

Editorial

Charting the Impacts of Media Discourses on the European Integration Project

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Abstract

The over-exposure to information facilitated by the hybrid media system and social networks is a key factor contributing to the increasing polarization of public opinion on major political issues. The European integration project is one of the major political processes affected by information manipulation and disinformation. In this regard, social networks have become powerful tools for nurturing news siloes or “echo chambers,” influencing people’s perceptions of important political issues in a manner that could have a destabilizing effect on democratic processes and institutions. In this context, the role of media discourses and their circulation among networked publics has become particularly relevant, leading audiences to adopt different views supporting or rejecting the European project. This thematic issue features a range of articles considering how the Europeanization process is impacted by discourses circulating in the hybrid media system or threatened by the destructive dynamics of disinformation and polarization.

Keywords

digital literacy; disinformation; Europeanization; European Union; Euroscepticism; media discourses; polarization; social networks

Issue

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1. Introduction

The over-exposure to information facilitated by the hybrid media system (Chadwick, 2017) and social networks is a key factor contributing to the increasing polarization of public opinion on major political issues (Tucker et al., 2018). The European integration project is one of the major political processes affected by the logics of the networked attention economy, yet also subject to the threats posed by information manipulation and disinformation amplified by the dynamics of the 24-hour news cycle and the algorithmic architectures of social media platforms. In this regard, social networks have become powerful tools for nurturing news siloes or “echo chambers,” and thus influencing people’s perceptions of important political issues in a manner that

could have a destabilizing effect on democratic processes and institutions.

In this context, the role of media discourses and their circulation among networked publics has become particularly relevant, leading audiences to adopt different views supporting or rejecting the European project (Tsuladze et al., 2016). The implications of this discursive power require ongoing scholarly attention as European powers and decision-makers globally are once again focusing on the continent in light of recurrent political turmoil and an all-out war waged by Russia on Ukraine. Understanding the present and future of European enlargement and the ongoing dynamics of Europeanization through the prism of media and communications studies is thus particularly timely. This thematic issue features a range of articles examining how the

Europeanization process is impacted by discourses circulating in the hybrid media system or threatened by the destructive dynamics of disinformation and polarization.

2. Media Discourses Contributing to Europeanization or Euroscepticism

As convincingly argued by many Europeanization scholars, several analytical models have evolved to explain the dynamics of the European project and the attitudes associated with it. In this regard, Europeanism and Euroscepticism have become catch-all terms integrating several attitudes engaging or opposing the EU project (McCormick, 2010). One of the great achievements supporting the EU project in generating broadly pro-European attitudes has been the Schengen Agreement (Davis & Gift, 2014). Adriana Ștefănel, Antonio Momoc, and Romina Surugiu (2023) provide in their study a fascinating analysis of how Eurosceptic discourses arose in Romania and Bulgaria in the weeks before and after the Justice and Home Affairs Council (December 2022) in the context of the countries' Schengen accession. The results show that the tactic used in mainstream media discourse was meant to minimize or downplay Euroscepticism and, on the other hand, to discursively promote the benefits of European integration.

Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine is one of the most significant recent events impacting Euroscepticism or pro-European sentiments in the public domain. This thematic issue contains two articles providing different lenses of analysis for this case: On the one hand, Gracia Abad Quintanal, Sonia Boulos, and Branislav Radeljić (2023) analyze how Spanish media discourses on the EU's geopolitical role in the context of the war influence or obstruct the process of European integration. The analysis of the Spanish media discourses revealed how Russia's attack on Ukraine has significantly increased news coverage of the EU's external dimension. The authors highlight that in their analysis, the representations of the EU in Spanish media discourses have shifted over the past few months from being reactive and vulnerable to more determined, united, and effective, with a more defined position on the international stage, including in its relations with NATO. They also show that EU member states were presented as being even more aware of the value of EU membership.

On the other hand, Mihnea S. Stoica and Andreea Voinea (2023) analyze the case of Romania in the face of Russia's war on Ukraine, examining the degree to which anti-EU appeals of AUR (Alliance for the Unity of Romanians) nurture Eurosceptic attitudes among Romanian citizens. In the study, the authors pursued two different goals: firstly, revealing the narratives within the political discourse of AUR, a new anti-EU populist party that has gained significant influence in the latest Romanian parliamentary elections; and secondly, assessing which of the discourses supported by AUR had the most influence on fostering Eurosceptic attitudes in Romania.

