-EU position, nor precludes criticism on the EU's political structure and functionality. The Greek blogger distinguished himself as a harsh critic of EU politics without being Eurosceptic or nationalist. Nevertheless, he saw the system in place as inefficient and undemocratic; it would resemble an intergovernmental hierarchy in which more powerful states dominated weaker ones. The crisis thereby revealed long-existing fundamental, systemic flaws in the EU's and especially Eurozone's infrastructure. None of the measures taken to overcome the political and economic challenges would foster a truly transnational democracy but remained cursorily, even irrational, and served short-term interests (e.g. PS_2011/08/28).

The pro-European NGO platform Europa Union Deutschland echoed similar criticism on the handling of the crisis and the state of EU integration in general. Processes that lead towards closer cooperation must not slow down but politicians across Europe should rather accelerate real federalisation; closer integration was portrayed as the only viable solution to current problems, since these arose from inconsistencies and flaws in the EU's underlying political organisation – which was still adjusted to national interests and eventually suffered from insufficient levels of collaboration. The creation of a “united states of Europe” was the goal to achieve in EU politics and any signs for a return to a re-nationalisation within the union was heavily criticised (EUD_2013/01/23; EUD_2013/02/11). The organisation's reaction to the re-introduction of border controls in Denmark and violation of the Schengen treaty was one such instance in which it clearly articulated this pro-integration perspective. The platform's operators appealed to a common European identity and political-legal culture in several publications; they also included references to like-minded organisations from other European countries and actively pursued transnational networking as part of its political work. Though it promoted the federalisation of Europe and strengthening of European identity, Europa Union Deutschland did at no point demand a deconstruction of national identities; to the contrary, its leading representatives argued the case for a multi-layered identity of which the European dimension was just another important facet. Altogether, expressing strong post-national, PanEuropean, and/or cosmopolitan sentiments seemed to be a rare exception in the overall crisis discourse. Except for the two latter online platforms only a handful of second level communicators with a pro-European attitude articulated similar perspectives.

To sum up, the analysed online platforms illustrate how the transnational and national dimensions were bound in a relation of constant tension during the crisis; this in turn stimulated quite diverse reactions across the political spectrum. The challenges of transnationalisation in Europe, which are a result of general globalising tendencies on the world stage, proved to be highly divisive: some communicators argued the case for further integration and demanded the creation of a real EU federation as the only adequate response. Others promoted a return to national seclusion, often by evoking and distributing national sentiments and narratives. In between both extremes were political communicators and decision-makers who represented different shades of a “middle way”: European governments who pursued a de-facto intergovernmental approach and major news media brands with considerable transnational openness and a strong local fixation. These findings correspond with the types of ‘cleavage coalitions’ that Kriesi and Grande (2015: 206-208) identified in European Parliament debates between the

1970s and 2000s: neo-liberal-cosmopolitan, interventionist-cosmopolitan, moderate-nationalist, interventionist-nationalist, and (neo-liberal)nationalist (*ibid*).

The previous discussion has also shown that nation-states indeed faced fundamental transformations, which entails an increased level of transnational interdependency; this was repeatedly articulated in public political communication on EU politics. Nevertheless, national contexts and identities did not forfeit their relevance but were partly even reinforced in the conflict-loaded context of the crisis; both were maintained through communication and remained central references in political discourse. Manifestations of different normative positions towards the role and function of the EU are not isolated from specific perspectives on nation-states and nationalism. More fundamentally, analysing and understanding transnational phenomena must include critical reflections on both; otherwise the constellation, course, and outcome of political conflicts beyond local contexts may stay inaccessible. Recognising the role and function of nation-states and nationalism as crucial factors in transnational debates does not automatically imply that one adopts the closed container thinking of methodological nationalism. To the contrary, its limitations need to be overcome to achieve a meaningful analysis of transnational-global phenomena. Methodological cosmopolitanism or transculturalism provide adequate, productive alternatives: they enable the in-depth assessment of transnational political discourses without neither taking the nation-state as somehow for granted nor ignoring its relevance as discursive products and actors in transnational contexts. Imagined national communities and the governments who try to represent these continue to mould the main conflict constellations while they influence political viewpoints and eventually framing patterns that accumulate to discourses.

