

In Search of Europe

A Cross-National Comparative Study of the European Union in National Television News

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This study is a cross-national comparative content analysis of the coverage of European Union politics in British, Danish, Dutch, French, and German television news. The study identifies key characteristics of the coverage and investigates influences shaping the coverage. In the majority of countries studied, EU politics was marginally represented in national television news. EU officials, too, were absent in the news. However, if the EU was covered, EU politics was more prominently presented than other political news. Three influences were found to positively contribute to the amount and prominence of EU news: it was more prominent in public broadcasting news programs, in countries with higher levels of public satisfaction with democracy, and during periods around EU summits. The visibility of EU officials in television news was highest in public news programs. The findings suggest that, with EU coverage being of limited visibility and without protagonists, the Europeanization of television news coverage is more an illusion than reality.

Keywords: *cross-national comparative research; content analysis; European Union; public broadcasting; satisfaction with EU democracy; routine news coverage*

Although European integration is one of the most significant political and economic developments in history, our knowledge about media representations of the European Union and European integration is scarce. This research gap is striking for three reasons: first, the communication science literature suggests that the media are the most important link between politics and citizens (e.g., Entman and Bennett 2001; Swanson and Mancini 1996), and this may especially apply to an issue as remote and abstract as EU politics (e.g., Blumler 1983). Second, more than two-thirds of EU citizens consistently identify the media in

general and television in particular as their most important source of political information (Eurobarometer [1999–2001]: 51–56). Third, a whole strand of research has emphasized the centrality of media to the notion of a “European public sphere” (Schlesinger 1997; Kunelius and Sparks 2001). The assumption in these studies is that visibility of EU news is a condition for public deliberation about European integration. However, this strand of research relies more on theoretical arguments than on data in substantiating claims about European issues in the media.

The few existing content analyses of the television coverage of the EU are confined to EU key events such as elections of the European Parliament (Kevin 2003; Leroy and Siune 1994; Peter et al. 2004; Siune 1983), the 1999 introduction of the euro (de Vreese et al. 2001), or crucial summits of the heads of government (Semetko and Valkenburg 2000). However, with the exception of Norris’s (2000) pioneering study, we know little about how the EU is covered in non-key-event periods.¹ This applies most notably to television news coverage of the EU.² The primary goal of this study is therefore to establish a baseline of the television news coverage of the EU in a non-key-event context. Ideally, such an investigation is an input to understanding any effects this coverage might have and may inform future research in this direction.

All existing content analyses have been limited to exclusively *descriptive* accounts of the EU coverage. To emphasize, descriptions of the coverage are important, especially in an understudied area such as the coverage of the EU. However, particularly in cross-national content analyses, merely descriptive accounts of the coverage may run the risk of increasing confusion instead of reducing complexity. Content analytic research cannot do without description, and cross-national content analytic research cannot do without establishing and describing country differences. However, research must not stop here. If content analytic research aims at the general and generalizable, then it cannot do without *explaining*, either. In cross-national comparative research, an attempt at explaining should replace country names with theoretically grounded, properly specified substantive variables (Przeworski and Teune 1970). Only such an approach exploits the explanatory potential of cross-national research. Identifying the influences that drive news coverage seems particularly pressing with respect to the analysis of the television coverage of the EU. The second goal of this study therefore is to not only *describe* the television coverage of the EU but to also *explain* what may shape the coverage from a cross-national comparative perspective.

Focus and Scope

Given the scarcity of existing research, we aim at providing an empirically anchored baseline analysis of the EU coverage during routine and summit peri-

ods. The *amount* and the *prominence* of EU coverage will be investigated in comparison with the amount and the prominence of other political coverage not dealing with the EU. Amount and prominence of EU coverage present important indicators of the size and location of Europe on the landscape of political news. In a second step, we will analyze the *visibility of EU officials* because the coverage of EU officials is generally understudied. Several studies on reporting about the EU have suggested that EU politics and EU officials are inaccessible (e.g., Meyer 1999), which may translate into limited visibility in the news.

The study draws on content analysis of news in five EU member states: Denmark, France, Germany, the Netherlands, and the United Kingdom. Generally, it is difficult to include data on country-specific news styles in an explanatory analysis of EU coverage. If, furthermore, it cannot be ruled out that country-specific news styles do affect EU coverage, then it is beneficial to select countries that are at least similar in their media system and some broad indicators of news styles (or at least less dissimilar than other EU countries). The media system of all five countries consists of strong public broadcasting and private networks (Siune and Hultén 1998), and their news styles tend to be similar, particularly in comparison with southern European countries (Heinderyckx 1993). However, the five countries differ in a series of factors that might influence the coverage as will become clear later.

Coverage of the EU can be defined as coverage that addresses EU policies and politics, EU institutions and politicians, or events at the EU level. This definition encompasses stories dealing with obvious EU issues (e.g., EU enlargement, common agricultural policy). The definition also integrates stories about issues not inherently associated with the EU (e.g., immigration, defense), if EU policies, EU institutions, or EU politicians are essential components of the story. This extension seems necessary because both domestic politics (e.g., Gerhards 2000) and also the coverage of the economy have become Europeanized (e.g., Gavin 2000). Stories that do not fit in this definition make up political non-EU coverage.

