

## **Europeanisation on the Internet? The Role of German Party Websites in the 2004 European Parliamentary Elections**

**Eva Johanna Schweitzer**, University of Mainz, Germany

### **Abstract**

It has been a key question of European communication research whether the growing transnationalisation of politics in the European Community has been paralleled by a similar Europeanisation of public political communication. In particular, scholars have scrutinized the ability of the mass media to engage the European public in a transnational political dialogue. In taking up this line of inquiry in the new field of computer-mediated communication, the paper develops a methodological design able to quantitatively assess the degree of Europeanisation on the Internet. Applied to German online campaigns in the 2004 European Parliamentary Election, this approach provides empirical evidence of Europe being a 'missing link' in German e-campaigning: Party and campaign websites lacked a genuinely Europeanised profile, were nationally focused and partisan biased in their hyperlink structure, and replicated the shortcomings of traditional mass media's EU coverage in their online news.

### **Introduction**

The process of European integration has been one of the major concerns in European communication research in the past fifty years. In particular, communication scientists have come to question whether the growing transnationalisation of politics in the European Community has been paralleled by a similar Europeanisation of public political communication. In this respect, the notion of a mass-mediated Europeanised public sphere--understood as a stream of transnational communication of the same European policy issues at the same time under the same scope of relevance in all EU member states (cf. Eder & Kantner, 2000, p. 328)--has often been cited as a vital prerequisite of democratic functioning in the European Union and as a foundation-stone for a common European identity (e.g. Schlesinger, 1999; Schlesinger & Kevin, 2000; Smith & Wallace, 1995; Ward, 2002). However, empirical analyses of EU coverage in the traditional mass media have widely demonstrated that the European Union does not yet share such a continuous stream of European-minded communication neither on the transnational nor on the state level. Indeed, media coverage of the European Community and of EU politics in general has in all member states continued to be rather small (Kevin, 2003; Leroy & Siune, 1994), nationally focused (e.g. Law et al., 2000; McQuail & Bergsma, 1983), and event-centered (e.g. Semetko & Valkenburg, 2000) both in routine and summit periods (e.g. Norris, 2000). Furthermore, supranational authorities prove to be almost invisible in news reporting (e.g. Lauf & Peter, 2004; Peter & de Vreese, 2004) or are presented in a

rather negative way (e.g. Peter, 2003) which amplifies the climate of mistrust and scepticism prevailing among the European population. As a consequence, communication scientists conclude that national and pan-European mass media have thus far failed to establish a genuine public dialogue about Europe as a crucial basis for future transnational cooperation.

With the diffusion of the Internet as a channel for mass-mediated political communication, however, the question of Europeanisation enters a new field in our discipline which is now challenged to reconsider these findings of past research in the light of a changing media environment. In contrast to conventional forms of mass communication the Internet allows political institutions and organisations to disseminate relevant information about Europe and the European Union in a rapid, cheap, comprehensive, and individualised way unfiltered by media interventions (e.g. Bentivegna, 2002; Tedesco, 2004). In addition, e-mails, weblogs, or chats provide opportunities for direct interaction between citizens and (EU) politicians and thus offer further possibilities to foster political discourses, e.g. with a genuine European perspective (cf. Dahlgren, 2001; Papacharissi, 2002; White, 1997). Hence, especially in European Parliamentary Elections, when voter information and mobilisation with regard to the European Union become primary objectives for parties and politicians, these facilities represent new chances for a Europeanised public dialogue to emerge. Yet, whether the Internet's potentials are indeed utilised in such a way as to contribute to a growing Europeanisation of public political communication is a question still open to empirical analysis.

The present paper takes up this line of inquiry in the new field of computer-mediated communication in order to develop a methodological design able to quantitatively assess the degree of Europeanisation on the Internet. In this way, the paper offers a threefold empirical approach to studying the World Wide Web which operationalises the concept of Europeanisation for all dimensions of online communication, i.e. for the formal website structure, its hyperlink practice, and the specific website content. To test the proposed methodology, the approach is applied to German online campaigns in the 2004 European Parliamentary Election. At that, the study seeks to answer the question whether German parties indeed offer a European-minded perspective on their websites as they compete for representation in the European Parliament.

### **Studying Europeanisation on the Internet**

What makes a national online campaign European-minded? Which aspects or elements of computer-mediated political communication account for a genuine European perspective? And how can these

elements be integrated into an overall empirical approach? These questions should be addressed first when developing an appropriate research design for the present analysis. Several studies dealing with EU coverage in the traditional mass media have already been concerned with a similar task in the past (cf. Blumler & Thoveron, 1983; Kevin, 2003; Law et al., 2000; Leroy & Siune, 1994; Peter, 2003; Peter & de Vreese, 2004; Semetko et al., 2000; Semetko & Valkenburg, 2000; van de Steeg, 2000). Their approaches to measuring Europeanisation might serve in the present study as a starting-point to develop an empirical framework, adapted to the peculiarities of computer-mediated political communication, which is still able to relate empirical findings to results of past research.

While some case studies have up to now concentrated 'on analysing media reporting on particular European issues such as the corruption scandal of the European Commission, BSE, the debate about the future of the EU, or about EU enlargement' (Risse, 2003, p. 2) the majority of empirical analyses has focused on Europe in the media in general across a certain period of time in comparison to other issues of national news reporting. In this way, Europeanisation has been operationalised by the amount of time and space devoted to European policy issues and EU member states (*issue salience*) on the one hand and by the number of references and citations of EU institutions and representatives in news outlets (*actor salience*) on the other hand. The comparison of EU-related and national reporting dealing with other (political) issues, institutions, and actors allows for conclusions about the relative importance attributed to Europe and the European Union by journalists (cf. Risse, 2003, p. 2; see also de Vreese et al., 2001, p. 110) and enables insights into the dominant evaluation of the EU and its representatives when the underlying tone accompanying media portrayals, i.e. journalistic criticism or support, is included (*evaluation salience*). As the present study asks exactly for this relative importance and evaluation of Europe and the European Union in German online campaigns in contrast to other issues of the national campaign agenda, this design seems to be most suitable to be applied also to the study of political websites. Hence, with regard to parties' positive self-promotion and overall political discussion on the Internet the following research questions arise:

*RQ1--issue salience:* Do German parties deal in their online campaigns with European policy issues such as the European Parliamentary Election, EU enlargement, or the European Constitution or do they merely focus on national policies on their websites? If European issues are addressed, which aspects are discussed primarily and are there differences in the course of the campaign or between parties analysed?

