European(ised) Media: Dutch journalists reporting on European in a European public sphere

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1. Introduction

On 11 May 2023, *Mediahuis* announced the acquisition of *EURACTIV*, a pan-European media network. *Mediahuis* thereby expands their network beyond Belgium, the Netherlands, Ireland, Luxembourg and Germany into the pan-European media landscape. (EURACTIV 2023; Leclerq 2023). After the complete acquisition of *Politico* by Axel Springer SE in 2021 (Axel Springer 2021; Lee 2021), the acquisition of *EURACTIV* by the originally Belgian *Mediahuis* shows how media companies from EU member states are increasing their stakes in European press. The Netherlands are an important part of their existing, as *Mediahuis* gets 46 per cent of its turnover from their activities in NL (CvdM 2022). Based on the latest available data on circulation from 2017 (CvdM 2021), they have an accumulative share of 90 per cent of the Dutch market for printed press together with *DPG Media* (another Belgian media company). These developments represent yet another element in the changes to European politics and transformations in media.

Chances are that most of the 447.7 million inhabitants of the European Union (EU) consume domestic media from one of the 27 member states, rather than pan-European media. Why is pan-European media lacking in our collective experience of the EU? In trying to explain this, the concept of a European public sphere has been an often-used lens to analyse the coverage of European affairs and the engagement of citizens with political decision-making. This thesis will use a definition of the European public sphere that was coined by Jürgen Habermas, who also originally brought the term 'public sphere' to popularity amongst scholars. According to Habermas, a European public sphere would be: "a network that gives citizens of all member states an equal opportunity to take part in an encompassing process of focused political communication" (Habermas 2001, 17). Notably, the media is not the same as a public sphere. Rather, "the media is an actor (…) as well as a container, or carrier of a mediated public spere" (van de Steeg 2012, 503).

As such, media play a central role in public spheres (Adam 2016, 2) as they are an important means for EU citizens to inform themselves about EU affairs and for the EU to become visible in their lives (Statham 2010a, 4–5). Media have an important role to "link, filter and synthesize themes and topics […] so that citizens can form positions and express opinions about problems and solutions aired in the civil society" (Eriksen 2005, 355). Media fulfil this role in the following ways: they are a forum and a speaker in public spheres (Berkel 2006). As a forum for mediated politics, they aid in developing positions for groups or 'collective actors' and

political actors. Through the way that they advance positions in public spheres, they are – as speakers – also "political actors" themselves (Koopmans and Statham 2010b, 47). "Without an effective media providing a supply line of political information, which allows people the opportunity to see, think, and make decisions about the European level, it would matter relatively little if institutional-fix solutions were applied to strengthen the link between the supranational level of governance and the citizens" (Statham 2010a, 4)

This thesis looks at those people who have a pivotal part in the media and by extension in the European public sphere: journalists. The research question for this thesis is: "How do Dutch journalists working on European affairs relate to the concept of a European public sphere?

Since the two waves of research on the European public sphere after referendums on a European Constitution and the Eurozone crisis, relatively little research has been done on the concept of a European public sphere. Part of the reason may be that 'the public sphere' as such is becoming more elusive and harder to research: the position of traditional media has been rapidly changing, as has the ways in which citizens communicate with each other because of the rise of digital media. This research looks at the role of journalists, as they have been a consistent factor throughout all the political changes and transformations in the media landscape that occurred since the Eurozone crisis. These changes and transformations all have created new occasions for Europeanisation, and as such justify looking at the concept of a European public sphere in a contemporary context.

This thesis focuses on Dutch journalists working for written press on European affairs. The contribution of this thesis will be threefold: Firstly, it looks at the role-perceptions of journalists in a professional context that has altered dramatically due to the transformations of media and changes to European politics outlined above. Secondly, it does so by looking at specifically at journalists from the Netherlands – a core EU-member state that has been mostly overlooked in country analyses of the European public sphere (except for (Statham 2010b). Thirdly, this thesis will apply a wider multi-media approach to the profession of the journalism, by not only focussing on national newspapers, but by mapping the contemporary European media landscape and interviewing Dutch journalists working for a variety of European written press, both online and offline (ranging from *EUobserver* to *Algemeen Dagblad*. Considering all the above-mentioned developments with regards to European politics and the media landscape, it is worth shedding light on the linkage between Dutch journalists and a European public sphere. With ten semi-structured, qualitative interviews with exclusively Dutch speaking journalists,

this thesis would provide the biggest contribution to thinking about the European public sphere in a Dutch context to date.