We distinguish between routine periods and summit periods. Routine periods are periods in which no prescheduled European key event such as European elections, EU referenda, or EU summits are held. However, it may encompass meetings of the Council of Ministers. Summit periods consist of the days before, during, and after the meetings of EU Heads of Governments, which typically take place four times a year.

Research Questions and Expectations

In her secondary analysis of the Euromedia data, Norris (2000) found that the little coverage of the European Union peaked in summit periods. This pattern was also found for the coverage of another EU key event, the introduction of the

euro (de Vreese et al. 2001). As a result, it can be presumed that there will be more EU coverage in summit than in routine periods. The first set of research questions, then, focuses, first, on the share of EU coverage in the political coverage (further referred to as Research Question 1a) and, second, on whether the share of EU coverage in the political coverage is higher in summit periods than in routine periods (Research Question 1b). Like all following research questions, the two research questions are addressed in a cross-national fashion. However, given the lack of previous research, we are not able to specify expectations about country-specific differences. Whether the EU coverage in summit periods is more prominent than in routine periods is an open question. The second set of research questions centers upon whether, first, EU coverage is less prominent than non-EU coverage (Research Question 2a) and, second, whether EU coverage is more prominent in summit periods than in routine periods (Research Question 2b).

The focus in this study is on EU officials such as members of EU institutions (e.g., European Commission, European Parliament, European Central Bank) or persons appointed by the EU such as Javier Solana who can be regarded to represent the EU. Given the absence of research in this field, our third set of research questions focuses, first, on whether EU officials are less visible than non-EU officials (Research Question 3a) and, second, on whether EU officials are less visible in summit than in routine periods (Research Question 3b).

Potential Influences

One of the potential influences on the amount and prominence of EU coverage has already been implicitly discussed—summit versus routine periods. Drawing on Norris's (2000) results, we formulated the expectation that there will be more EU coverage in summit periods than in routine periods. Though Norris does not elaborate, we presume that EU coverage in summit periods will also be more prominent than coverage during routine periods given the importance of EU summits. Conversely, EU officials are less likely to be covered in summit periods because domestic politicians dominate summits of the heads of government. As a result, we assume EU officials to be more visible in routine than in summit periods.

A second potential influence on amount and prominence of EU coverage derives from debates about the news styles of public broadcasting versus private outlets (see, e.g., the debate between Brants [1998] and Blumler [1997]). Private television is usually assumed to focus on soft news and infotainment instead of conveying everyday politics to the viewers (Blumler 1997; Pfetsch 1996). Therefore, we expect that there will be more and more prominent EU coverage in public broadcasting outlets than in private outlets. Given that EU officials are

inherently political actors, we also expect this to apply to the coverage of EU officials.

A third factor impinging upon the amount and prominence of European coverage may be public satisfaction with domestic democracy. A large body of research has demonstrated the domestic foundations of EU-related issues (e.g., van der Eijk and Franklin 1996). More specifically, support for the EU and even satisfaction with democracy at the EU level are affected by citizens' experiences with domestic political reality (e.g., Anderson 1998). If, then, judgments about domestic democracy build important foundations of EU-related attitudes, one can assume that satisfaction with domestic democracy is relevant to EU-related matters.

Judgments about one's satisfaction with certain things always result from comparisons with other things (e.g., Sullis and Wills 1991). The EU may serve as a comparison standard, for example, when domestic governance is evaluated. Conversely, the domestic political system may be used as comparison standard when the EU is judged. In any case, there is a comparative relationship between the domestic political system and the EU. As a result, the EU may become more politically relevant the greater the level of dissatisfaction with domestic democracy in a particular country (and vice versa). Because (political) relevance is an important news value (e.g., Galtung and Ruge 1965; Schulz 1976), higher political relevance of the EU is reflected in news coverage by more and longer stories. Thus, we expect the amount and prominence of EU coverage to increase as levels of satisfaction with domestic democracy decrease. This reasoning may also hold for the visibility of EU officials as embodiments of a potentially better political system. Thus, the greater the dissatisfaction with domestic democracy in a particular country, the more politically relevant EU officials are. The more politically relevant they are, the more visible they are. Consequently, the visibility of EU officials increases with lower levels of satisfaction with domestic democracy.

A fourth influence on how much and how prominently the European election campaign is covered may derive from whether elite opinion about the EU is polarized or consensual in a particular country. In this study, by *elites*, the political elites are meant. In particular, anti-EU parties may contribute to polarized elite opinion.³ In-depth interviews with journalists have revealed that European elections are occasionally considered to be a "nonissue" (de Vreese 2001: 168). The (alleged) nonissue character of European elections and, thus, its missing newsworthiness may be associated with the lack of one of the core news values—conflict. Because conflict plays a crucial role in news selection in general (e.g., Galtung and Ruge 1965; Schulz 1976) and in EU coverage in particular (de Vreese et al. 2001; Peter et al. 2004), conflict and disagreement may be assumed to increase the amount of European election coverage. Polarized elite opinion, then, may introduce conflict into EU politics, which journalists typically per-

ceive as inaccessible, overly bureaucratic, and abstract (Meyer 1999). As a result, we expect that there will be more EU coverage in countries with polarized elite opinion as compared to countries with consensual elite opinion.

