Probing the EU Public Sphere: Participation and Civic Cultures

Peter Dahlgren
1. Introduction: the EU’s democracy dilemmas

In a recent anthology on the democratic prospects of the EU, the editors ask (rhetorically):

...can this top-down, elite-led process make further progress without the added impetus of greater unity also in the sphere of social consciousness and ultimately culture, which would help make it more of a bottom-up project? Undoubtedly this fundamental question has to do with communicative processes, media, public opinion, and identity formation (Sükösd and Jakubowicz, 2011, 1).

The editors list a number of deficits in the European Union; these cluster around the dynamics of communicative processes and include the by now famous democratic deficit, as well as a legitimation deficit that derives from the inadequate democratic anchoring. The editors also stress an identity deficit, noting that the citizens of the EU tend to not have gotten beyond “banal nationalism” and moved into a European mode, as was hoped in past decades. Moreover, citizens do not even seem to embrace to any great extent the less culturally charged and seemingly less ambitious notion of “constitutional patriotism”. This is a more recent ideal, one that suggests that citizens of the EU could at least unite around the rules of the game that frame the EU, since it is ultimately in all of their interests that this transnational institution functions properly.

The idea that the EU could become a functioning democracy, and that with this development a genuine public sphere could emerge, remains one of the most central political questions facing the continent. Sükösd and Jakubowicz are perhaps balancing somewhat on the fence in this regard, but they are clearly uneasy about the prospects. What they are saying is that for this vision to come about, changes have to be achieved that not only alter formal structures and procedures, but that also impact at the level of culture and consciousness. These two (ultimately inseparable) trajectories of necessary change for the democrati-
zation of the EU – structures and culture – have proved to be difficult to set in motion, as many authors have affirmed in recent years.

My aim in this article is to explore the dilemma a bit further, with the particular horizon of citizens’ participation in the public sphere as the key thematic. Participation is predicated on factors of both structure and culture, and at bottom it is the participation of citizens in the talk, the arguments, and the hammering out of political positions, and the shaping of opinion that constitutes the lifeblood of democracy. Thus, I want to explore, schematically, the contingencies of participation, and to that end I will apply a framework I call civic cultures to better highlight what is involved in the calls for a more democratic EU and a functioning EU public sphere.

To set the stage, I will first briefly look at two studies that address the overarching challenges that an EU public sphere faces – and highlight what is at stake in their respective notions of the public sphere. This will then usher us into a conceptual discussion about public spheres, participation and the notion of the political. Thereafter I introduce the framework of civic cultures, with its six dimensions, and briefly connect them to the issues around EU civic participation; the aim is to conceptually illuminate what participation involves, and situate this perspective in the context of the debates about the democratic character of the EU. I conclude with some reflections on the prospects for EU democracy and participation, refracted through the lens of civic cultures.

2. The EU public sphere: two recent analyses

2.1. Visibility and inclusiveness

The anthology edited by Koopmans and Statham (2010) is a collection that brings together impressive research on the EU and the question of democracy. It is any integrated anthology, since the chapters derive from the same extensive research project. Statham (2010) in the final chapter pulls the various threads together in a concluding summary and analysis. He organizes the discussion around a simple two-dimensional model that yields four basic ideal types of public politics. The first dimension is the degree of public visibility of European decision-making, which can be low, with sparse media coverage, or high, with dense media coverage. The second dimension is the degree of public inclusiveness in European decision-making, which can be low or high, manifesting the degree of civil society access. The resulting typology is as follows:
Fig. 1 A two-dimensional conceptual space for types of Europeanized public politics (Statham, 2010)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Degree of public visibility</th>
<th>Low</th>
<th>High</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Low</td>
<td>Executive bargaining</td>
<td>Corporatist interest group politics</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>High</td>
<td>Elite-dominated public politics</td>
<td>Inclusive public politics</td>
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In this heuristic framework the upper left ideal type reflects the well-known mechanisms where EU policy-making proceeds behind closed doors (especially of the Commission), with little or no public visibility and little or no public input or participation via civil society. Continuing across the top right, the corporatist interest group politics is also one in which there is very little public visibility, but in principle should reflect broad public inclusiveness, i.e., participation. Statham (2010, 281) underscores that this view ignores that the power dynamics hardly allow for equal access and influence for the various groups trying to impact on regulation and legislation. The influence of lobbying is massive, where today some “15,000 trade associations, consultants, not-for-profit NGOs, international organisations, think tanks, regional associations, and other lobbyists currently operate in Brussels, where they seek to shape the legislation and regulation of the European Union” (Keane, 2013, 185). This erodes the democratic character of the EU, not because lobbying a priori is corrupt but because in practice it is the wealthy and powerful interests who most often succeed in their efforts. The hierarchies of access – and the mechanisms of exclusion – reflect the radically skewed sets of power relations.