One could argue that the crisis and its manifold affects catalysed the renaissance of the nation-state in political discourses while it simultaneously revealed an inherently paradox situation: most social and economic transformations are not limited to geographical locations and nation-states cannot control their outcomes on their own; still, various political communicators recourse to the nation as an alleged anchor of stability. In times of heightened confusion and enormously complex challenges, simplifying worldviews seemed to gain in attractiveness. Online media served for the public distribution of the various types of national and transnational-cosmopolitan perspectives and thus allow observing the ambiguous, partly self-contradicting relationships between both as discursive manifestations against the background of inherently transnationalised political-economic developments. The Web itself displays a dual character: on one hand, it is an inherently globalised technology that can catalyse the dissolution of boundaries; on the other, it can serve for the construction of secluded, nationally-oriented spaces of communication.

Chapter 6: Conclusions

This book addressed the complex issue of transnational political communication in digital public spaces against the background of a multidimensional crisis using the example of European politics; this included the analysis of frames and networks as substructures of mediated public discursivity and the ambiguous, often tense relations between the national and transnational dimensions. First, a comprehensive methodological approach was proposed for identifying and assessing transnational online communication as specific web spheres that collect and contextualise related communication, i.e. online content, on EU issues during a specific time frame. These web spheres can emerge, evolve, and vaporise in an ad-hoc fashion and thus reflect the inherent dynamics of contemporary, digitalised public spheres. These web discourses are always normative, since they focus on political, economic, social, and cultural problems and solutions. The theoretical conceptualisation for the notion of the transnational web sphere applied here draws from previous research on European media publics, transnationalism, nationalism, the arena model of the public sphere, and cyber conflict theory. The two analytical categories of discursive convergence and discursive integration enable the demarcation of transnational communicative contexts and the evaluation of the quality of interactions between different communicators within these. The arena model and its differentiation between distinct yet interconnected levels of public communication allow focusing on varying communicative sections of online platforms and thus to screen web spheres in greater depth, i.e. to integrate their public accessibility, network components, and on-site interactions. Cyber conflict theory underlines that framing and networking are constitutive for digital public spheres.

This theoretical framework informed the development of precisely configured instruments for empirical analysis of online platforms with a focus on EU- and European politics. The methodological approach and tools for data surveying and analysis proved to be efficient and accurate for portraying, screening, and evaluating political debates on the Web both structurally and in terms of content; the multi-level content analysis provided data for more specific frame- and network analyses, which in turn opened the way for a holistic and in-depth evaluation of the crisis discourse from a communication-focused perspective. The combination of quantitative and qualitative steps in a circular process ensured that no aspect relevant for approaching the three major research questions was lost; the research lens was both wide enough and clearly specified to catch all crucial empirical data from the observed subjects. The findings allow to draw some conclusions on the three major research questions:

- **Research question 1:** What content areas did political online communicators cover who focused on the EU/EU-crisis and what discursive networks did they form during the years 2011 to 2013?
- **Research question 2:** What frames dominated political online communication in the context of the crisis and how did communicators evaluate main stakeholders (EU and nation-states)?
- **Research question 3:** How did political online communicators differ in their communication strategies to approach transnational issues?

Internet technology left a lasting impact on political public communication and transformed the communication-sociological dynamics of contemporary public spheres, mainly by pluralising the spectrum of publicly dispersed political information. Online platforms facilitate the construction of publicly accessible communication spheres with an essentially transnational alignment, despite a conglomerate of socio-economic, political, and cultural filters that eventually determine the social fabric of each web discourse.