This thesis finds that Dutch journalists working on European affairs, did in fact relate to some degree with the concept of a European public sphere. Some people did not believe in the feasibility of a European public sphere, but they were all in agreement about the importance of linking the EU to citizens. This thesis first presents a literature review, defining a European public sphere, introducing useful concepts for the analysis of the Dutch public sphere, and presents the findings previous research on the role of journalists in a European public sphere. This in turn leads to the formulation of four themes, that will form the backbone of the interviews and the subsequent analysis of the interviews: 1) perceived role, 2) perceived audiences, 3) perceived cooperation with other journalists, and 4) perceptions of a European public sphere.

2. Literature review

As mentioned in the introduction, this thesis uses the following definition of a European public sphere: "a network that gives citizens of all member states an equal opportunity to take part in an encompassing process of focused political communication" (Habermas 2001, 17). It was necessary to pick a definition, since every scholar gives their own twist on what it means. This stems the tension between measuring *what is* and a perspective on *what should be*. This literature review will first discuss what academics currently understand as a public sphere and how it relates to the possibility of a European one. Within this discussion of a public sphere, I will focus specifically on the role of media in a European public sphere. Second, I will devote specific attention to the role of journalists working in that public sphere, to show what information is missing from our current understanding of journalists and a European public sphere in order to answer the research question: how do Dutch journalists working on European affairs relate to the concept of a European public sphere?

2.1. Origins of the public sphere

This thesis uses a definition of a European public sphere that was coined by Jürgen Habermas in a journal article titled: "Why Europe needs a constitution" (Habermas 2001). In his article discussing a way forward to what he calls 'European unification,' he engages in a debate on a

European public sphere that grew independently from his own original usage of the term 'public sphere.' Habermas originally introduced the concept '*Öffentlickhkeit*' in his 1962 book *"Strukturwandel der Öffentlichkeit"* (translated to English as: *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*). In this book, he describes the *Öffentlichkeit* as the "sphere" of private people coming together to discuss the general rulings of public authorities. What makes this historically unprecedented is that it was what Habermas calls the "people's public use of their reason" (Habermas 2011, 27). This led to "an idea of society separate from their ruler (or the state) and of a private realm separate from the public" (Calhoun 1993, 7). In his book, Habermas explains how this "bourgeois public sphere" transformed over time. Simply put, a 'public sphere' comes down to the idea of discussing public authority, being able to use your reason, and consequently, challenge public authorities. Habermas, and later George Steiner (Steiner and Riemen 2015), chose the phenomenon of coffeehouses or cafés as this embodiment of the public use of reason: persons coming together, sharing ideas, talking, informing themselves and others, thinking critically on political matters. It is an ideal type, something that Habermas conceptualised to think about the democratic legitimacy of decision making of public authorities. The most important takeaway is people's public use of their reason, with an emphasis on the *publicness* (Risse 2015, 10)

That German term, *Öffentlichkeit* has been translated to "public sphere" in academic literature, whereas it can also mean "(the) public," "public space," and "publicity," as the translator of the 2011 edition points out (Habermas 2011, xv). I would further note that Habermas does not equate this to *the* public (i.e., some collective that "appears or is imagined as a social actor or agent in relation to some important and controversial social issues" (Splichal 2011, 31). The French translation *"sphère publique"* gave it a spatial connotation by focusing more on the "*sphère*," which makes people assume that you can find or look for such a 'space' in our social reality. In turn we run the risk of seeing such a space anywhere (or nowhere) and attach meaning or agency to it that does not belong to the space as such (Splichal 2011, 28).

The term 'public sphere' as a translation of *Öffentlichkeit* proved incredibly popular both in public usage and academic debate. Due to the untranslatable nature of the term alluded to above, it had a degree of elusiveness that made the term "public sphere" easy to use, while the Habermas's views about it were not *per se*. Splichal analyses the reasons and conditions for the rise and fall of the popularity of the concept or term 'public sphere' in scholarly discourse. He explains that the usage of 'public opinion' has been increasingly substituted for 'public sphere,' as the term 'public opinion' tended to be increasingly narrowed to just 'opinion polls.'

As such, a European public sphere becomes also conflated with 'a European audience' or a 'European society.' Splichal does not argue that we should return to referring to the 'public sphere' as *Öffentlichkeit*, as it would render it meaningless to non-German academics. Instead, we should move beyond Habermas to find ways in which the concept of a public sphere can aid in improving our democratic processes (Splichal 2022).