Turning to the category in the lower left corner, the key idea is that an elite-dominated politics is being made more transparent and accountable through media coverage. This is a hope that seemingly always springs eternal in some quarters: that more or better journalism will somehow help reduce the democratic deficit. The Commission often responds to the charges of inadequate democracy by framing it as a “communication” problem – that they are somehow not getting across successfully, and will try harder. Fundamentally, it is not a problem of communication but of power relations. I am reminded of a classic scene in the Paul Newman film Cool Hand Luke from 1967, where he plays a prisoner on a Florida penal farm who resists submitting to the rules and regulations, and is constantly being punished for it. After one particularly brutal beating, where he is lying, face up, in a ditch, one of the guards looks down at him and
says to the effect, with deliberate sarcasm “What we have here is a failure to communicate” – when in fact the issue is about submission to the power structure. One wonders if the Commission is really so incapable of seeing the irony in its equivalent pronouncements.

As Statham emphasizes, and as several chapters in the collection show, there is in fact considerable coverage of the EU in much of the mainstream media of the member countries. The dilemma is that research has confirmed time and again that the news agenda is mostly shaped by the elites, who also dominate the coverage: government and executive actors are systematically over-represented, with legislative and political party actors less so. Those who truly lose out in this regard are precisely civil society actors, who are profoundly under-represented. While the coverage may provide some grounds for the electorate to make choices, the public is kept at arm’s length from the political process. It has at times been suggested that we can get further in regard to EU public sphere participation if we empirically look at the internet. However, Statham finds that most EU-related materials take the form of one-to-many mode, i.e. mass communication; actual discussion among citizens – and especially in any transnational manner – appears very uncommon.

We can also recall that beyond the national mainstream media that address EU issues, there are also a few “pan-European” media outlets, mainly in print and online. Varga (2011) provides a good review and analysis of them, highlighting their merits but also their various and severe limitations, including the economics of the journalism and their largely delimited elite readerships. Under these circumstances citizens still remain largely uninformed and disengaged.

Thus, media visibility is shaped by the stratified character of the EU polity, where EU-level actors have much to say about EU-level policies, and where national public spheres filter such communication through their own news frames and political cultures. Statham tellingly terms the mediated space for EU politics a public sphere “lite” (Statham, 2010, 183), yet suggests that is about as good as we expect it to be – a sort of optimistic resignation. Interestingly enough, he refers to another major study, headed by the late Bernard Peters (a student of Habermas), who came to largely similar empirical findings, but offer less optimistic conclusions. The Peters group surmised that there was indeed a public sphere “deficit”, and the present circumstances reflect at best a weak “monitorial governance” based on vertical visibility, rather than a strong and horizontal “discursive integration” that promotes “a common European discourse” and a “transnational community” (Statham, 2010, 287).

Curiously, the Statham group rejects this critical conclusion, arguing that it builds on excessively idealistic notions from the Habermasian tradition; they prefer a “more realistic approach”. One may personally lean towards the conclusions of one group of researchers over the other, but what is worth noting here is that definitions of the public sphere, or at
least the criteria of its success, remain negotiable and are not firmly fixed. The “discourse of the public sphere” is potentially always a contested one. I will return to this theme below.

If we now move to the lower right-hand category of the framework, a Europeanized inclusive public politics, we bring into focus the vision an ideal participatory public sphere populated not only by party leaders and other elites, but also by various public interest groups, social movements, and individuals, deliberating largely via the media. Only in this way, argues Statham – in citing Habermas (2006) – can Europe’s democratic deficit be overcome (Statham, 2010, 283). Also, its legitimacy can only be secured “from the interplay of institutionalised consultation and decision-making processes, on the one hand, and informal public processes of communication in which opinions are formed via the mass media, on the other” (Statham, 2010, 284). Here one senses that he surprisingly embraces higher criteria by which to judge success.