Regarding research question 1 the findings support the observation that a transnational web sphere, open to a virtually unlimited transnational public, emerged during the crisis in 2011 and 2013; the issues at stake and the involvement of political actors from across the EU triggered the formation of a communicative sphere that not only transcended but partly even dissolved the distinguishing lines between national and transnational discursive dimensions. A diversity of communicators talked about the same set of general issues in public digital spaces. The empirical data indicates that there were discernible tendencies towards convergence in terms of issues and events covered by the different platforms in the EU context. Public communication from various “points” in the EU condensed into a web sphere on EU politics and the economic crisis; this type of convergence laid the groundwork for a transnational discussion. The various communicators do not live in hermetically sealed silos but reacted to the communicative actions of the involved actors and stakeholders and commented on the overall development of the crisis.

This did not preclude specialisation on sub-sections and partial areas of the crisis, as each online platform applied a different political, social, and cultural angle. Local perspectives, political agendas, and special interests emerged as determining factors. This implies that events of broader societal relevance can simultaneously trigger the particularisation of public online communication. The crisis served as a complex and multifaceted context with a myriad of sub-sections; each one was defined by specific discursive constellations that mainly depended on the affected local spaces and societal areas. The formation of a shared discursive meta-context and the differentiation of specified partial discourses were not mutually exclusive but rather evolved in parallel. Convergence thus had clear limits and immediate discursive ties between platforms appeared rather weak and forms of ideological-cultural fragmentation emerged from the sample. Though the various political communicators identified a similar, if not the same, set of relevant issues, they did not necessarily talk to each other, at least not in the sense of deliberation-oriented, multilateral discursivity and explicit mutual referencing; in fact, the degree of interaction between platforms within the sample was relatively low and the communicators/web platform tended to create their own sub-networks. This applies to all platforms across the political spectrum and occurred even within the same ideological spheres. The degree of hyperlinking and network building varied and mainly depended on political backgrounds and online media strategies.

The book also discussed the purpose of public communication in information societies and to ascertain the dominant frames and networks in the crisis web sphere. For this purpose, it reviewed the controversial academic debate on the public sphere by contrasting democratic-integrative models with descriptive and conflict-focused versions. It proposed a tripartite separation of the public sphere into public speakers, public audiences, and technologies for public communication. It argued that overly normative expectations may impede the empirical analysis of existing structures and promoted a pragmatic-integrative approach; it acknowledged that normative ideals derived from democratic theory

can help to assess the quality of public discourses, while descriptive ones are better suited for explaining why a specific public discourse emerges and what sections of society it involves. However, forms of strategic communication, conflict, and contestation seem to primarily mould public political communication and the synthesis of consensus does not necessarily take place on public media stages. This assumption is supported by the frame- and network analyses and one can state for research question 2: political communicators reproduced a diversity of often polarising narratives, interpretations, descriptions and propositions for courses of action during the crisis. The frame analysis revealed the conflicts that materialised in the web sphere; the arena-character of media-based public discursivity became empirically observable. Different visions of Europe, the EU, and the future of individual nation-states clashed in this highly fragmented and unstable discursive context that partly translated into cultural conflicts. It showed the complex network of interrelated fields of contestation, which accumulated to the overall crisis discourse.

The three largest sections concerned crisis developments and policies, the EU's political framework, and, to a lesser extent, migration- and racism-related issues. Economic and political challenges stimulated the articulation of a cacophony of political viewpoints towards EU integration, ranging from support for to clear rejection of the transnational union. This does not only illustrate the controversial character of EU politics and the diversity of opinions but also revealed considerable democratic deficiencies. Despite the potential to liberalise political discursivity and to influence the outcome of decision-making processes, the core network of leading political figures and dominant frames remained virtually exclusive, reflecting a "top-down" hierarchy. A diversity of political communicators could share their frames via online media but not all of them did necessarily leave an impact on the actual handling of EU politics and crisis management; no feedback loops between alternative political movements and political hegemonies could be identified in the data. In this respect, the transnational web sphere appears not too different from domestic, "national" political discourses, which are similarly determined by fragmentation, conflicts, and exclusion. Discursive imbalances were not confined to non-establishment organisations and movements but expanded to the relationships between entire nation-states. There were tendencies towards stereotyping of member-states, with the separation between an alleged Northern and Southern Eurozone as the most relevant, reductionist, simplistic, and potentially consequential framing of individual nation-states. The crisis countries were mainly reduced to their status as causes of problems and dependent units that had to rely on external help and were unable, or even unwilling, to apply necessary political and economic reforms. The frame- and network analyses highlighted the complexity of modern public discourses that affect multiple social systems on a transnational scale and that common stakes and issues do not preclude but may even support the formation and fostering of fragmented political interests.