The reason for mentioning all of this is to lay the groundwork for why the concept 'public sphere' has been so popular in academia and to show its origin. The question remains to what extent *journalists* relate to the concept of a European public sphere. As I will show now, it has many different definitions, yet, due to its elusiveness, it underpins the constructivist nature of the public sphere as a communicative space: it is what we make of it. The discussions that follow relate to the questions: what is a European public sphere? Is there a European public sphere? If yes, to what degree and where?

2.2. What is a European public sphere?

Habermas's concept as outlined above developed as academics engaged with it. Today, the 'public sphere' still encompasses political communication, public engagement, and exchange of opinions in public, thereby being a "thickened space of political communication" (Hepp et al. 2016). It is an open 'space' that provides a platform, or "open forum," for public and "meaningful" exchange of views (Risse 2015, 5–7), not just of political actors, but explicitly of 'normal' citizens. It has a strong democratic, normative connotation in that it is seen as prerequisite for governance that gathers input to provide legitimate output (Walter 2017a, 20–21). As such, public spheres function to 'test' whether political decisions are correct and just (Eriksen 2007, 41). In short, a European public sphere is a "communication system that mediates between the EU citizens at the micro-level and the EU's governmental system at the macro-level" on issues related to EU affairs (Walter 2017a, 77). To bridge this gap between the original conception of a public sphere and the contemporary understanding of it in the EU context, Habermas's definition will be used: "a network that gives citizens of all member states an equal opportunity to take part in an encompassing process of focused political communication" (Habermas 2001, 17).

The nation-state has been "the *locus classicus* of thinking about a public sphere," and as such national public spheres are a critical reference point for any discussion on a European public sphere (Fossum and Schlesinger 2007, 279). Initially, research focused on a pan-European (or

'supranational' (Koopmans and Statham 2010b, 38) public sphere akin to a national public sphere. Considering that the EU is not a nation-state, but an entity in continuous transformation, Schlesinger argued that a pan-European public sphere does not exist, as the 'weak' transnational space that flows from the development of policy on a European level is not strong enough to substitute or transcend the existing rigidity of national public spheres as a point of reference (2007, 424). There are obstacles to a pan-European public sphere for a variety of reasons such as language, identity, and economic feasibility of European media (Pfetsch and Heft 2015, 32).

Instead, a more promising line of research into a European public sphere was to look at the degree to which national public spheres are Europeanising. Europeanisation in this regard means the "transformation of discourse arenas, institutions, and policies in such a way that the EU as a multilevel governance system becomes an integral part of the 'domestic' as well as the 'transnational' realms" (Risse 2015, 10). EU member states are thus devoting more attention to EU affairs (Walter 2017a, 163). Thus, transparency and publicness about EU decision-making is increased, as the EU is increasingly represented in national media outlets (Kleinen-von Königslöw 2012, 445). To summarise, Europeanisation is a transformation of communicative flows in which the European actors (both institutional and amongst member states) take an increasingly meaningful role in national public spheres. Hence, common themes across member states, different European actors, and policy issues become more recognizable across member states. This would then in turn facilitate a general European public sphere by providing citizens with the means to inform themselves and engage in public discussions on EU affairs.

Koopmans and Statham created a system of two dimensions, or axes, of Europeanisation: *vertical* Europeanisation's communicative linkages between national and the European levels, and *horizontal* Europeanisation, which relates to communication flows between different member states (2010b, 38–43),

Horizontal Europeanisation is indicative of "the interconnectedness of national publics in different member states and of real exchange between discourse arenas" (Pfetsch and Heft 2015, 35). A recent case that fits the horizontal dimension of Europeanisation was when politicians published an advertisement in the German newspaper *FAZ* urging German politicians support aid to southern member states early in the Covid pandemic (Mustafa Marghadi [@mousmar] 2020). This advertisement was a response to statements from Dutch

politicians who had spoken against such measures as Italy did not have their government finances in order in anticipation of a crisis.

Vertical Europeanisation can also be shown by looking at contemporary examples of the linkages between the national and European levels. On 27 April 2022, the Commission presented a proposal for increased legal migration from specific source countries (European Commission 2022). In national reporting, the French *Le Monde* stressed the "demographic changes" that led to this proposal and the shortage of specifically healthcare workers (Stroobants 2022). The Dutch *NRC,* on the other hand, wrote that the Commission aimed to avoid migrants risking a dangerous route to the EU and warned that "antimigration politicians" would see it as an undesired way of 'boosting' migration (Walters 2022).