Statham does acknowledge that we are not there yet, and wraps up his discussion with an educated guess that the best way forward to develop the democratic character of the EU goes via competitive party politics at the national level. Europeanized national party politics is perceived to be more engaging than direct EU politics. The anticipation is that national journalistic coverage will increasingly take on European frames, and citizens will increasingly adopt elements of EU civic identities. In time, national governments could channel popular political sentiment into the EU in ways more robust ways than the EU parliament does. While the argument is more sophisticated than my brief summary here, one cannot help but think of the chorus of global voices – not least within the EU – who have been insisting on the dire state of national politics and the party system; over the past quarter century the democracy within the nation state has become increasingly problematic, not least due to so many citizens feeling mistrust and disaffection from party politics. Thus, national political contexts hardly seem like a safe life vest for the EU. We have at bottom a well-informed analysis about the difficulties, one that still holds on to a degree of optimism, yet whose conclusions do not appear convincingly realistic.

The seemingly paradoxical situation where manifestations of “media abundance” do not automatically enhance democracy is an important theme that needs to be given more critical play in this context. Making a general point about what he calls “hidden power” but which applies very well to the EU, Keane notes that “power which is ‘invisible’ nowadays comes wrapped in publicity” (Keane, 2013, 223). Keane cogently argues that the communication revolution of the past few decades also involve what he calls media decadence, that is, they inadvertently or by design can also contribute to undemocratic modes of societal development. News coverage of elites, online as well as in the traditional media, is increasingly shaped by elites, via spin doctors, publicity agents, PR-experts and
advertisers, deflecting the critical watchdog function of journalism. This, together with what many citizens feel is a lack of meaningful ways to enter into the political process, leaves many citizens feeling disempowered and cynical.

2.2. Domestication and politization

A briefer but more focused effort to address the theme of the EU's public sphere is found in Seoane Pérez (2013). Building on a more modest body of empirical research, the book begins by immediately dispatching the idea of a “communication gap” as a suitable way of explaining the distance between the EU's institutions and its citizens or of resolving it. Instead, the author presents his two key concepts, domestication and politicization, as the way to formulate the twin deficits that lie at the heart of the problems. The first term refers to the fact that, for most citizens, “the EU is seen as something remote, out there”, while the second concerns the lack of the political: “the EU is about diplomatic compromise and technocracy, not about the fray of ideological clashes that characterizes politics in traditional national democracies” (Seoane Pérez, 2013, 1). These two dimensions of the democratic deficit, the author asserts, are inexorably linked, in an interplay of “parsimony” (Seoane Pérez, 2013, p. 206). (We might note that “ideological clashes” are often less intense in national politics today as well, as parties scramble towards a middle ground, and political rhetoric often pivots on economic and technical themes, rather than ideological ones).

That the EU is experienced as distant by most citizens comes as no surprise per se, but Seoane Pérez offers an interesting analysis of the theme. He posits that within the EU, the dynamics of identity and conflict are downplayed; by this he means that citizens are not invited to identify with issues as political agents – their subjectivity is generally not mobilized in the routines of EU politics – while at the same time “conflict” is to be administratively managed. Even at regional and national levels EU issues are mostly handled by what he calls the “Eurominati network” of various elite and interest groups. Thus, EU-related conflicts rarely interpellate citizens, their identities do not become invested in political positions. Conflicts are largely dealt with at the elite level, and EU citizenship thus becomes empty of political meaning. It becomes rather “a sort of premium passport to enjoy a private life of travel, study and entertainment... the realization of the old dream of the bourgeois individual: ... free of public commitments” (Seoane Pérez, 2013, 201). There is in a sense a double absence of identity, for not only are citizens not invited to position themselves in relation to specific EU-related conflicts, the more familiar lack of a collective European identity further undercuts the foundation for political engagement, which remains mostly enclosed within nationalist frames.
The structural lack of politicization, Seoane Pérez’s second category, links neatly with the first. The combination of diplomacy, technocracy and neo-corporatism that shape the EU’s dynamics tilt decisively in the direction of compromise, bureaucratization, and the marginalization of serious political conflict. That so much takes place behind closed doors, where not least national and special interests assert their policy preferences with minimal transparency, obviously short-circuits civic participation. The involvement of civil society is largely restricted to a few major associations who become “partners” in the discreet negotiations; all these actors seemingly share the view that publicity and open debate is not a desirable option. Finally, so much of the EU’s activities are geared towards achieving economic stability, and economics as such is kept separate from “politics” as much as possible, further underscoring the technocratic character.