3. Polarization and Disinformation in Media Discourses Affecting Public Opinion

Radu M. Meza (2023) offers in his research a particular vision of polarization processes in media coverage of the Schengen accession. Presenting a qualitative analysis of news headlines, the findings of the study indicate three distinct ways in which coverage of the Schengen Area accession has the potential to fuel Euroscepticism and generate polarization: (a) by fostering animosity and outrage toward foreign actors, either collective ones such as the Netherlands and Austria or individual ones such as key state officials; (b) by encouraging detachment from politics through a cynical state of amusement in response to politicians' strategic communication and news; and (c) by fostering a sense of self-victimization and insinuating conspiracy.

Disinformation shaping public opinion is ably captured by Ágnes Urbán, Gábor Polyák, and Kata Horváth (2023) in the case of Hungary. The research illustrates how pro-government media generate and disseminate disinformation and examines how disinformation is reshaping the public discourse in Hungary. The Russian invasion of Ukraine provides a stark illustration of Hungary's misinformation environment and its disastrous impact on democratic public discourse. Disinformation blaming Ukraine for starting the war was spread in the early stages of the invasion. Later, discourses in the same media widely promoted the belief that only Hungary was committed to maintaining peace and that the West was only interested in going to war. Throughout the autumn of 2022, the emphasis switched away from the war and toward sanctions, with the messages becoming more and more anti-EU.

Sara Monaci, Domenico Morreale, and Simone Persico (2023) also focus on disinformation in social media discourses using a different but equally captivating example, that of the Eurabia doctrine (a far-right, anti-Muslim conspiracy theory claiming that globalist entities, led by French and Arab powers, aim to Islamize and Arabize Europe). Arguing that conspiracy theories in social media have become key factors undermining societal perceptions of European integration, the authors offer a chronological study (2020, 2021, and 2022) based on 50,000 tweets related to the topic of the conspiracy in different European languages. Their findings show how conspiracy theories about the Eurabia doctrine can become influential in public opinion and thus harmful to the framing of EU actions. They also argue that political actors appear to be using such conspiracies consciously to increase their prominence in online discussions.

4. Media Representations of the European Project

In their study, Marcos Mayo-Cubero, Lucía García-Carretero, María-José Establés, and Luis-Miguel Pedrero-Esteban (2023) examine the representation of the EU in Spanish media, observing changes in public opinion

as a consequence of the Covid-19 pandemic and the Next Generation funds received by Spain. The study analyses media discourses from six leading Spanish news media through qualitative and quantitative methods by applying content and critical discourse analysis. The findings add new information to previous scholarship (García-Carretero et al., 2022), demonstrating the significance of media discourses related to European funding as particularly relevant for shaping favorable public opinion about the EU.

In another study on representations of the European project, Maria Raquel Freire, Sofia José Santos, Moara Crivelente, and Luiza Almeida Bezerra (2023) provide a compelling analysis of Portuguese media discourses focusing on populism. Using critical thematic analysis and examining how populism as a topic was used to create and negotiate political EU representations, this article focuses on media discourses in Portuguese mainstream media during a complex political period that included national elections. Their study, building on a historical perspective, finds that populism was used in the media and by the media as a discursive mechanism of political stance and/or delegitimization or criticism of political actors, agendas, or actions.

5. Digital Literacy as a Means of Combating Fake News and Disinformation

In the context of intensifying disinformation and fake news circulation in the aftermath of the Covid-19 pandemic, digital literacy has played an important role in addressing this global issue (Mason et al., 2018). Moreover, there is also an emergent connection between digital literacy and political opinions in an era where political communication and international relations debates have moved into the digital arena (Pérez-Escoda & Freire, 2023). The article authored by Charo Sádaba, Ramón Salaverría, and Xavier Bringué (2023) investigates the value of digital literacy with a focus on adults. Their research demonstrates how participants' political views affect their capacity to recognize false information. As their findings highlight, progressive political views are linked to higher right-biased headline accuracy detection and lower left-biased headline accuracy detection. Conservative stances result in more accurate recognition when the headline has a progressive bias, but when the headline has a right-wing slant, detection is less accurate.

6. Conclusion

The ongoing transformations of both the hybrid media environment and the digital political communication sphere documented in this thematic issue highlight that perceptions and representations of the European project are impacted by the manifold media discourses circulating in the traditional and digital media, but also shaped by the potentially harmful dynamics of algorithmic bias,

disinformation and resulting political polarization. It is our hope that the research in this thematic issue, which highlights the various facets of these phenomena and their significance for the European public sphere, contributes to existing scholarship but also inspires future academic inquiry into this quickly developing field.

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Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interests.

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