*RQ2--actor salience:* Do German online campaigns refer to EU representatives like European parties, EU candidates, EU politicians, institutions, or other EU member states, and if they do, do these references outnumber, equal, or lag behind national political actors or institutions named and cited on German party websites?

*RQ3--evaluation salience:* What do German parties acknowledge or criticise when dealing with EU policies or EU institutions? Are EU authorities rated more positive/ negative and what image does the European Union in general have in German online campaigns?

To answer these questions German party and campaign websites have to be examined by content analysis. Yet, as the Internet's most crucial and distinguishing qualities go beyond the mere text-based dimension, the study would fall short of important characteristics of computer-mediated (political) communication when it leaves out aspects of hypertextuality, interactivity, and voluminous data storage. Therefore, the analysis should also include a comparison of party homepages and campaign websites with regard to their hyperlink structure so as to examine whether German parties make use of this basic Internet facility to Europeanise their 'web spheres' (Foot et al., 2003), e.g. by offering direct connections to EU institutions. Accordingly, the appropriate research question reads as follows:

*RQ4:* Do German party websites provide hyperlinks to homepages of the European Union, its institutions, and political parties, and if so, to what degree in comparison to other web directories, or do they mainly focus on national partisan organisations in their linking structure? Do parties differ in this respect from each other or are there common patterns in parties' linking practices?

Finally, computer-mediated political communication is characterised by its abilities to provide extensive background information about the European Union, its policies, and of course about the EU candidates at stake via additional news items and interactive services, e.g. by news letters, official documents, chats, newsgroups, etc. Hence, the notion of a Europeanisation of national online campaigns should not only include a content-specific and hypertext-related dimension of analysis but should also take into account the formal website appearance and its structural elements as indicators of a European-minded online campaign. Therefore, the final research question guiding the present analysis might be posed as follows:

*RQ5:* To what extent and in which form do German party and campaign websites offer additional online services and options to enhance Internet users' understanding of European policies and to mobilise their political participation and support? Are these features primarily document-based forms of one-way top-down communication or do they realise modes of reciprocal bottom-up interaction between voters and politicians?

Answering this latter research question seems even more important as up to this point of time no single study has provided an encompassing survey of formal website characteristics in German online campaigns including also minor parties not represented in parliament.

## Method

Homepages and campaign websites of all 23 German parties participating in the European Parliamentary Election have been analysed in the last four weeks before Election Day on 13 June 2004. In order to prove whether German online campaigns indeed offer a European-minded perspective in their political communication, the study comprised three different levels of analysis which are in line with the research questions developed above: On the one hand, party and campaign websites were analysed with regard to the absence or presence of EU-related structural elements and options so as to gain insight into the quality and amount of information and mobilisation features provided on party and campaign websites to enrich national political discourses. In accordance with Gibson's and Ward's (2000) proposed methodology for studying political websites these elements were classified in groups of features serving either information, service, interactive, mobilisation, or navigation and design functions (see Tables 1-5). While *information* functions comprised website elements in terms of presentation and distribution of background knowledge about parties, politicians, or the European Union (e.g. official documents, information on party history and structures, etc.), *service* functions contained website features used by parties to enhance and demonstrate user friendliness (e.g. by news letters, e-mail contact, or download and archive options, etc.). In contrast, *interactive* functions were defined by elements employed to secure and increase user responsiveness (e.g. chats, newsgroups, weblogs, etc.) while *mobilisation* options such as e-volunteering, online membership, or online fundraising primarily served purposes of user activation for party support. Finally, *navigation and design* functions marked those online features available to facilitate website handling and to increase website appeal (e.g. search engines, site maps, photos, graphics, etc.). For all homepage elements separated in these five functional groups the rate of diffusion among party and campaign websites was calculated based on the number of parties providing these features divided by the total number of parties included in the sample.

In addition, websites were examined with regard to their hyperlink structure to prove whether German parties offer direct connections to the European Union or to other European political actors and thus provide a Europeanised web sphere. Using the free software programme Xenu's Link Sleuth™, which has already been employed in other communication studies (cf. Zimmermann et al., 2004), every external link leading from party homepages to other websites has been registered and classified with regard to the type of webpages addressed, e.g. partisan organisations, personal homepages, non-profit organisations, or other political institutions. The number of links leading to one type of website in contrast to other classes of homepages therefore indicates the importance attributed to certain political or social actors from

German parties' point of view.<sup>1</sup>

Finally, the study comprised a content analysis of current party news presented on the homepages and campaign websites to examine Europe's importance in German parties' argumentative positioning and overall election communication. The news articles were printed out in total once a day during the heated phase of the election campaign, archived, and finally analysed with regard to their main issues, their statements on political affairs, competitors, and institutions, and their formal characteristics such as length, style (e.g. report, commentary, interview, etc.), author, placement, time lasting on website, and graphic supplements (e.g. pictures, illustrations, charts, etc.).<sup>2</sup> The comparison of EU-related and non-European aspects allows for conclusions about the political significance attributed to a transnational perspective on Europe in German online campaigns.

As Germany's major parties represented in parliament, i.e. the Social Democrats (SPD), the Conservatives (CDU, CSU), the Green Party (Alliance 90/The Greens), the Liberal Party (FDP), and the Party of Democratic Socialism (PDS), account for more than 90% of all German votes in the 2004 European Parliamentary Election and also published most of all online news articles analysed in the heated phase of the election campaign, comparison will concentrate on these parties primarily in the presentation and discussion of content-related results. In addition, results concerning parties' formal website structure will be addressed first in the following section before turning to the hyperlink and content analysis.