3. Public spheres, participation, and the political

That the notion of the public sphere is still not a fully fixed signifier can be verified by a perusal of the literature; the collection by Grip-srud et al (2010) provides a handy overview of different inflections, while the theme issue of Javnost/The Public (2014) demonstrates the variety of angles that critical intellectuals can emphasize. More specifically in regard to the EU, Splichal (2011) underscores how various versions of the concept are mobilized in different EU research contexts, and if we were to evaluate them with rigour in relation to Habermasian principles, their validity is often questionable. “Obviously, different conceptualizations would lead to divergent assessments of empirical evidence in favor or against a European public sphere (Splichal, 2011, 43); in other words, the less ambitious criteria one has in one’s definition, the more likely one is to find something to cheer about. In ways parallel to what happened with the notion of public opinion, the concept of the public sphere seems to become increasingly gutted of its critical conceptual core and rendered easily operationalized for quantitative empirical analysis.

3.1. Public sphere criteria

This difference in the criteria for determining the success of the public sphere becomes salient in the comparison between the Statham group and Seoane Pérez. Where the former puts its hopes in the gradual Europeanization of national politics and the continuation of elite-dominated EU media coverage, the latter argues that this public sphere mode reflects political engagement and will do so as long as the present EU institutional arrangements are in place. Seoane Pérez zeroes in on precisely the problems of the remoteness of EU politics to citizens and the mechanisms of depoliticization of the citizenry that are structured into the dy-
namics of the EU. Amalgamating the strands from the two research efforts, we could say that there is media visibility, but of the wrong kind – it does not promote domestication, i.e. the proximity that enables a sense of agency. The lack of inclusiveness in turn undercuts participation and depoliticizes citizens. Analytically, I find it hard not to side with Seoane Pérez: the deflection of the political is what ultimately renders the present EU incapable of a democratic public sphere.

Volumes have been written on how best to conceptualize the public sphere, and I do not wish to launch into a long discussion of that here. I will just refer to a simple model (see Dahlgren, 1995) that highlights for me what is an essential feature of a democratic public sphere but that often gets left out when discussion and analysis becomes too media-centric. The model focuses attention on three fundamental, mutually reciprocal dimensions of public spheres: First, public spheres require suitable political, economic, regulatory, and organizational structures in order to operate in a manner that could be deemed democratic. Secondly, they require contents and forms of communicative representation that will serve democratic ends and fulfill democratic criteria and standards, be it via mass- or interactive media and/or via face-to-face encounters.

Thirdly, public spheres need ultimately to be enacted and animated through the participation of citizens, through their discursive interventions, arguments, and struggles to generate public opinion. It is this dimension that is often left by the wayside, as analysis dwells on structures and representations, mostly of the media; these are absolutely necessary, but, I would insist, not sufficient without the participatory dimension. Indeed, the structures and representations have a responsibility to foster participation, to promote a democratic cultural environment that empowers citizens.

3.2. Participation and the political

The concept of “the political” has entered discussions about democracy in recent years not least via the work of Chantal Mouffe (see Mouffe, 2013 for her most recent book), and builds upon a conceptual distinction between politics as a formalized arena of conflict (usually electoral) and collective contestations that can potentially arise anywhere on the societal landscape, generating ever new categories of “we” and “they”. Democracy is seen as the best way to deal in a civilized way with such societal conflict, offering mechanisms to resolve disputes without resorting to violence. The term “the political” insists on the centrality of both conflict and of the identity distinctions between friends and enemies if one is to genuinely understand the character of politics (it is thus not surprising that there is a strong Mouffian element to Seoane Pérez’s analysis). Further, the dynamics of democracy require that existing conflicts are aired, are given voice, and that citizens actually participate in political life, es-
especially via the public sphere. Excluding legitimate issues from public discussion is a manifestation of “hidden power”, a strategy for circumventing the political, for depoliticizing the functioning of power – and sapping the vitality of democracy.