As far as the prominence of EU coverage is concerned, earlier research has suggested that polarized elite opinion is not influential (Peter et al. 2004). In want of other evidence, we expect that this will also apply to coverage of the EU in routine and summit periods. If conflict and controversy create newsworthiness and if members of anti-EU parties are likely to articulate controversial opinions on the EU, then these—domestic—politicians have a good chance of being covered. This, in turn, reduces the chances of EU officials occurring in a news story given their inaccessibility (Meyer 1999). Thus, the existence of an anti-EU party and, thus, polarized elite opinion may impede the visibility of EU officials.

Given the special sample—two rather EU-skeptic countries (Denmark and the United Kingdom), three rather EU-supportive countries (France, Germany, the Netherlands)—it might be advisable to also include a country's EU support as a control variable into the model. Though we have outlined the domestic foundations of EU-related attitudes, we cannot preclude that a generally positive or negative attitude toward the EU shapes coverage of the EU apart from and beyond the remaining explanatory factors. In line with studies pointing out that news coverage focuses more on negative aspects than on positive ones (e.g., Kepplinger and Weissbecker 1991), we expect that less support of the EU leads to more emphasis on contentious and controversial, in other words, negative aspects of the EU and, consequently, to more coverage. Because controversy is an important news factor, this may also contribute to an increased prominence of EU coverage. If less EU support leads to a focus on controversial issues, then these controversial issues may be predominantly discussed at the domestic and not the EU level. This, in turn, reduces the chances of EU officials being covered. Conversely, higher levels of support may increase the visibility of EU officials.

Two aspects of our analyses should be noted. First, the analysis is based on the assumption that EU coverage—to some extent—responds to events and developments outside the media system. This is not to reject the notion of media coverage also constructing reality, but at the present stage of research on influences on EU coverage, it seems justified to keep explanatory attempts simple and parsimonious. Second, outlet- or journalist-related variables (e.g., resources invested in foreign/EU coverage, used news agencies, journalists' opinions about the EU) will not be investigated. Either such data are not available from (all of) the various outlets investigated in this study because the outlets consider this important strategic information or such data simply do not exist (e.g., comparable surveys among journalists about their attitudes toward the EU and its coverage).

Method

Procedure and Measures

For the period between February 2000 and December 2000, the most widely watched public broadcasting and private evening news programs for each country were content analyzed (see the appendix). For the EU summit periods in March (Lisbon), June (Feira), October (Biarritz), and December (Nice), the three days preceding the summit, the two summit days, and the two days following the summit were content analyzed, thus in total twenty-eight days.⁴ The routine periods consisted of a natural week sampled in the months without summit, resulting in forty-nine days of coverage (i.e., seven days in each of the seven months). The weeks were rotated month-wise (i.e., first complete week in April, second complete week in May, etc.).

The coding proceeded in two steps. First, all stories of a bulletin were coded with respect to formal characteristics, its political character, and EU references. In a second step, EU stories were coded with respect to more substantive categories, including the actors. A news story was generally defined as a semantic entity with at least one topic delimited from another story by a change of topic, and this constituted the unit of analysis.⁵ The news stories were coded by teams of native speakers from the five countries who had been trained several weeks before coding and were supervised throughout the whole coding period. All training and coding took place centrally at the University of Amsterdam during December 2000 and July 2001.

Because the coders were trained in country groups and were supervised by different coder trainers, the coder trainers were checked to ensure that they sufficiently agreed in *their* understanding of the coding protocol to avoid artifactual country differences as the result of variations in the training (Peter and Lauf 2002). Thus, before the coder trainers started training the coders, the coder trainers had to take an intertrainer reliability test, which showed that the trainers highly agreed in their coding. Given that the coder trainers came from different countries, the *intertrainer* reliability test was assessed on randomly selected English news stories. After the trainers had trained the coders, in each country group the *intercoder* reliabilities were assessed along with the reliabilities between *coders* and *coder trainer*.⁶

The test between coders and coder trainers determines the extent to which the training was successful. Furthermore, assuming sufficient levels of agreement, such a test links the various country groups and ensures the comparability of the reliabilities and the coding between the country groups (for an explication of this reasoning, see Peter and Lauf 2002). In line with the two-step procedure of the coding, the reliability tests were first performed on a random sample of all stories including nonpolitical, political, and EU stories. At least thirty-one stories were coded per country. For EU stories (coded in a second step), a second

reliability test was conducted in which at least twelve randomly selected stories were coded per country. The reliabilities of all measures used in this study are documented separately for each country in the appendix as both average agreement in percentages and as Scott's Pi.