## Results

### *Formal Website Elements*

Did German online campaigns provide Internet users with additional information and mobilisation features about Europe to enhance their understanding and support for a European level of political cooperation? When having a closer look on the formal structure of German party and campaign websites in the European Parliamentary Election the answer appears to be no: Apart from information devices and documents about parties' national policies, their associations, and leadership, EU-related material such as information about the European election system, EU politicians, or European political institutions and their functions proved to be almost an exception both among major and minor parties (see Table 1).

---

<sup>1</sup> The hyperlink analysis has been conducted after Election Day. The number of links going to EU websites might therefore be slightly underestimated for the heated phase of the national election campaign.

<sup>2</sup> In order to determine the intracoder reliability 5% of the material have been recoded. Using Holsti's formula the intracoder reliability was assessed at .83.

Indeed, parties emphasised for the main part their own election programmes (100%) and candidates (82.6%) but lacked a comprehensive political contextualisation of the European Parliamentary Election itself. In that way, references to other European parties competing in the European Parliamentary Election were found only among four out of 23 parties. Background information on the European election system and on EU politicians were presented only on 17.4% and 8.7% of all websites respectively, and no party provided explications of the work and hierarchy of the European political institutions such as the European Parliament or the European Commission.

**Table 1: Diffusion of information features on German party and campaign websites**

Website function	Website element	Rate of diffusion (in %)
Information	Party documents	100.0
	Election programme	100.0
	Information about party leadership	91.3
	Information about regional party groups	91.3
	Information about EU candidates	82.6
	Current party news	78.3
	Background information on current issues	69.6
	Information on party history	65.2
	Information about party working groups	37.1
	Information about party structure	34.8
	Information about junior party organisations	26.1
	Information about the European election system	17.4
	Information about other European parties	17.4
	Information about party members	8.7
	Information about EU politicians	8.7
	Information about partisan foundations	8.7
	Information about European political institutions	0.0

This is also true with regard to service and interactive functions provided on German party websites: While e-mail contact (100% diffusion), event announcements (78.3% diffusion), and press releases (69.6% diffusion) proved to be standard elements of political websites both on major and minor party homepages (see Table 2) only 47.8% of all websites offered supplementary news letters for further information.

Especially minor parties not represented in parliament nearly abstained from providing additional elements

and services to facilitate information dissemination about Europe on their websites such as text and English versions of online content, e-mail and download options of news articles, or document archives.

**Table 2: Diffusion of service features on German party and campaign websites**

Website function	Website element	Rate of diffusion (in %)
Service	E-mail contact	100.0
	Download of paraphernalia	86.6
	Event announcement/calendar	78.3
	Party and politicians in the media	69.6
	Watch party posters	69.6
	Press releases	69.6
	Watch party spots	65.2
	Article archive	56.5
	News letter	47.8
	Print articles	34.8
	E-shop	34.8
	Photo archive	30.4
	Additional software	30.4
	E-mail articles	26.1
	English version of website	26.1
	Text version of website	17.4
	SMS service	8.7
	Offers of posts	8.7
Download articles	4.3	
Press accrediting	4.3	

In this way, also interactive elements usually employed to increase website appeal to Internet users and to intensify EU-related political discourses between citizens and politicians, e.g. via chats, weblogs, or online opinion polls, were rather sparse on German party and campaign websites (see Table 3) with newsgroups being the most frequent interactive element established by 10 out of 23 parties analysed.



**Table 3: Diffusion of interactive features on German party and campaign websites**

Website function	Website element	Rate of diffusion (in %)
Interactivity	Newsgroups	43.5
	Intranet	30.4
	Feedback on articles	13.0
	E-cards	13.0
	Guest book	13.0
	Chat	8.7
	Computer games/lotteries	8.7
	Quizzes	8.7
	Weblog	4.3
	Online opinion polls	4.3
Online petitions/protest mails	4.3	

**Table 4: Diffusion of navigation and design features on German party and campaign websites**

Website function	Website element	Rate of diffusion (in %)
Navigation & Design	Graphics	100.0
	Toolbar	95.7
	Photos	91.3
	Homepage icon on lower website levels	91.3
	Upward button	56.5
	Animated icons/banner	52.2
	Search engine	52.2
	Back button	34.8
	Site map/index	30.4
	Audio/Video streams	21.7

In contrast, parties relied mainly on downloadable paraphernalia (86.6%) and political spots (65.2%) as well as on photos (91.3%) or graphics (100%) to increase their website appeal to Internet users (see Tables 2 and 4). Yet, these elements did hardly offer incentives and opportunities to voters to become genuinely informed about the European Union and to engage in the European Parliamentary Election.

In addition, mobilisation features aiming at voter activation for party support in the election campaign

such as online fundraising (30.4%) or e-volunteering (26.1%) were not employed extensively on major and minor party websites (see Table 5) although these have been essential elements of online campaigning in Germany's 2002 National Election (author's publication).

**Table 5: Diffusion of mobilisation features on German party and campaign websites**

<b>Website function</b>	<b>Website element</b>	<b>Rate of diffusion (in %)</b>
Mobilisation	Online membership	87.0
	Online fundraising	30.4
	E-volunteering, friendraising	26.1

This might prove that the European Parliamentary Election--in spite of its political significance for an enlarged and increasingly interdependent European Community--is of secondary concern to German parties: Their online campaigns do not show a profound European-minded profile with regard to their formal appearance and structural organisation. Therefore, research question 5 dealing with the degree of Europeanisation on the formal website level has to be answered negatively.