At the most fundamental level, the political emerges through talk and other forms of communication in the public sphere. It need not necessarily be formalised deliberation, but the political always becomes manifested through communication. This can empirically vary enormously with the specific circumstances, local cultures, existing political traditions, historical experience and organisational situations. We can treat the process as akin to a continuum, whereby even everyday, conversational talk may move from the pre-political to the para-political (which manifests traces and potential) and then to the full-blown political itself. From there it may enter the arena of formal politics or in the extra-parliamentarian domain; or it find expression in more volatile ways, as see within the crisis-ridden Europe of today. For citizens, engagement with the political and the enactment of participation requires some self-understanding as political agents, an identity whose subjective elements can nourish such agency; I’ll come back to this in a moment.

Turning to our other key concept here, participation, it emerges from several different fields in the social sciences (see Carpentier, 2011 for an extensive treatment). I will not offer an inventory of possible usages, but rather will simply underscore that participation means involvement with the political, regardless of the character or scope of the context. It constitutes an intervention into existing power relations, an effort towards power-sharing, however modest or remote. It always involves some degree of contestation, of struggle, and often begins with discussions among citizens. Many instances of the political will become a part of electoral politics, but it is imperative that we keep the broader vista of the political in view: the terrain of political agency and participation can well extend into the realm of alternative, extra-parliamentarian politics (I explore this further in Dahlgren, 2013).

Linking participation to engagement in the political to the conceptual framework of the public sphere, we can say that while participation is dependent upon the structures and representations of the media, it is ultimately participation that is the measure of the democratic character of a public sphere. We can note the Habermasian distinction between strong public spheres, which have more direct impact decision-making, and weak public spheres, which are by far the most common and serve the function of opinion formation. Both are necessary; in terms of the dynamics of democracy, even participation in weak public spheres constitutes engagement with the political and still holds out the potentiality that the views developed and expressed will have some relevance in shaping political decisions – and thus, even if remotely, have an impact on power relations.
And to connect the final dots with the critical conclusions of Seoane Pérez: the structures and representations of the public sphere cannot on their own facilitate political participation if the existing political order is characterized by mechanisms that foster exclusion or render participation meaningless. As Couldry, Livingstone and Markham (2010) indicate, having access to reliable journalism is in itself not sufficient compensation to ensure the public connection of citizens: they must also feel that there is a meaningful port of entry for them as political agents into the governing process. In Western democracies generally, and in the EU in particular, this lack of a sense of empowered agency – together with undercurrents of distrust, cynicism, and ultimately meaninglessness – leads to much disengagement with existing democratic institutions.

4. EU civic cultures?

In discussing and analyzing democracy (and all its problems) we sometimes can let ourselves slide into a mindset that ignores that which lies beyond the formal structures and procedures of this political model. Democracy ultimately has to do with a way of life, and it is inevitably anchored in the prevailing cultural patterns of society, in its values, assumptions, ways of dealing with other people, and so on. Without this cultural anchoring, without some degree of taken-for-granted democratic impulses, it is hard for the formal system to function as it should. Of course in the real world of Western democracies – with all their variations – we are mostly dealing with situations of more-or-less and uneven fulfilment of such ideals; the cultural parameters are never fully realized or internalized by all citizens. Indeed, we could say that democracy theory inexorably comprises a mythic dimension, a compelling vision of the good society. Such ideals – of course always present in various and contested variants – are important for guiding struggles for an improved democracy, even if they can never be fully attained. Such should be the case with the EU as well.

Even as many citizens disengage with the EU and with national and local governments, participation takes new forms, in the various guises of alternative, extra-parliamentarian democratic efforts. If there is deep disenchantment with the established institutions and their caretakers, such activism at least bears witness to the continuation of democratic hopes. So what becomes interesting, and indeed important, is to probe and illuminate the kinds of factors that do promote democratic political participation in public spheres.

4.1. Towards empowerment: civic cultures

While the emphasis on the institutional features of democracy is essential, it is important to not lose sight of the dimension of agency: it is
people, individually and collectively, who will experience civic engagement and participate politically. Where does the subjectivity of such engagement to come from? One way to begin to answer the question – both conceptually and empirically, is through the framework of civic cultures (Dahlgren, 2009). I use the plural form of civic cultures to indicate that there are today many ways in which participation can be enacted; there is no one universal civic culture, but many versions that can sustain participation and promote something we would call democracy.