Levels of Analysis

Three different levels of analysis have to be distinguished, which is important to understand the operationalization of the concepts below. The descriptive account of the number and prominence of EU stories is based upon the *story* level of analysis because the story itself presented the unit of analysis in the content analysis. Visibility of EU officials is investigated at the level of the particular *actor*. In other words, the actor and no longer the story (in which up to six actors could be coded) constitutes a single case. Overall, 1,389 actors were coded. For the explanatory analysis, the coverage of a particular *outlet* in a given month was the level of analysis. Thus, for each of the ten outlets, the coverage in February, March, April, and so on was studied. This is important to investigate whether the coverage differs between summit and routine periods when controlling for other potential influences. Technically speaking, the data were aggregated such that the coverage of each particular outlet in a particular month constituted the case for further analysis. With 10 outlets and 11 months content analyzed, this led to 110 cases.

Measures—Amount and Prominence of Coverage, Visibility of EU Officials

EU stories were operationalized as stories in which EU policies, EU events, EU institutions, or EU decision making were mentioned in at least two complete, independent sentences. The intercoder agreement was 99 percent (Scott's Pi = .90) in Germany and 100 percent (Scott's Pi = 1.0) in the remaining countries. We operationalized political stories as stories in which regional, national, EU, or international politics and/or politicians and/or political institutions/organizations were mentioned verbally at least once and depicted at least once. In stories without film material, they had to be mentioned at least twice or had to be mentioned and shown in a picture. The intercoder reliabilities for the pertinent categories were between 91 percent (Scott's Pi = .84) and 100 percent (Scott's Pi = 1.0).

The *prominence* of the stories was operationalized by drawing upon a formula originally developed and validated by Watt and van den Berg in 1981 and modified by Watt et al. in 1993.⁷ The prominence measure is based on the length of a news story and the appearance of an anchor and of visuals. The measure of length of news stories was straightforward and coded in seconds. The reliability of this category was Pearson's $r = 1.0$ (metric variable) in all countries.

EU officials were operationalized as members of EU institutions or persons appointed by the EU (e.g., Javier Solana). We collapsed all remaining actors who did not fit in this definition in the category non-EU actors. In each story, up to six different actors could be coded with the same actor coded only once. To qualify as an actor, a person, group, or institution had to be either depicted and mentioned (or quoted) at least once. For stories without film material, a person, group, or institution had to be mentioned verbally at least twice or mentioned once and shown in a picture. The main actor was chosen in terms of his or her or its importance in the story (operationalized as amount of information given about him or her or it, frequency of being mentioned, degree of visibility, and number of quotes). The remaining five actors were coded in order of appearance. The reliabilities ranged between 90 percent (Scott's $Pi = .76$) and 98 percent (Scott's $Pi = .95$).

Measures—Explanatory Analysis

The independent variables were operationalized as follows: To account for variations in countries' EU support and satisfaction with domestic democracy within the period of investigation, the relevant values were computed from three Eurobarometer surveys: Eurobarometer 52 (conducted in October and November 1999), 53 (April and May 2000), and 54.1 (November and December 2000). Thus, three different sets of values of the two variables were added to the content analysis data. For February and March, we added the data obtained from the October/November 1999 Eurobarometer. For the period April until October, we added data computed from the April/May 2000 Eurobarometer, and for November and December, we added data retrieved from the November/December 2000 Eurobarometer.

EU support was operationalized with the question, "Generally speaking, do you think that [your country's] membership of the European Union is . . . ?" with the response categories 1 (a good thing), 2 (a bad thing), and 3 (neither good nor bad). The response categories were recoded such that 1 meant (a bad thing), 2 (neither good nor bad), and 3 (a good thing). "Don't know" answers were excluded from the analyses. Satisfaction with domestic democracy was gauged with the question, "On the whole, are you very satisfied, fairly satisfied, not very satisfied or not at all satisfied with the way democracy works in [your country]?" where the anchors were 1 (*very satisfied*) and 4 (*not at all satisfied*). For the analysis, the scale was reversed. "Don't know" answers were eliminated from analysis.

The polarized or consensual nature of elite opinion was defined as the existence of a sufficiently visible anti-EU party. To identify anti-EU parties, Ray's (1999) expert survey was used. Anti-EU parties had to have an average score of 2 or lower (*opposed to European integration*) on a 7-point scale. Moreover, they had to have gained at least 5 percent of the vote in the latest general election, which was assessed with reference to the year 2000. Whether a story was broadcast in a

summit or a routine period was tapped with a dichotomous variable where summit periods were coded with one.

A statistical problem is associated with the operationalization of dependent variables in cross-national comparative analyses of television content data. In essence, percentage-based measures may account for outlet differences (such as different number of stories broadcast) but might no longer be linearly predictable and tend to gross distortions when based on low absolute figures. The latter problem is a particular concern with the coverage of ten outlets measured at eleven different points of time. The alternative use of absolute figures requires some control measure in the explanatory analysis to avoid spurious effects because, for example, a high number of EU stories may only be the result of an outlet generally covering a lot of stories in its bulletins.