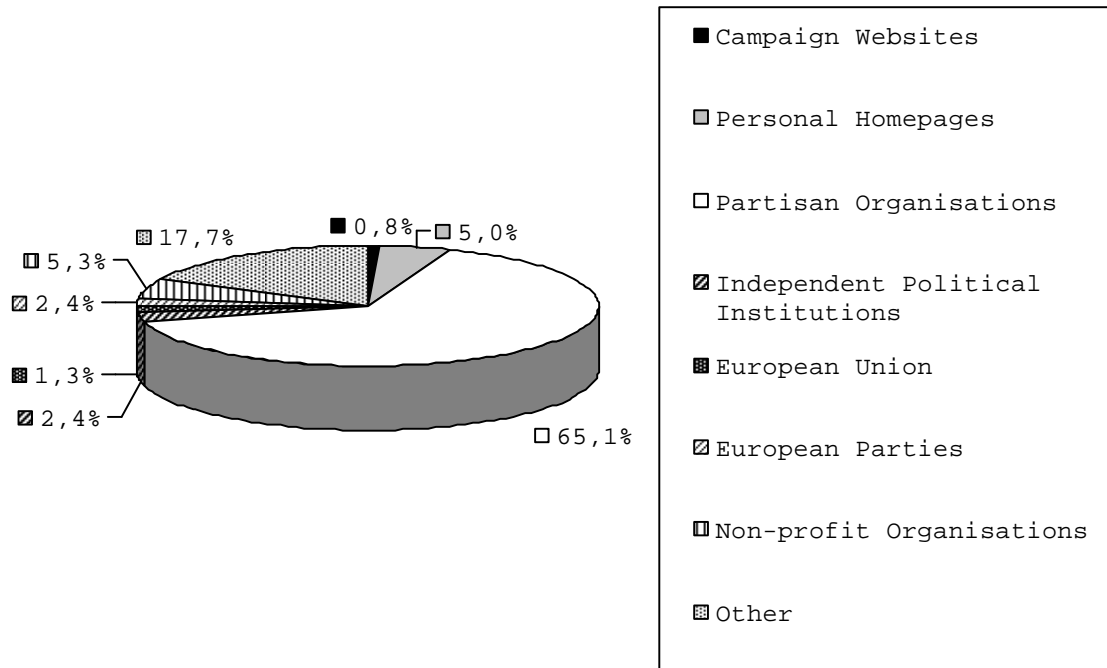
As the empirical operationalisation of Europeanisation in German e-campaigns is not only based on aspects of formal website construction but includes also parties' link-based web spheres and their argumentative positioning in online news articles, these dimensions of analysis have to be considered first, though, to draw an overall conclusion about the degree of European-mindedness in German online campaigns.

#### *Hyperlink Structure*

Providing a link to the European Union, to single European institutions, or to other European parties is one of the most basic ways to extend the political focus of online campaigns to a transnational perspective. A genuinely Europeanised national online campaign might therefore use this option (a) to compensate for missing EU-related material on the own website, (b) to symbolically demonstrate European interconnectedness, and (c) to direct interested Internet users to other relevant web sources for further, comprehensive, continuously updated, and unfiltered background information about the European Union. But did national online campaigns really make use of this facility in practice? This was the basic research question guiding the analysis of German parties' hyperlink structures in the European Parliamentary Election. Indeed, their web spheres nearly reflect the invisibility of the European Union already encountered structurally on German party and campaign websites: More than half of all German parties

participating in the European Parliamentary Election (13 out of 23) provided no single link either to websites of the European Union itself, its institutions, or its task forces. Only 12 out of 23 parties offered links to other European parties, and websites including connections to the European political level employed them only to a marginal degree (see Figure 1).

In contrast, most of all 4,955 links analysed on German party websites (65.1%) directed Internet users primarily to national partisan organisations on lower levels of the political system while connections provided to other independent political institutions, such as the United Nations, NATO, or certain national ministries (2.4%), were rather small in number. With one exception, especially minor parties not represented in parliament made hardly use of the Internet’s hyperlinking facilities and thus accounted altogether only for 18.2% of all links analysed.



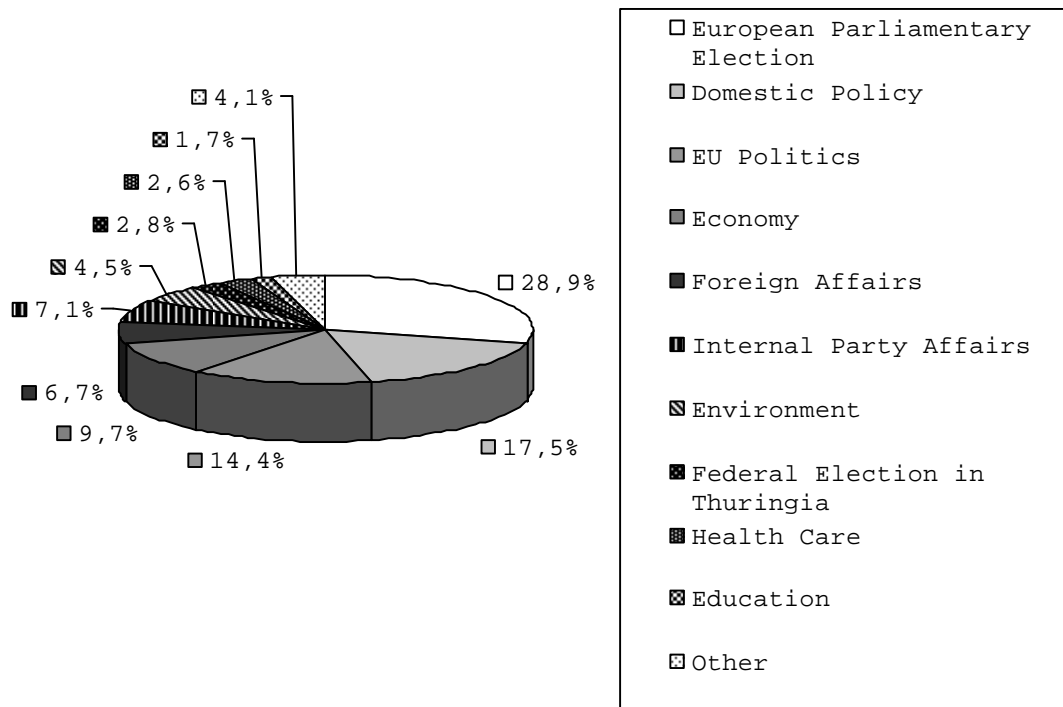
**Figure 1:** Websites linked to from German party homepages