My basic supposition is that for people to participate politically, to become involved in public spheres, they must be able to see engagement as both possible and meaningful. In other words, people need some kind of an empowering civic identity. While every actor is a unique individual, such identities of course need a collective anchoring to be effective. Yet such identities cannot flourish in a vacuum; they need to be nourished by civic cultures. Civic cultures is a way of answering, analytically and empirically at the level of culture, the question of what facilitates or hinders people from acting as political agents, from engaging with the political. Civic cultures refer to cultural patterns in which identities of citizenship, and the foundations for civic action, are embedded. They serve as resources for citizenship.

What I am suggesting is that robust civic cultures are necessary prerequisites for viable public spheres and thus for a functioning democracy. Civic cultures have thus in part a normative status, yet they are also point to empirical phenomena about how people develop into citizens, how they come to see themselves as political actors and participants in societal development), and how such senses of self are maintained. The notions of identity and subjectivity at work here are central: they build on constructionist and materialist understandings of the self. Contingency is conceptually important, since subjectivity is seen as prismatic and varying with discursive contexts. Who we are unto ourselves is in part dependent upon the circumstances we are in – as well as what we do and say in those circumstances, as a number of theorists assert (e.g. Laclau and Mouffe, 2002). Thus, our sense of self as political actors is one (possible) dimension of our identities, shaped by specific contingencies.

To the extent that they are effective and compelling, civic cultures function below the level of conscious awareness; they are basically taken for granted. Civic cultures are historically shaped by an array of factors, including societal relations of power, but also by institutions and patterns of interaction from everyday life. Certainly media play a central role; their structures and representations, their specific logics and affordances can serve as resources.

In terms of viability, civic cultures are both strong and vulnerable. They can empower citizens, who in turn, via their practices, can influence the character of civic cultures. Yet civic cultures are also vulnerable to power, and the weaknesses or absence of civic cultures is clearly disem-
powering. Powerful actors can impede and undermine them, resulting in the erosion or absence of democracy.

Civic cultures is not a new concept, and my reformulation incorporates some traditional elements from political science/political communication along with the more recent culturalist components. American researchers in the Cold War era tried to map democracy’s cultural variables using large-scale survey techniques together with functionalist views on social integration (Almond and Verba, 1963; 1980). My point of departure is somewhat different; I wish to avoid what I take to be their psychological reductionism, and my view of culture is constructionist and materialist, rather than systems-oriented. This approach is intended to help illuminate the conditions that are necessary for political engagement, for the subjective dispositions that can nourish participation. The research concern with the cultural and subjective dimensions of civic engagement is growing; in my reading, both Sükösd and Jakubowicz (2011) as well as Seoane Pérez (2013), point in this general direction in their attempts to analyze the EU. I see the civic cultures framework as a compatible extension of their lines of inquiry.

4.2 A dynamic circuit; a difficult setting

The notion of culture can be rather nebulous; thus, for conceptual precision, I model civic cultures as integrated circuits of six dimensions of mutual reciprocity: (1) knowledge, (2) values, (3) trust, (4) spaces, (5) practices and skills, and (6) identities. The circuit metaphor underlines their interaction, but there is never anything mechanical or inevitable about how cultures operates. These analytic categories can be and have been used for empirical analysis, in particular in analyzing mediated communication relevant for the public sphere. I discuss each of the six dimensions in turn.

Knowledge: That citizens need knowledge in order to participate politically is obvious and fundamental. In the modern world, the media play a key role in this regard, though not an unproblematic one. On the one hand, we are familiar with traditional journalism's central role as well as its shortcomings in this regard. On the other, hand, the new web environment, with its oceanic abundance of information, and myriad of competing perspectives, presents new opportunities as well as problems. Knowledge must be comprehensible as well as accessible – in technical and economic terms, as well as in regard to linguistic and cultural proximity. And it must also be perceived as relevant, if it is to be used. Citizens’ perception of the knowledge they need about the EU is of course dependent upon their engagement with it, which in turn is in part shaped by the knowledge that they have – and receive – about it. Not surprisingly, in this reciprocal process, most citizens’ knowledge about the EU is quite low.
Values: Democracy will not function if such values as tolerance and willingness to follow democratic principles and procedures do not have grounding in everyday life. Even support for the legal system is an expression of such virtue. Just which are the “best” or “real” democratic values, and how they should be applied, can be the grounds for serious dispute – and should be. While civic cultures do not presuppose homogeneity among citizens, they promote minimal shared commitments to the vision and procedures of democracy. Which values citizens perceive the EU’s embodying certainly varies, but the “democratic deficit” is surely an indication of a problematic situation on this front.