With respect to the dependent variables, this means that the number of EU stories broadcast, operationalized as the sum of EU stories broadcast by a particular outlet at a certain point of time, will be controlled for the number of the remaining stories broadcast by the particular outlet at this point of time. The number of EU officials covered, operationalized as the sum of EU officials covered by a particular outlet at a certain point of time, will be controlled for the number of the remaining actors covered by the particular outlet at this point of time. The prominence measure gauged as the mean prominence of EU stories at a certain point of time is inherently relative and takes outlet differences into account. Therefore, no control variable is needed for the analysis of this measure.

Data Analysis

To investigate patterns of influence, the three dependent variables ([1] number and [2] prominence of EU stories and [3] visibility of EU officials) were regressed on the five predictors plus the pertinent control variable. Cross-national comparative content analyses in general, and the particular data structure for the explanatory analysis with its eleven measurement points have inherent problems. The problems are associated with the sample and especially with the hierarchical data structure, which may lead to an underestimation of the standard error in flat ordinary least squares (OLS) regressions and, consequently, to a higher chance of a Type I error. The sample of outlets does not present a truly random sample, but can be considered as acceptable approximation of the television coverage within the particular countries. Moreover, it does not seem advisable to completely make do without significance testing as it otherwise becomes very difficult to decide when to consider an effect robust. We consider the significance of an effect as an indicator of its robustness, noting that further inferences to a larger universe outside the five countries investigated are problematic. The explanatory analyses take into account the hierarchical data structure by using the so-called "sandwich" estimator of the standard error (e.g.,

Table 1

Share of EU stories in political coverage and average prominence of EU stories in routine and summit periods

	Routine			Summit		
	Percentage EU Stories	Percentage Non-EU Stories	Total <i>n</i>	Percentage EU Stories	Percentage Non-EU Stories	Total <i>n</i>
Denmark	19 (2.52)	81 (2.13)	574	25 (2.65)	75 (2.06)	325
France	2 (2.54)	98 (2.14)	596	11 (2.51)	89 (2.09)	465
Germany	4 (1.90)	96 (2.15)	499	10 (2.73)	90 (2.03)	309
Netherlands	5 (2.37)	95 (2.35)	394	10 (2.36)	90 (2.34)	256
United Kingdom	2 (2.36)	98 (2.27)	412	10 (2.69)	90 (2.29)	244

Note: Average prominence appears in parentheses.

White 1980). This is particularly appropriate for the present data structure with its eleven measurements for each of the ten outlets.

Results

Descriptive Analysis of Number and Prominence of EU Stories and Visibility of EU Officials

Table 1 shows that, during routine periods, the share of EU stories in political news was not higher than 5 percent, Denmark notwithstanding (Research Question 1a). During summit periods, the share of EU stories increased to 10 to 11 percent, Denmark again presenting an exception (Research Question 1b). The findings thus suggest that the EU is more visible in summit than in routine periods. Table 1 also shows that, both in routine and summit periods, EU stories were at least equally prominent as political non-EU stories; in most of the cases, EU stories were even more prominent than political non-EU stories (Research Question 2a). Only German EU stories broadcast in routine periods were clearly less prominent than non-EU stories. The prominence of EU stories broadcast in summit periods was higher than the prominence of EU stories broadcast in routine periods in Denmark, Germany, and the United Kingdom (Research Question 2b). In France and the Netherlands, the prominence of the EU stories did not vary by the period of coverage.

Table 2 shows that, as far as EU stories are concerned, EU officials were less visible than actors not working for the EU (Research Question 3a). In the major-

Table 2

Share of EU officials in all actors in EU stories during routine and summit periods

	Routine			Summit		
	Percentage Non-EU Actors	Percentage EU Officials	Total <i>n</i>	Percentage Non-EU Actors	Percentage EU Officials	Total <i>n</i>
Denmark	93	7	396	90	10	278
France	86	14	44	91	9	198
Germany	56	44	55	95	5	118
Netherlands	73	27	80	93	7	88
United Kingdom	92	8	25	95	5	107

ity of countries, not even one in ten actors who appeared in EU stories was an EU official. Only during routine periods, EU officials were more visible in the French, the Dutch, and the German coverage, but they were still outnumbered by non-EU actors (however, note the generally low number of actors at all). With the exception of the Danish coverage, EU officials were less visible in summit periods than in routine periods, which was in line with the expectations (Research Question 3b).

Explanatory Analysis of Number and Prominence of EU Stories and Visibility of EU Officials

Which of the explanatory factors influenced how many EU stories were broadcast? As Table 3 shows, there was more EU news during summit periods than during routine periods. This finding was robust even when we controlled for outlet differences by including the number of the remaining stories as an additional variable. Higher levels of satisfaction with domestic democracy were also associated with more EU coverage. The amount of EU coverage was unaffected by the public or commercial character of outlets, the nature of elite opinion, and EU support. Three of the five predictors also turned out to impact upon the prominence of EU coverage (see Table 3). Public broadcasting outlets covered EU affairs more prominently than did private outlets. Furthermore, summit periods led to a higher prominence of EU coverage than routine periods. Additionally, the prominence of EU coverage increased with rising levels of satisfaction with domestic democracy, whereas it was unaffected by a country's level of support for the EU. Polarized elite opinion had no impact.