Besides the formal aspects of website construction also German parties’ web spheres appear therefore to be nationally focused and partisan biased, leaving the Internet’s potentials for additional EU-related information via hyperlink networks nearly untouched. More than anything else, the European Union thus proves to be a missing link on German party websites. As a consequence, also research question 4

referring to the degree of European-mindedness in parties' web spheres has to be answered negatively. However, dealing with the European Union and the European Parliamentary Election extensively in current party news and thus providing insight into European policy issues on the content level might compensate for these structural and hypertextual omissions. An analysis of parties' online news with regard to their thematic and argumentative emphasis might therefore complete the picture of Europe in national online campaigns.

### *Content Analysis*

In the last four weeks before Election Day on 13 June 2004 altogether 464 online news articles were found and analysed on party and campaign websites of SPD, CDU, CSU, Alliance 90/The Greens, FDP, and PDS. These were primarily published on the homepages themselves (67.5%) instead on the campaign websites established for the European Parliamentary Election and stayed online for about six days which speaks of a low campaign intensity in contrast to the former National Election (author's publication). With an average length of 318 words the news articles were thrice as long as a typical press release and seldom accompanied by photos (51.5% of all news articles), graphics (9.9% of all news articles), or additional hyperlinks (42.7% of all news articles). Across all parties and over the whole period of time they were kept mainly in a matter-of-fact news style (81%) and were mostly edited by parties' professional Internet editorial boards (82.3%) to evoke an impression of neutrality and objectivity among Internet users. Only the Party of Democratic Socialism (PDS) appeared to be an exception from this rule as articles published on its website were for the main part written by politicians themselves (50%) and presented in an opinionated commentary style (47.2%) so as to symbolise responsiveness and closeness to citizens. With regard to the first research question, dealing with Europe's issue salience in German online news, it becomes clear that the European Union definitely entered parties' computer-mediated political communication. Over the whole period of time--with exception of the second week of inquiry--and across all parties--with exception of the Conservatives (CDU, CSU)--the European Parliamentary Election has been the most frequent topic in online news articles (28.9%) followed by Domestic Policy (17.5%) and EU politics in general (14.4%) (see Figure 2). At that, dealing with EU policy issues included for the main part discussions of holding a national plebiscite for a European Constitution (41.8% of all EU policy matters; 6% of all issues analysed), considering Turkey's possible EU membership and the enlargement of the European Union in general (17.9% of all EU policy matters; 2.6% of all issues analysed), and deliberating about a common EU security policy (14.4% of all EU policy matters; 0.2% of all issues analysed).

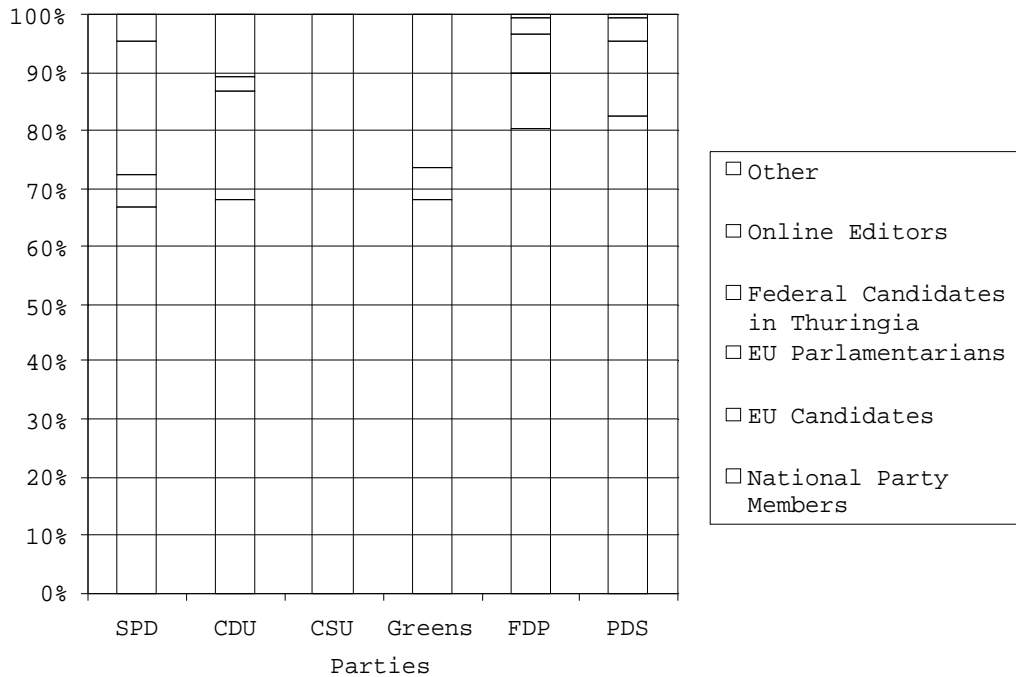


**Figure 2:** Issues of online news articles on German party and campaign websites

Yet, as total percentages show, these political topics coined the online campaigns only to a marginal degree: Even when dealing with the European Parliamentary Election itself, articles concentrated primarily on aspects of national campaigning, i.e. parties' canvassing tours (25.4% of all election-related topics; 7.3% of all issues analysed), opinion polls (10.4% of all election-related topics; 3% of all issues analysed), or online activities (9.7% of all election-related topics; 2.8% of all issues analysed) while political considerations of the European Union and its institutions were almost left out in this context. In this way, more than half of all news articles (51.7%) did not even refer to European policy issues as a side-aspect. On a five-point scale ranging from no reference at all (1) to EU reference dominant (5) the mean was 2,3 with the Conservatives (mean 2,9) having significantly the strongest EU orientation in their online news (Kruskal-Wallis-Test:  $\chi^2_{(5)} = 24,2$ ,  $p < .001$ ). Thus, across all parties and over the whole period of time Europe appeared to be only a side-issue in German online campaigns.