The analysis then took a closer look at the complex relationship between the national and transnational dimensions in the European, crisis-dominated context. It outlined how all involved communicators were part of a general transnational discourse network but that they still displayed striking differences in the type of transnational alignment. A theoretical "gauge" was developed to categorise the sampled online platforms, based on a critical review of previous definitions of transnationalisms, nationalisms, and nation-states. A strict rejection of methodological nationalism and turn towards methodological cosmopolitanism enabled the discussion of nation-states and nationalisms as social formations and narratives based on discursive actions against the background of broader transnational and

global flows of communication, without neither ignoring their political relevance nor perceiving them as naturally grown, closed containers. The following can then be said in response to research question 3: political communicators articulated different types and combinations of extreme ethno-nationalist, civic nationalist, pro-European, and progressive transnational/cosmopolitan perspectives and self-perceptions. These often corresponded to stances on EU integration in general, e.g. particularly Eurosceptic communicators tended to be more nationalistic, while proponents of EU federalism focused much less on the national dimension. The findings imply that despite increasing transnationalisation of economic and political regulations, nation-states and nationalisms have not forfeit their relevance in European public discourses; to the contrary, under increasing pressures and transformations both remain central references.

The potentials of online media materialise in variable forms and largely depend on the set of involved political communicators and their agendas, though they mostly serve conventional purposes of strategic political communication –the options to implement postmodern ways of communicating politics often remain dormant (Karatzogianni 2006). This has drastic implications for the European context: though Internet access is widely distributed and numerous online platforms provide relevant political information, a fundamental change in European politics seems unlikely. The findings of the present case study have shown that hierarchical, top-down forms of communication remained characteristic for the application of web technology in the crisis discourse; the limited networking behaviour and PR-oriented content agendas of official institutions are one example, the exclusion of protest movements another. Instrumentalisation for specific communicative goals defines most types of crisis communication that could be discerned in the crisis web sphere: *Public Relations and Political Marketing, Political Analysis and Commentary, Economic Analysis, Premediation, Campaigning and Mobilisation, Accusation and Defamation*. However, the Web has the potential to facilitate the formation of social movements in local contexts that may cooperate on a transnational level, if only for limited timespans and specific goals.

The national angles of most news media platforms but also linguistically separated spaces in social media networking sites make a mass-integration of European citizenries in a permanent, somehow institutionalised online public sphere improbable. The transnational digital public sphere is rather a loose network of national and transnational discourses that condense into a denser context when a certain threshold of ‘multiple-systems relevance’ (Kohring 2007) has been reached. And even then, transnational web spheres primarily provide access to information and a diversity of relevant viewpoints but they do not necessarily catalyse the coalescence of national publics into one transnational version; online media face the same limitations to integration as their offline counterparts. Traditional structures are constantly challenged and transform but do simply disappear on the Web and retain their relevance and influence. Nationalism and nation-states continue to supersede the European dimension in framing processes of identity formation in transnational settings. The formation and articulation of a genuinely transnational-European identities in web spheres thus seems still limited to elite discourses involving individuals with strong personal and professional interests in EU politics; the bloggers from Greek and Hungary are prime examples from the sample. Technically speaking, online media could support the forging of stronger European identities but this potential alone is no magic bullet.