Of the influences presumed to shape the visibility of EU officials, only the public broadcasting character of an outlet proved to be a robust predictor (Table 3). There were more EU officials on public broadcasting bulletins than on private ones. None of the other presumed influences affected the visibility of EU

Table 3

Influences on amount and prominence of EU coverage and visibility of EU officials

	Amount (<i>n</i> = 110)	Prominence (<i>n</i> = 110)	Visibility of EU Officials (<i>n</i> = 110)
Public broadcasting outlet	2.31 (1.60)	0.68 (0.20)**	0.84 (0.27)*
Polarized elite opinion	4.50 (2.76)	0.32 (0.21)	0.01 (0.32)
Summit period	5.90 (0.82)***	0.76 (0.27)*	-0.33 (0.29)
Satisfaction with domestic democracy	25.97 (8.00)**	1.98 (0.65)*	0.14 (1.04)
EU support	-7.00 (4.02)	-0.42 (0.57)	0.84 (0.69)
Number of remaining stories broadcast	-0.03 (0.05)		
Number of non-EU actors in EU stories			0.06 (0.02)*
Constant	-48.71	-3.40	-2.09
<i>R</i> -squared	.46	.29	.37

Note: Cell entries are unstandardized multiple regression coefficients with robust standard errors in parentheses.

* $p \leq .05$. ** $p < .01$. *** $p < .001$ (*t*-test, two-tailed).

officials, if one neglects the impact of the control variable, which mainly indicates the varying number of EU stories and, thus, actors.⁸

Discussion

This study of the news coverage of the EU had two primary goals. One was to establish a baseline of the television coverage of the EU in a nonevent context. The second goal was to expand on the descriptive nature of previous investigations of the news media coverage of the EU to also investigate potential influences that may shape the coverage from a cross-national comparative perspective.

Turning to the descriptive findings, with the exception of the Danish coverage, only one in ten political stories dealt with EU affairs, in routine periods even less. The Danish exceptionalism in terms of EU coverage is to some extent due to the euro referendum held in September 2000, exactly in the period of investigation. However, even in the months after the referendum, there was still more EU coverage in Denmark than in other countries, as post hoc analyses revealed. Moreover, Danish television coverage of EU affairs had also stood out in routine news coverage after the 1999 introduction of the euro (de Vreese et al. 2001). Thus, there is reason to believe that EU affairs are approached differently in Denmark, which materializes, among others, in the amount of EU coverage.

Both the descriptive and the explanatory analysis revealed that there is generally little EU coverage and that it only peaks around the summits of the EU heads of government. Both types of analyses also confirmed that EU coverage is more

prominent during summit periods than during routine periods. EU summits lead to a change of the placement, length, and presentation of EU stories. The EU, then, is somewhat like the moon: though of major influence on the ebb and flow of Europe, it is only cyclically fully visible. These findings corroborate and extend Norris's (2000) analysis and may generally serve as rule of thumb when dealing with the dynamics of EU coverage. However, a crucial qualification has to be made. EU stories were by and large more prominent than their political counterparts. The EU may be invisible, but it is not unimportant. In other words, it is an *invisible importance* that characterizes the coverage of the EU. *If* the EU is covered, it is covered prominently—however, the EU is rarely covered.

Two factors shaped both the number and the prominence of EU stories: the summit periods (as discussed above) and satisfaction with domestic democracy within a particular country. Higher levels of satisfaction with domestic democracy were associated with more visible and more prominent coverage of EU affairs. The unexpected direction of this impact may be a result of whether EU citizens have the chance of deciding about EU politics. If EU citizens have a say in EU politics and, thereby, in another form of governance (as is typically the case during European elections), dissatisfaction with domestic democracy may be the incentive for television outlets to cover this alternative more strongly, both in terms of the number and the prominence of EU stories. If EU citizens cannot participate in EU politics (as is typically the case in routine and summit periods), then dissatisfaction with domestic democracy may lead television outlets to focus on dissatisfying domestic governance.

Public broadcasting outlets did not report more frequently about the EU than did private outlets. However, the EU was more *prominently* covered in public than in private television. In other words, the visibility of EU affairs was equally low in both public television and commercial television, but public outlets attributed more importance to EU affairs than did commercial television. This finding has an important consequence for the old, but still unresolved, debate about differences or similarities between public and private television. The debate either draws on proper empirical data but is confined to the national context (e.g., exemplary for the German discussion, Pfetsch 1996) or the debate has taken on a more international flavor at the expense of comparable data (e.g., the discussion between Blumler 1997 and Brants 1998). This study demonstrates in a cross-national comparative fashion that public television differs from private television in the importance attributed to a crucial development in Europe. More specifically, the study shows that the trade-off between empirical depth and cross-national breadth can be avoided—in favor of promising results. Future research might try to further investigate why public and private outlets differ in the prominence of EU coverage, preferably also in Mediterranean countries or EU new countries.