This is especially true with regard to statements analysed in online news articles: Altogether 755 statements appeared on German party and campaign websites in the heated phase of the election

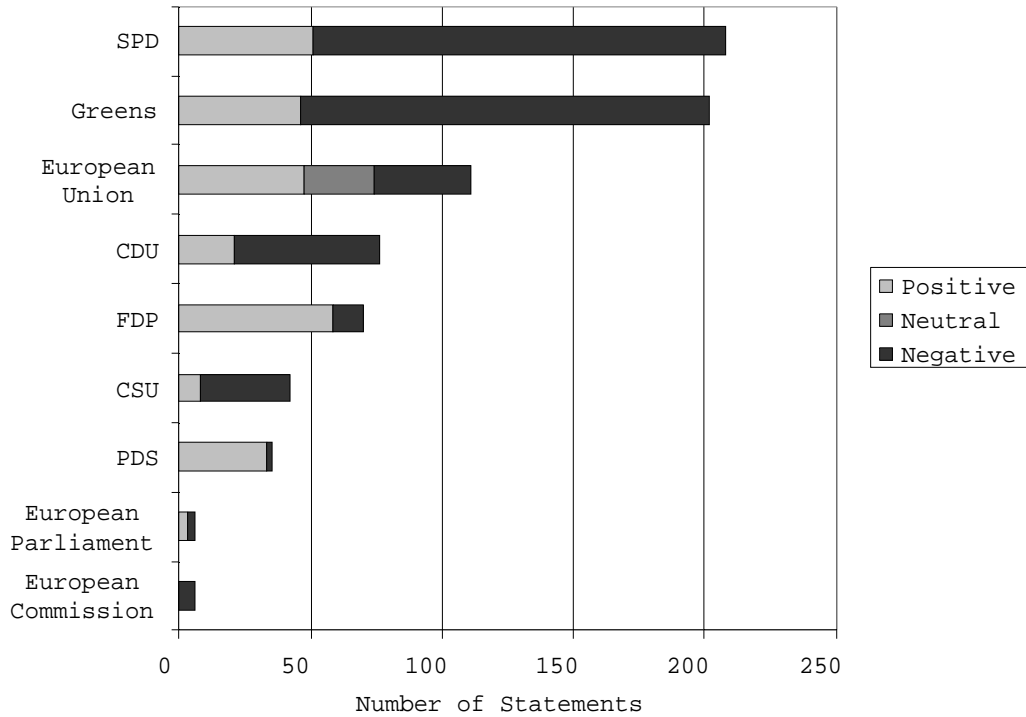
campaign with most of them (33.1%) being published in the last week before Election Day when campaigning enters the final stage. The majority of all statements can be traced back to partisan politicians as main source (76.6% of all persons cited) while EU candidates or EU representatives (see Figure 3) were almost left out as originators.



**Figure 3:** Originators of statements in parties' online news articles

Over the whole period of time and across all parties, however, the political online discussion in the European Parliamentary Election was mainly preoccupied with national political opponents and national political affairs (see Figure 4): In this way, statements on German party and campaign websites concentrated primarily on the Social Democrats (SPD) (27.5% of all statements) and Alliance 90/The Greens (Greens) (26.6% of all statements) as governing coalition. Throughout the campaign these were both blamed on the one hand for being inactive and having no adequate concepts in the face of Germany's crucial economic and socio-political problems (28.4% of all SPD-related statements; 29.3% of all Greens-related statements) and on the other hand for ruining Germany's economy (18.3% of all SPD-related statements; 17.4% of all Greens-related statements). In turn, government parties most of all

criticised the Conservative opposition with blocking up political decisions in parliament (27.6% of all CDU-related statements; 35.7% of all CSU-related statements) and for being opportunistic and untrustworthy (15.8% of all CDU-related statement; 21.4% of all CSU-related statements). Yet, EU-related statements in parties' positive self-promotion for the European Parliamentary Election such as fighting for a strong and peaceful Europe or serving Germany's interests in the European Union were hard to find (12.7% of all statements). Only the minor Green and Liberal Party and the Party of Democratic Socialism referred in their online self-presentation primarily to their competences in European politics (53.7%, 62.1%, and 48.5% of all self-referential statements on parties' websites respectively) while the major Social Democrats and the Conservatives although competing for seats in the European Parliament as a *transnational* political institution mostly emphasised their *national* engagement for social justice and security (48% of all self-referential statements on the SPD website) or their efforts for economic growth in Germany (33.3% of all self-referential statements on the CDU website; 37.5% of all self-referential statements on the CSU website). In sum, parties' online news appeared therefore to be highly self-referential and nationally focused both on the overall issue and the statement level and thus did not provide a genuinely European perspective adequate to the transnational level of political competition. Hence, instead of supplementing national public discourses with additional arguments and information about Europe, German e-campaigns seem most of all to underline the notion of the European Parliamentary Election to be a 'second-order national election' (Reif, 1984; Reif & Schmitt, 1980). Research question 1 dealing with Europe's thematic importance in parties' online news has therefore to be answered negatively.