Trust: Trust has long been seen as an important component for democracy. Certain degrees of general trust in society are necessary to make life bearable, but trust balanced with a built-in antenna for skepticism and criticism becomes optimally prudent. The bearers of trust are usually seen as the citizens, and the objects of trust are the institutions or representatives of government. We can surmise that citizens’ trust in the EU is not overwhelming, though it of course varies between social groups and member nations. However, another significant aspect of trust is of the horizontal kind – among and between citizens. This is crucial for civic cultures and participation. It permits cooperation among citizens who may not know each other personally. Mistrust leads to political paralysis, and can further lead to fear – and the erosion of civic cultures. A problem for EU democracy is that most citizens’ horizons are shaped by national frames, and even within member states, trust between different groups of citizens can at times be low. It is thus difficult to see much transnational trust among EU citizens.

Spaces: Spaces have to do with where citizens meet and communicate with each other. Where does democracy “take place”? We still find it in physical places, such as the street, cafés, workplaces, education centres, and even within the home. Many physical sites, however, have been rendered difficult for political discussion: the wall TV in the bar, the blurring commercialism of the mall, the loud music in the restaurant. The mass media have traditionally provided some spaces for the airing of opinion and debate. Today the online world and social media have become obvious spaces for public spheres, generating even a new form of “mobile publicness”. We need to challenge ourselves whenever we utter the term “public sphere” and ask: where can we find it? Where can we create it? In terms of the EU, establishing self-evident and functioning spaces for it remains a massive task. Online settings offer great technical potential, though the institutional framing and management of such EU spaces remains underdeveloped.

Practices: To participate politically takes the form of (mostly communicative) practices, and the skills to enact them. Voting is a classic civic practice, but there are so many more forms: discussing, debating, organizing, recruiting, lobbying, generating enthusiasm, calling and running
meetings, and so on – not least via various technologies. Civic cultures at the local and national level can provide an array of practices, and civic initiatives can create new ones; the web can also facilitate participation in global contexts, as witnessed by the many groups, networks, and movement who engage across national borders. New practices and traditions can and must evolve to ensure that democracy does not stagnate. We see today how the lack of civic practices and skills is an obstacle for citizens in many societies attempting to develop their democratic character. Skills can develop through practices, and, in this process, foster a sense of empowerment. Practices interplay forcefully with knowledge, trust, and values; practices involve defining, using, or creating suitable spaces, and, most compellingly, practices help to foster civic identities. For many citizens, the array of practices afforded by the web dramatically increases the repertoire of civic agency. In regard to the EU, however, much remains to be developed: most citizens are still at a loss as to what to actually do, even if they can locate some corner of the EU public sphere. The paucity of possibilities looms very large, a function of its remoteness to the realm of everyday practices of most citizens.

Identity: We come back to where we started, to the most basic dimension of civic cultures: to see oneself as an empowered political agent, who can also identify oneself with positions in political conflicts. We have seen some of the obstacles that impede such identity formation – and thus erode participation in the EU context. Its systemic logic vis à vis citizens is precisely remoteness and depoliticisation, as Seoane Pérez (2013) asserts; its outcome is at bottom civic disempowerment and weak civic identities, with the consequence of an anemic EU public sphere.

5. Concluding reflections

As noted, Sükösd and Jakubowicz (2011) comment that making the EU more of a bottom-up project requires a stronger emphasis on not least public opinion and identity formation. We have seen in the work of Koopmans and Statham (2010) that EU politics tilts toward low civic inclusiveness and high public visibility of elite actors. Their book concludes with the idea that EU public spheres need traditional political elites, but also actors representing a variety of civil society groups, social movements, and societal sectors. However, the argument veers towards “the realistic”, and suggests that, ultimately, the best hope does lie in going via the national political party systems. Just how realistic this is of course is contested, and in the view of Seoane Pérez (2013), this will never lead the EU beyond its remote and depoliticized character.