In terms of its officials, the EU is faceless. Given the power of an institution such as the European Commission, it is amazing how absent its officials were in the television coverage of EU affairs. The coverage conveys the impression that EU politics is decided upon by anybody, but definitely not by EU officials. EU coverage resembles a play that does without its inherent protagonists. Theorists of modern drama would not hesitate to call it absurd; scholars of the EU would probably term it the stepwise degradation of EU politics in television coverage. It has been suggested that, during European elections, a second-order event is accompanied by third-rate coverage of EU representatives (Peter et al. 2004). During nonelection periods, a third-order issue has produced fourth-rate coverage of EU officials. The only problem is that EU officials are not necessarily fifth-class politicians.

There were more EU officials on public television than on private television. This effect was direct, although the number of EU stories broadcast also strongly influenced the visibility of EU officials. Keeping in mind that EU stories were more prominent on public television than on commercial television, the division of the EU in television has come full circle. In all five countries, it largely depended on public broadcasting television whether the EU was depicted as an important and accountable, personalized agent instead of as an inaccessible, technocratic abstraction. This result may be of even more political relevance because none of the other potential influences affected the visibility of EU officials.

The negligible coverage of EU officials may result from the EU's limited external communication. The EU's public information efforts are frequently criticized as rather poorly coordinated and inadequately staffed (Meyer 1999). Political accountability is often obfuscated to circumvent public scrutiny. If the media are provided with information about who advocated what, this information cannot be attributed to politicians but to diplomatic sources, usually spokesmen of the Directorate Press and Communication. However, as Meyer (1999: 633) argues, "Without the personalization of political debate and decisions, political accountability remains invisible"—a conclusion that is mirrored by our findings.

If, as is often contended, a lively and viable Europe depends on vivid media coverage, then the findings presented in this study should make scholars, politicians, and citizens alike think. If during routine and summit periods, a maximum of one in ten political news stories deals with the EU, and if EU officials rarely appear in stories about the EU, then EU citizens can hardly build a sound opinion on what happens at the EU level. Television coverage, it seems, is largely oblivious of a large-scale development in Europe. Several scholars have discussed the emergence of a European public sphere (Schlesinger 1997; Kunelius and Sparks

2001). Although such notions may be desirable and theoretically challenging, the data presented in this article suggest that there is no European public sphere. Traces of a European public sphere may exist in some international elite media, but not in mainstream television coverage. Even more cautious notions of a Europeanized national public sphere are not tenable (see also Gerhards 2000). Television, it seems, has not left the nation-state.

This study has demonstrated how a *cross-national* comparative perspective can enrich our understanding of what affects television coverage. The main strategy was to use substantive contextual variables to initially explain what has previously only been described. However, not only cross-national content analyses have been predominantly descriptive. The vast majority of studies of media reporting rarely move beyond descriptive accounts of the coverage. One possibility to tackle this problem is comparative research. Comparative studies do not have to be confined to comparisons between countries. Comparisons of, for example, states or media markets may also provide the researcher with substantive variables that may help uncover underlying patterns. If it is true that comparative research is the “engine of knowledge” (Dogan and Pelassy 1990: 8), then content researchers should no longer wait to get started.

Appendix

Table A1

Background information and figures content analysis EU coverage during routine and summit periods

	Outlets Analyzed	Missing Days	Entire Coverage			Political Coverage			EU Coverage		
			Routine (n)	Summit (n)	Routine (n)	Summit (n)	Routine (n)	Summit (n)	Routine (n)	Summit (n)	
Denmark	TV1 "TV-Avisen" (pb) TV2 "Nyhederne" (co)	2 4	602 603	334 312	306 268	180 145	64 47	51 30			
France	TF1 "Le Journal" (co) F2 "Le Journal" (pb)	10 7	912 910	690 600	248 348	198 267	3 8	28 22			
Germany	ARD "Tagesschau" (pb) RTL "RTL Aktuell" (co)	1 0	638 685	361 405	321 178	189 120	18 2	19 13			
Netherlands	NOS "Het Journaal" (pb) RTL "Nieuws" (co)	0 0	556 528	313 302	177 217	114 142	5 16	8 20			
United Kingdom	BBC "Nine o'clock news" (pb) ITV "News at 6.30" (co)	0 1	8 487	486 266	289 176	236 101	143 2	6 12			

Note: pb = public broadcasting; co = commercial.

Table A2
Country characteristics

	Polarized Elite Opinion ^a	Mean EU Support Months 2-3/4-10/11-12 2000 ^b	Mean Satisfaction with Democracy 2-3/4-10/11-12 2000 ^b
Denmark	Yes	2.38/2.30/2.3	2.90/2.98/2.93
France	Yes	2.45/2.38/2.35	2.50/2.59/2.65
Germany	No	2.54/2.30/2.38	2.59/2.52/2.65
Netherlands	No	2.74/2.70/2.68	2.86/2.90/2.75
United Kingdom	No	2.40/2.03/2.07	2.73/2.61/2.80

a. Ray (1999); for definition see main text.

b. Eurobarometer (1999–2001) 52–54.