**Figure 4:** Objects, amount, and valence of statements in parties' online news articles

The same is true with regard to research question 2 concerning the salience of European political actors in German online news: Although the European Union in general (32.4%) and the European Parliament (22.5%) proved to be the political institutions most often cited in parties' online messages, other political actors of the European level were hardly taken into account: Indeed, 89.9% of all news articles did not refer to other European or EU member states. Less than one fourth of all online news (23.5%) considered parties' main candidates in the European Parliamentary Election and only every twentieth article (5.1%) cited representatives of the European Parliament. In that way, also European parties, e.g. the European Liberal Democrats in the European Parliament (ELDR), the Group of the European People's Party and the European Democrats in the European Parliament (EPP-ED), or the Eurogreens, were referred to only in 12.3% of all articles with foreign politicians from other European countries being considered only in every tenth article (10.1%). Therefore, even when dealing with European issues, German online campaigns maintained a self-referential and nationally biased point of view and hardly extended their perspective to a transnational or Europeanised level. In contrast, parties' online news seemed to reflect and replicate in



their European issue and actor salience the shortcomings of traditional mass media's EU coverage cited above which political and communication scientists had hoped for to be compensated by the Internet.

Does this also hold true with regard to parties' overall evaluation of the European Union and its institutions? This has been the third research question underlying the content-related analysis of German online campaigns:

Indeed, only 16.3% of all statements analysed on party websites dealt with the European Union in general or its institutions. Yet, published mainly in the first week of inquiry (21.4% of all EU-related statements) EU evaluations were--with exception of the third week--all over positive (42.3% of all EU-related statements). At first sight, research question 3 concerning Europe's image in German online campaigns (evaluation salience) can therefore be answered in a favourable way: Parties especially believed the EU enlargement to be a benefit for Europe (10.6% of all EU-related statements) and an economic opportunity for Germany (8.1% of all EU-related statements). Here, the latter argument once again underlines parties' first of all nationally orientated point of view when dealing with Europe or the European Community. However, positive evaluations of the European Union were not shared by all parties: While positive appraisals dominated on websites of SPD, CDU, CSU, and Alliance 90/The Greens, a more critical tone prevailed in online news articles of the Liberal Democrats (FDP) and the Party of Democratic Socialism (PDS): These blamed the European Union for suffering from bureaucracy and distance to citizens (34.8% of all EU-related statements on Liberal websites) and for contributing to a growing militarisation of EU member states in terms of a common European military unit (16% of all EU-related statements on Democratic Socialist websites). In addition, Liberal Democrats and Democratic Socialists also accounted for most criticism on single European institutions such as the European Parliament or the European Commission which were otherwise almost invisible in German online campaigns. Indeed, only 0.8% of all statements either referred to the European Parliament or to the European Commission while other European institutions, e.g. the European Council of Ministers or the European Court of Justice, were of no concern in German e-campaigns. At that, criticism on the European Parliament and the European Commission included mainly reproaches on the Commission to disregard parliament (4.9% of all EU-related statements across all parties) and on EU politicians of being corrupt and disinterested in citizens demands (2.4% of all EU-related statements across all parties). Yet, concrete proposals for change or reforms of these grievances were not offered. Thus, while positive evaluations of the European Union in general prevailed, parties' criticism on single European institutions seemed to parallel traditional mass media's negative tone of reporting--even if to a lesser degree.

## Discussion

Did German online campaigns in the 2004 European Parliamentary Election offer a European-minded perspective in their political communication to enrich the national public dialogue about Europe? This was the basic research question underlying the present empirical analysis of German party and campaign websites. In order to answer this question, the paper proposed a quantitative methodological approach which assessed the degree of Europeanisation in German online campaigns in consideration of parties' formal website structure, their hyperlink practices, and their content-related characteristics.

The respective results showed that although the Internet has technological potentials to supplement national public discourses with vital background information and arguments about European policy issues, political actors do not (yet) make use of these possibilities so as to transnationalise their political communication in accordance with the transnational level of political cooperation. Instead, German party and campaign websites replicate the shortcomings of national EU reporting in the traditional mass media as they did hardly offer additional EU-related material and services, were nationally focused and partisan biased with regard to their link-based web spheres, and seldom referred in their online news to European institutions, European representatives, EU member states, or European policy issues. In contrast, arguments and discussions proved to be highly self-referential and mainly concentrated on domestic affairs and national political competences. Also, slightly negative evaluations of single European institutions, such as the European Parliament or the European Commission prevailed, thus corresponding to the overall tone of traditional mass media reporting. With regard to the basic research question raised in this study it therefore appears that national online campaigns in the 2004 European Parliamentary Election did not enrich the public dialogue about Europe with a substantial European perspective. Rather, the missing link to the European level of politics, which had been diagnosed in the hypertextual dimension of German online campaigns, becomes an overall metaphor for the near absence of Europe and the European Union on German party and campaign websites: Still, political actors seem to lack the incentives to widen their scope of campaigning to the transnational aspects of politics—even in a European Parliamentary Election. In that way, the new field of computer-mediated political communication offers no exception from the rule. Rather, the findings of past European communication research, which had identified the European Union as underrepresented in the traditional mass media, are confirmed for the new medium of the Internet.

At present, though, the range of this confirmation is restricted to party and campaign websites in a German election context. Whether the results apply also to other forms of online communication and to other circumstances of election campaigning is a question open to further empirical analysis. Future

research will therefore have to test the proposed methodology for studying the question of Europeanisation on the Internet with reference to other types of websites (e.g. of non-partisan organisations, politicians, or the traditional mass media), other national settings (e.g. other EU member states or candidate countries), and with regard to other time periods (e.g. non-election or summit phases) in order to validate the given findings and to fully understand the potentials and limitations of computer-mediated communication in fostering a European public sphere.

In following this line of inquiry, it will become clear that the so-called 'old questions and answers' of past European communication science are indeed the real foundations-stones of future research: They inspire expansions and refinements of existing concerns, motivate the development of new methodologies, and provide continuity in the scientific study of a changing media environment.