We have also seen that the criteria for what should count as genuine participation and what standards to accept in evaluating public spheres has also lacked consensus. Moreover, not surprisingly, it appears that
the higher our demands and expectations of the public sphere and participation are, the more “unrealistic” they seem. Thus, at present, the prevailing options are either unrealistic expectations about genuine democracy – and thereby inevitable feelings of failure, or, alternatively, a lower set of standards, coupled with a sense of “greater success”. My burlesquing the situation in this way is merely a way to underscore the extent of the difficulties involved; we seem genuinely stuck. Ideally, the EU would need to reconsider its own foundations, but of course this is an utterly unlikely scenario.

In mobilizing the framework of civic cultures, I have tried to shed more light on exactly what is involved when we refer to participation – what are the contingencies involved. I emphasized the dimension of identities, arguing that people need to see themselves as empowered political actors who sense that they can engage meaningfully in political issues. The EU tends not to promote such identities among citizens, and the reciprocal dynamics of knowledge, trust, values, and practices serve to enforce this negativity. In the meantime, we see the results of EU austerity politics, especially in the south of Europe: on the one hand yet more apathy and disengagement, on the other, desperate and raging political engagement that is taking to the streets, turning away from traditional parties, and launching new ones. Such developments signal forms of participation, but of a kind that in the long run are not healthy for the stability of the EU.

If there is any “realistic” road to be taken, it is, in my view the one that Koopmans and Statham (2010) in the final analysis marginalize (in favour of traditional party politics): they opened and then seemingly shut the door on the sprawling field of alternative, extra-parliamentarian politics. For the EU, this domain today is largely dominated by vested interest groups and lobbyists, and by elite NGOs with whom the Commission engages in consultation. This domain could, however, in principle be informally expanded by the engagement of an array of other actors representing other sectors of the citizenry, both within and across member states. This would be an important step; such an expanded domain of discourse could begin to enlarge EU public spheres, and approach the “bottom up” vision whereby citizens participate via discussion, debate, and potential actions. A development like this would certainly involve degrees of formalization, but hopefully not so much to quash a sense of “easy entry” to participation.

The key spaces for such practices would be precisely the web, and under the right contingencies, civic cultures may begin to grow deeper roots. I must firmly emphasize that I am not anticipating some “techno-fix” for the EU’s democratic deficits, and that “the right contingencies” may be long and hard in coming. However, in the realm of transnational political communication, we see something new taking shape; Volkmer (2014) describes a new kind of global public sphere. While noting that the familiar, technical macro-networks of communication – with their
active audience-users – constitute a premise for contemporary global communication, she emphasizes the multi-level character of these media and their communicative modes. She underscores that the character of globalized communication today is not defined by these media structures in themselves, but rather by the actual way that individuals and organizations communicate across diverse platforms, from all manner of mainstream media to all kinds of social media. It is the in the communication – and editing, mixing, filtering, modifying – of content that we find the new global sphere.

This new public sphere is shaped by individualized nodes, “situated within a universe of subjective, personal networked structures linking individuals across world regions” (ivi, 1). There is thus a significant emphasis on subjective dynamics here, not only in terms of communicative processes, but in the very character of “lived” public spaces. Volkmer uses the concept of “micro-networks” to capture the interdependent connections between actors across these thus “assembled” communicative spaces. We thereby begin to modify the defining framework of nation-states, and move to a regime where the local blends readily with the global and all stops in between, not least the regional, as with the EU. This new type of global public sphere is based on the identities, loyalties, and allegiances of the actors, operating across the full range of media technologies and platforms; it functions across supra- and sub-national societal contexts.

These networked nodes could potentially mesh with structures and organizations, enhancing trust and affirming democratic values. In particular, they would involve knowledge-sharing, offer new kinds of online practices, and allow new identities to flourish in circumstances where the EU is perceived not only as having great relevance, but also as a domain in which the political could be introduced in a meaningful way. What might spark such engagement is difficult to say. If set in motion, however, such scenarios could serve to push the EU towards change; it may feel compelled to begin adapting to a more participatory and responsive mode. This is of course a long shot, but one that I would argue has as much – if not more – of a realistic quality to it than anticipating that traditional national politics will be able to deepen participation and civic cultures of the EU. The scenario also assumes, of course, that this regional entity can continue to hold together – something which we perhaps should not take for granted.

Lund University
References