However, European online media are likely to play a crucial role in the formation of individual opinions that might pool into collective sentiments; audiences can seek information about European issues from a diversity of sources that may expand their horizon beyond news media agendas; simultaneously, amateur and professional political communicators can tap into the same sources in their

coverages and commentaries on transnational issues. Again, this is a mixed blessing for democratic discourses, as demographic factors delimit the final information menu in each individual case. There is also the threat of further fragmentation between discourse cultures along ideological fault lines; filter-bubbles and the intensification as well as radicalisation of viewpoints in socially homogenous discourse settings has been empirically researched for the US context but the same developments materialise in Europe, too.

Discursive convergence will continue to shape political online discourses with a European focus for as long as the EU maintains its competencies and influence on its member-states. Since many problems in the Eurozone crisis as well as migration crisis remain virtually unsolved, it is likely that online communication increases again with every irritation of the fragile political-economic situation. The Brexit web sphere is the most recent example; it started as a subsection of the EU crisis web sphere as early as 2011 and gained again in momentum in the weeks before and after the referendum whose outcome was for many EU-supporters an unwelcomed surprise. Brexit and the migration crisis evolved into related yet clearly distinguishable web spheres along with the “original” Eurozone crisis web sphere. In sum, these themes shape public communication on the Web that addresses and potentially mobilises different publics without necessarily supporting their integration into one European demos. Crises and conflict reveal the advanced level of interconnectedness in the EU but also that democratic integration of European publics in the climate of the ending 2010s is a difficult task to achieve whose ‘success’ might be very limited – not least since it is not actively or only insufficiently pursued by central national and transnational decision-makers.

The book has shown that the transnational web spheres are an empirical reality, which pose several academic-scientific and political challenges; simultaneously, they hold considerable potentials for expanding nationally confined perspectives. First and foremost, online platforms provide access to conflicts, problems, and irritations in society and the political debates that evolve around them. The Web does not exist in a vacuum but is deeply embedded in modern social life and thus inevitably has close links to all available types of mediated public communication; it does not simply expand but transform the communicative dynamics in public discourses. The proposed framework integrates public sphere theory with cyber conflict- and web sphere theory to better understand the structural features and functions of public discursivity; the combination of frame- and network analyses, based on finely tuned yet flexible content analyses, provides a versatile and effective instrument for adequately portraying and analysing online discourses. Both the theoretical outlook and empirical method can be adjusted and applied to other similar phenomena involving public online communication.

There are several limitations that need to be addressed. First, the empirical analysis had to exclude the comment-dimension and discursive spaces in social networking media. These had to be left out due to pragmatic decisions. However, the proposed flexible methodological approach facilitates the inclusion of these communicative spheres in follow-up research projects. A growing number of studies focuses the role of social media networking sites as spaces for transnational discourses in the crisis context (e.g. Hepp et al. 2016, which could not be reviewed during the writing process). Like web spheres, social media networks host discourses of varying national-transnational alignment; opponents and supporters of the EU socialise in social media, which have become central sources of political information for publics. Digital methods for large-scale data collection with “scrapers” or tools that access social media data bases via their application programming interface (API) provide powerful tools

for online esentiment analyses in future projects (Rogers 2015). Keyword searches and subsequent automatized content analyses would allow to analyse web spheres on a much broader empirical basis that considers not only different website providers but also different web technologies.

Furthermore, the online text corpus compiled for the present analysis provides sufficient material for a wide range of additional and alternative investigations. For example, one could focus in greater detail on the framing and instrumentalisation of migration issues or the handling of foreign conflicts, such as the Libyan and Syrian crises or the French intervention in Mali in quasi-historical analyses. Another follow-up research project could include more recent developments in EU politics and the crisis, such as the European elections in May 2014 or the UK referendum in 2016.