## References

- Bentivegna, S. (2002), "Politics and the new media", in Lievrouw, L., Livingstone, S. (Eds.), *Handbook of new media: Social shaping and consequences of ICTs*, London, Sage Publications
- Blumler, J. G., Thoveron, G. (1983), "Analysing a unique election: Themes and concepts", in Blumler, J. G. (Ed.), *Communicating to voters: Television in the first European Parliamentary Elections*, London, Sage
- Dahlgren, P. (2001), "The public sphere and the net: Structure, space, and communication", in Bennett, W. L., Entman, R. M. (Eds.), *Mediated politics: Communication in the future of democracy*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press
- De Vreese, C. H., Peter, J., Semetko, H. A. (2001), "Framing politics at the launch of the Euro: A cross-national comparative study of frames in the news", in *Political Communication*, 18, 107-122
- Eder, K., Kantner, C. (2000), "Transnationale Resonanzstrukturen in Europa: Eine Kritik der Rede vom Öffentlichkeitsdefizit" [Transnational structures of resonance in Europe: Criticizing the saying of a public deficit], in Bach, M. (Ed.), *Europa. Sonderheft der Kölner Zeitschrift für Soziologie und Sozialpsychologie, Band 52*, Opladen, Westdeutscher Verlag
- Foot, K. A., Schneider, S. M., Dougherty, M., Xenos, M., Larsen, E. (2003), "Analyzing linking practices: Candidate sites in the 2002 US electoral Web sphere", in *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication*, 8 (4), Retrieved August 1, 2003, from <http://jcmc.indiana.edu/vol8/issue4/foot.html>
- Gibson, R. K., Ward, S. (2000), "A proposed methodology for studying the function and effectiveness of party and candidate Web sites", in *Social Science Computer Review*, 18 (3), 301-319
- Kevin, D. (2003), *Europe in the media: A comparison of reporting, representation, and rhetoric in national media systems in Europe*, Mahwah, NJ, Lawrence Erlbaum
- Lauf, E., Peter, J. (2004), "EU-Repräsentanten in den Fernsehnachrichten: Eine Analyse ihrer Präsenz in 13 EU-Mitgliedsstaaten vor der Europawahl 1999" [EU representatives in television news: An analysis of their presence in 13 EU member states before the 1999 European Parliamentary Election], in Hagen, L. M. (Ed.), *Europäische Union und mediale Öffentlichkeit: Theoretische Perspektiven und empirische Befunde zur Rolle der Medien im Europäischen Einigungsprozess*, Köln, Herbert von Halem

Law, M., Middleton, D., Palmer, J. (2000), "The press reporting of the European Economic and Monetary Union in four European countries: A comparative analysis", in Baerns, B., Raupp, J. (Eds.), *Transnational communication in Europe: Practice and research*, Berlin, Vistas

Leroy, P., Siune, K. (1994), "The role of television in European elections: The cases of Belgium and Denmark", in *European Journal of Communication*, 9 (1), 47-69

Norris, P. (2000), *The virtuous circle: Political communication in postindustrial societies*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press

Papacharassi, Z. (2002), "The virtual sphere: The internet as a public sphere", *New Media & Society*, 4 (1), S. 9-27

Peter, J. (2003), *Why European TV news matters: A cross-nationally comparative analysis of TV news about the European Union and its effects* (Doctoral dissertation, University of Amsterdam, Netherlands, 2003)

Peter, J., De Vreese, C. H. (2004), "In search of Europe: A cross-national comparative study of the European Union in national television news", in *The Harvard International Journal of Press/Politics*, 9 (4), 3-24

Reif, K. (1984), "Ten second-order national elections", in Reif, K. (Ed.), *European Elections 1979/81 and 1984*, Berlin, Quorum

Reif, K., Schmitt, H. (1980), "Nine second-order elections: A conceptual framework for the analysis of European election results", in *European Journal of Political Research*, 8, 3-44

Risse, T. (2003, March), *An emerging European public sphere? Theoretical clarifications and empirical indicators*, Paper presented at the annual meeting of the European Union Studies Association (EUSA), Nashville, TN, Retrieved, July 5, 2004, from [http://www.fu-berlin.de/atasp/texte/030322\\_europe\\_public.pdf](http://www.fu-berlin.de/atasp/texte/030322_europe_public.pdf)

Schlesinger, P. (1999), "Changing spaces of political communication: The case of the European Union", in *Political Communication*, 16, 263-279

Schlesinger, P., Kevin, D. (2000), "Can the European Union become a sphere of publics?", in Eriksen, E. O., Fossum, J. E. (Eds.), *Democracy in the European Union: Integration through deliberation?*, London, Routledge

Semetko, H. A., De Vreese, C., Peter, J. (2000), "Europeanised politics--Europeanised media? European integration and political communication", in *West European Politics*, 23 (4), 121-142

Semetko, H. A., Valkenburg, P. M. (2000), "Framing European politics: A content analysis of press and television news", in *Journal of Communication*, 50 (2), 93-109

Smith, J., Wallace, W. (1995), "Democracy or technocracy? European integration and the problem of popular consent", in *West European Politics*, 18 (3), 137-157

Tedesco, J. C. (2004), "Changing the channel: Use of the Internet for communicating about politics", in Kaid, L. L. (Ed.), *Handbook of political communication research*, Mahwah, NJ, Lawrence Erlbaum

Van de Steeg, M. (2000), "Analysis of the Dutch and Spanish newspaper debates on EU enlargement with Central and Eastern European countries: Suggestions for a transnational European public sphere", in Baerns, B., Raupp, J. (Eds.), *Transnational communication in Europe: Practice and research*, Berlin, Vistas

Ward, D. (2002), *The European Union Democratic Deficit and the Public Sphere: An Evaluation of EU Media Policy*, Amsterdam, IOS Press

White, C. S. (1997), "Citizen participation and the Internet: Prospects for civic deliberation in the information age", in

*The Social Studies*, 88 (1), 23-28

Zimmermann, A., Koopmans, R., Schlecht, T. (2004), *Political Communication on the Internet. Part 2: Link structure among political actors in Europe*, Working paper of the project 'The Transformation of Political Mobilisation and Communication in European Public Spheres' funded by the 5<sup>th</sup> Framework Programme of the European Commission, Retrieved July 20, 2004, from:  
<http://europub.wz-berlin.de/Data/reports/WP4/D4-7%20WP%204.2%20Integrated%20Report.pdf>