Table A3
 Inter-coder reliabilities of the categories used (percentage-wise agreement, Scott's Pi in parentheses)

	Denmark	France	Germany	The Netherlands	United Kingdom
Entire coverage					
Coders (<i>n</i>)	2	5	5	4	4
Stories (<i>n</i>)	45	36	35	31	37
Anchor	100 (1.0)	100 (1.0)	100 (1.0)	100 (1.0)	100 (1.0)
Newsfilm	100 (1.0)	100 (1.0)	100 (1.0)	100 (1.0)	100 (1.0)
Length (Pearson's <i>r</i>)	1.0	1.0	1.0	1.0	1.0
Local/regional	100 (1.0)	97 (.92)	100 (1.0)	100 (1.0)	100 (1.0)
National	98 (.96)	97 (.94)	99 (.98)	93 (.87)	93 (.87)
EU level	98 (.94)	99 (.95)	98 (.87)	100 (1.0)	99 (.90)
International	95 (.90)	100 (1.0)	98 (.95)	91 (.84)	97 (.94)
EU politics mentioned	98 (.93)	98 (.94)	100 (1.0)	100 (1.0)	98 (.90)
About EU	100 (1.0)	100 (1.0)	99 (.90)	100 (1.0)	100 (1.0)
EU stories					
Coders (<i>n</i>)	4	3	4	2	2
Stories (<i>n</i>), selection	20, randomly selected, 8% of entire material	15, randomly selected, 21% of entire material	20, randomly selected, 16% of entire material	15, randomly selected, 20% of entire material	12, randomly selected, 23% of entire material
Actors	94 (.81)	98 (.95)	92 (.84)	96 (.88)	.90 (.76)

Note: The reliabilities for the actor category refer to the actor (re)coding as used in the article.

Notes

1. In her analysis, Norris (2000) draws on reports from a study on the European Union in the press and in television (European Commission 1995–97). However, the reports Norris re-analyzes do not outline the procedure of the study, category definitions, and intercoder reliabilities. Therefore, it is necessary to recast and possibly extend Norris's findings in the light of newly collected data.
2. Kevin's (2003) study provides important information on the coverage of the 1999 European election campaign, on the reporting of European economic issues, and on the coverage of other countries in Europe. Moreover, the study also investigates which television programs report about the EU. However, the coverage of the EU in non-key-event periods does not play a role in Kevin's analysis.
3. At the fringes of a party spectrum, there may be small parties that oppose the EU but remain largely unnoticed by the public. These parties are not meant here.
4. Actually, eleven days surrounding the summits in March, October, and December were content analyzed. For reasons of comparability with the routine periods, we chose to include only seven days in the sample. Moreover, as will become clear later, some analyses have to be based on absolute figures instead of percentages so that results from an eleven-day period are no longer comparable with results from a seven-day period.
5. If coders were in doubt whether a new news story had begun, they were instructed to start coding a new news story whenever the anchor reappeared. This, of course, did not apply to interviews or talks in which the anchor was involved but that pertained to the previous story.
6. The reliabilities between coders and coder trainers could not be assessed for the French group because none of the coder trainers was a French native speaker. Two coder trainers coded the Dutch EU stories.
7. The formula is

$$P = \frac{TL_{\text{Bulletin}} - ST_{\text{Story}}}{TL_{\text{Bulletin}}} + \frac{L_{\text{Story}}}{AL_{\text{Story/Bulletin}}} + (A * F * 0.5)$$

where P = prominence of particular news story; TL_{Bulletin} = total length of the particular bulletin coded (in seconds); ST_{Story} = starting time, that is, time from the start of the bulletin to the beginning of the particular story (in seconds); L_{Story} = length of the particular story coded (in seconds); $AL_{\text{Story/Bulletin}}$ = average length of the stories in the bulletin coded (in seconds); A = anchor present (coded 1 if yes); and F = film material/video material present (coded 1 if yes).

We added the presence of an anchor to the formula by Watt et al. (1993). This is an acknowledgement of the fact that some outlets (e.g., the German ones) present short news blocs in which no anchor introduces the story. In sum, stories are the more prominent the earlier they begin in a bulletin, the longer they are, and if they are introduced by an anchor and visualized by film material. The sum of the length of all stories represents the total length of a particular bulletin (TL_{Bulletin}) and by cumulating the length of stories within a bulletin the starting time of a particular story within a bulletin (ST_{Story}) was computed. The average story length within a bulletin is simply the mean of the stories broadcast within that bulletin.

8. The effect of the public broadcasting nature of TV outlets may be mediated by the number of EU stories. The more frequently the EU is covered, the higher, in principle, the chance of EU officials to be visible. However, additional analysis (not presented) demonstrated that the effect of public broadcasting TV remained robust and was not mediated by the number of EU stories.

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