In the case of EU and Eurozone politics in the early 2010s, the chosen approach allowed the reconstruction of the unfolding of a fundamental crisis that will continue to determine the future development of the transnational union for years, even decades to come. It is a historical caesura in its political evolution and left a tangible impact on its infrastructure, self-perception, and orientation. It also determined the prospects of transnational integration and cooperation in other regions of the world, since the EU is exemplary for any such developments. The entailed fields of contestation were not limited to fiscal and economic challenges but inevitably expanded to the political, social, and cultural configurations of European society; it was more than “just” about the organisation and regulation of the single currency but raised profound questions on the sense and purpose of the union. The crisis revealed a fundamental paradox moulding social life in contemporary Europe: it highlighted the advanced degree of convergence in various dimensions of social interaction on the continent, which is in many respects without precedents in world history; there simply is no other region on the globe where levels of transnationalisation have ever reached a similar intensity. In this regard, an analytical view on relevant web communication shows how different political stakeholders and interest groups articulated their awareness for this shared context and how they perceived, processed, and evaluated events and developments that were not confined to individual member-states. Specific political-ideological perspectives determined how exactly each communicator assessed which aspects of the enormously complex developments that accumulated to the crisis. Considerable differences emerged especially regarding the attribution of responsibility and willingness for transnational collaboration. The fact that European economic systems are intrinsically interwoven did not mean that all observers and actors in EU politics accepted further integration. Quite the opposite, the crisis proved to be divisive, causing a chain of distinct yet interrelated conflicts. Diverging ideas of Europe, national sovereignty, and transnational solidarity clashed; proponents of different political perspectives pursued specific communication agendas with which they tried to advance narratives of the crisis and proposed what they perceived as adequate responses to current problems. This is the other side of the European paradox: the unprecedented degree of integration entails considerable potentials for conflict and fragmentation along cultural and ideological lines; political communicators seem to agree that they are entangled in common transnational contexts but the question of how to handle this situation, i.e. whether to embrace or reject this current state of affairs, promotes the emergence of a complex network of conflict lines.

The controversial nature of the crisis and EU politics in general stimulated the articulation of polarising perspectives. The systematic evaluation of communicative practices on the Web implies that not deliberation but strategic framing and contestation dominated the transnational public debate. Discursive integration became manifest but not in the sense of consensus-seeking or fraternisation but

seemed limited to the recognition of common stakes on a transnational level, i.e. that the economic well-being of one member-state depended on the performance of its peers within the Eurozone. This did not necessarily translate into the creation of a united European identity; the realisation that everybody is bound to each other fuelled tendencies towards disintegration rather than the coalescence into a single European public. The situation looks far more complex and ambiguous at best, as regional and local identities persist and various stereotypes circulate in the crisis' blame game. It is quite probable that political developments and events in the EU and individual member-states, particularly in those who experienced economic turmoil, will rekindle the transnational crisis discourse. The crisis may appear dormant for a period but can gain momentum and topicality with the slightest irritation in European politics and economy, as the transnational and national dimensions are inextricably coupled to each other.

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¹ Translated by the author (henceforth: translation DN).

² Source: Google Trends for search terms *Eurozone crisis*, *euro crisis*, *Greek crisis*.

³ See also Raeymaeckers and Cosijn 2007/2010, Mono 2009, Urrichio 2008, Hagen 2004 and the AIM Project (2004 to 2007), including studies on the EU-/Europe coverage of print media outlets in eleven countries (online accessible at <http://www.aim-project.net/>, see also Kopper 2007; Kopper and Leppik 2007).

⁴ They describe five levels of articulation in political discourse cultures: Regulation, i.e. the cultural patterns of institutional or structural conditions of political communication; production, i.e. cultural patterns for the emergence of political communication; representation, i.e. cultural patterns of depiction and content generation in political communication; acquisition, i.e. cultural patterns of consumption and localisation in everyday life of political communication (Hepp et al. 2012: 36).

⁵ Translation DN.

⁶ Beck thematises this crucial aspect in the context of his theory of the ‘world risk society’ (2007) and argues that the definition of what a risk is and what not often depends on nationally determined perspectives. This allocation of relevance draws from the geographical division and distance between ‘deciding countries’ and ‘victim countries’ (*ibid*: 299). Subsequently, certain global risks that actually affect the entire globe (or at least larger parts of it) can simply disappear as they simply do not become subject of a particular national discourse due to their alleged remoteness. According to Beck, methodological nationalism would ‘duplicate’ this conjuncture and practically ‘confirm the inexistence of global inequalities – not because it explicitly denies them (against the background of empirical research), but because its unit of analysis and the respective research questions as well as hypotheses have an exclusively national focus and exclude “side effects” for others’ (*ibid*, translated by the author).

⁷ Chernilo revises and discusses the most influential authors of three “ages” of social theory (classical, modernist, contemporary) regarding their levels of “methodological nationalism”. He concludes: “Social theory is criticised in equal measure for having totally neglected the nation-state and for having overstated, to the level of reification, its position in modernity. As this reconstruction of social theory on the nation-state moved from Marx to Luhmann and Habermas, however, the image that has been emerging was subtler and richer than any form of methodological nationalism would grant. We have shown that the charge lacks almost all specificity and is backed up with very little textual support. It just did not resist closer scrutiny” (Chernilo 2007: 159).

⁸ Beck addresses this criticism by stating that Chernilo misinterpreted his notions of methodological nationalism and cosmopolitanism by overlooking the metaphorical character of both. Chernilo’s ‘overdrawn’ perception of methodological nationalism would lead him to the false conclusion that turning to a cosmopolitan view was ‘redundant, even dogmatic’ (Beck 2007: 297, translated by the author). This would eventually (and wrongly) ‘write off’ an entire research program without any chance for empirical validation (*ibid*).

⁹ Translation DN.

¹⁰ Translation DN.

¹¹ Translation DN.

¹² Translation DN.

¹³ Translation DN.

¹⁴ German communication scientist Bernhard Peters (2007b) proposes a similar categorisation and distinguishes between three notions of the adjective “public”: a) as an attribute for issues and events that become subject of collective responsibilities, attention, and deliberation; b) as a social sphere of action; c)

in an emphatic notion as a sort of collective that is based on a specific structure of communication or a sphere with certain normative attributes; in here something like a public opinion may emerge.

¹⁵ Translation DN.

¹⁶ Austin's notion of locutionary acts (facts), illocutionary acts (action), and perlocutionary acts (effects) provide the basis for Habermas' model of speech acts (1995a: 389).

¹⁷ Habermas further distinguishes between aesthetical criticism and therapeutic criticism. The first one aims for the evaluation of normative standards, the second one focuses on the validity of expressions (*ibid*).

¹⁸ Translation DN.

¹⁹ There are two different dimensions of understanding, a semantic one, the 'Sinnverstehen' and an empirical one, the context-dependent processing or 'Weiterverarbeitung' (*ibid*: 396-399). There are further sub-levels of understanding: a) pragmatic; b) semantic; c) empirical (context-dependent processing) (Habermas 1995a: 399). 'Identisch verstehen', i.e. identical interpretations are highly problematic/unlikely (*ibid*: 412).

²⁰ Dean asserts that 'the proliferation, distribution, acceleration, and intensification of communicative access and opportunity, far from enhancing democratic governance or resistance, results in precisely the opposite, the post-political formation of communicative capitalism' (2005: 3). Democratic principles are undermined and even commodified under the dogma of a 'technological fetish' (*ibid*: 14; 2003b).

²¹ Translation DN.

²² Translation DN.

²³ Translation DN.

²⁴ Translation DN.

²⁵ Translation DN.

²⁶ Translation DN.

²⁷ Translation DN.

²⁸ Translation DN.

²⁹ Translation DN.

³⁰ Translation DN.

³¹ Translation DN.

³² Translation DN.

³³ This goes back to German sociologist Ferdinand Tönnies (1855-1936), who paid considerable attention to the function of the public sphere in coordinating and mediating diverging interests in stratified, mass societies. He develops a notion of the public sphere that is mainly based on media communication, since in modern societies publicity would not require any form of physical attendance. He further differentiates between varying aggregate phases of public opinion (gaseous, liquid, and solid, 1922). Walter Lippmann is another pioneer academic who approached public opinion analytically, though a rather sceptical perspective emerged from his arguments on the *Phantom Public* (1925) or *Public Opinion* (1946). An equally important and more recent classic approach provided Elisabeth Noelle-Neumann, who is regarded as a pioneer in the empirical discipline of opinion survey (*Demoskopie*). She describes an imbalance between vocal, offensively acting proponents of dominant opinions and less outspoken supporters of alleged minority opinions in her theory on the spiral of silence (2001). The latter ones would ultimately retreat into seclusion, since they perceived themselves in a marginalised position.

³⁴ Translation DN.

³⁵ Translation DN.

³⁶ Translation DN.

³⁷ Translation DN.

³⁸ Translation DN.

³⁹ A randomizer was used to create non-systematised lists of articles per month for the bigger platforms (i.e. those that published more than 5 articles per month); then, depending on the total amount of articles available per month, every n-element was selected (e.g. every 5th, 10th, 15th etc.) until the set quota per platform was met. A lottery system with printed tickets was applied for the smaller platforms.

⁴⁰ The test was then re-run with 25% of N1 and intercoder reliability was calculated with Krippendorff's Alpha, which resulted in satisfactory average values for all topic variables of ($KALPHA=.88$), ($KALPHA=.97$) for all country variables, and ($KALPHA=1$) for the comment variable. Krippendorff's Alpha is one of the most popular reliability tests to evaluate intercoder agreement in content analyses (de Swert 2012; Hayes and Krippendorff 2007). It can be used for any level of measurement (nominal, ordinal, interval, ratio) as well as number of coders (also observers or judges) and works with string and numeric data. It is basically a macro for SPSS that considers each variable as a coder and each row as a unit (*ibid*). The test calculates in how many cases the involved coders coded the same values for the respective variable; that means the test needs to be conducted for each individual variable in the coding instrument. The closer the $KALPHA$ value is to 1, the higher the reliability of the variable and thus the degree of intercoder agreement (e.g. .99). A low value indicates problems with the coding instrument as the observers coded differently in many cases (e.g. .30). Values starting from .79 are mostly regarded as a strong indicator for an intersubjectively replicable coding instrument. The second test was immediately conducted after the first one and it was split into two phases: phase one covered the original 10% subsample of N1, while phase two was conducted several months later and included another 15% of randomly selected articles from N1. Data from both phases was compiled in the files named above to calculate the overall $KALPHA$ values per variable. This multiple testing scheme ensured that intercoder reliability was tested throughout the data survey process and not only at the initial phase.

⁴¹ The procedure required some coder training in advance, as the test codings ideally happened without the researcher being present. The test-coders coded ca. 25% of N2, i.e. roughly a quarter of the second sample was 'double checked' to reduce the impact of single-coder-bias (Terfrüchte 2011: 138). If opinions diverged over a coded segment the issue was resolved via 'consensual coding', i.e. both researcher discussed the segment and agreed to either refine the coding category or create a new one if necessary (Kuckartz 2012: 82-83).

⁴² It provides the median of all variables that occur within statements in articles assigned to a particular cluster in order to calculate a median for the entire cluster with the help of the squared Eukledian distances between the respective instances. When all distances have been added up, those two clusters are combined that increase the total sum of distances the least.

⁴³ The network graph was created with Gephi, using Force Atlas 2 (scaling 1000) and the modularity algorithm to detect communities.

⁴⁴ The network graph was created with Gephi, using Force Atlas 2 (scaling 1000) and the modularity algorithm to detect communities.

⁴⁵ Results derive from the qualitative analysis of N2 (=1347), which covers 10% of N1. The specific N is in this table the total of sub-codes within the main code *Crisis Developments*, which can also apply when no sub-area was covered in a given article.