Horizontal and vertical Europeanisation are relevant ways of looking at the European public sphere. Since we will examine Dutch journalists covering EU affairs for a variety of media, it is useful to have these concepts in our 'toolbox' for assessing how those journalists relate to a European public sphere. It is possible that there is either vertical or horizontal Europeanisation in a member state. If there is only vertical Europeanization, "national public sphere monitoring of Brussels increases but not their efforts to connect with other European countries." Kleinen-von Königslöw calls this "segmented Europeanisation" (Kleinen-von Königslöw 2012, 443). In such a situation, there might be "synchronisation" of reporting on EU affairs (Kleinen-von Königslöw 2012, 445–46), where the same issues are discussed in different member states (vertical Europeanisation) but without referring to European actors from other member states.

Looking at vertical and horizontal Europeanisation, an overarching 'European' public sphere as communicative spaces is "multi-segmented" (Hepp et al. 2009; Kleinen-von Königslöw 2012) and "overlapping and interconnecting" (Risse 2015, 9). 'Multi-segmented' means that a European public sphere is different in different EU member states and that there exist also differences between forms of media (i.e., between tabloid and quality dailies, yet also amongst different media products). 'Overlapping' means that there is not a single, transnational European public sphere, but rather a plurality of country-, language-, or issues-specific public spheres that sometimes overlap.

2.3. Waves of European public sphere research

Research on a European public sphere has often been both highly normative and cyclical. The concept of a European public sphere arose to "remedy" a legitimation deficit of the EU, as it

was phrased by Habermas (Habermas 2001, 17). The trap here is to raise normative questions about what ought to be, which has been done extensively already considering the immense academic debate in the past. These normative questions could provide perspectives on what currently exists and what that means to the people working in it. Schlesinger already referred to this as a "cosmopolitan temptation" (Schlesinger 2007). Schlesinger might mean to say that by a certain desire to have a particular outcome, us academics sometimes see that which might not actually be there.

As I mentioned, research on a European public sphere started around the time of the Maastricht Treaty in 1992, when the most substantial shift in delegated competences took place in the "European project" (Adam 2016, 1). The turbulent period of ratification processes following the Maastricht Treaty (Barth and Bijsmans 2018) were symptomatic of more contestation on the process of European integration that would follow the Maastricht Treaty. A turning point were the referenda in a European Constitution in 2005 in France and the Netherlands. In both countries, a majority voted 'No.' The referenda came to represent as a pivotal moment in what Hooghe and Marks have described as the transition from "permissive consensus" to "constraining dissensus" (Hooghe and Marks 2009), starting at the Treaty of Maastricht and culminating in a variety of referenda: in this key moment of public consultation, it became clear that EU citizens would not support further EU integration without reservation. Instead, the policies of EU institutions took a turn to attempt more transparency and involvement of the 'public' (Brüggemann 2010).

In scholarly discourse on European affairs, it led to a 'boom' in attention to the European public sphere in a variety of academic publications and special editions in the immediate years that followed (Eriksen 2005; Downey and Koenig 2006; Heikkilä and Kunelius 2006; Machill, Beiler, and Fischer 2006; Heikkilä 2007; Baisnée 2007; Bijsmans and Altides 2007; Eriksen 2007; Fossum and Schlesinger 2007; Kaitatzi-Whitlock 2007; Koopmans 2007; Lauristin 2007; Neverla 2007; Schlesinger 2007; Statham 2007; Wessler et al. 2008)

A second pivotal point for scholarship on a European public sphere has been the Eurozone crisis (Risse 2015; Hepp et al. 2016). It led to a turning point for the research by Hepp et al. (2016) whose interviews took place in the autumn of 2008 and was the main focus for Risse's book (2015) on the politicization of the EU. The abovementioned phenomenon of "constraining dissensus" (Hooghe and Marks 2009) has strong overlap with the concept of "politicization" of European integration that Risse has coined in relation to the European public sphere. To

paraphrase and give a broader reflection on what happened post-2005: national governments increasingly had to seek popular support for European integration, sometimes culminating in referenda on massive steps toward European integration, and European politics came to be increasingly discussed in terms of crises. This politicization led to increased contestation of European politics on a national level, making it potentially more visible for larger audiences. Risse's own definition is useful for further thinking on why Europeanisation and politicization are linked and relevant to researching a European public sphere: "European issues are politicized if and when the following statements are true: 1) There is an increase in issue salience of EU-related questions in various public spheres. 2) There also is growing controversy and polarisation regarding EU issues." (Risse 2015, 13).

The overarching point is that research on the European public sphere is cyclical and comes in waves. We also see elections for the European Parliament as moments of interest for analysing EU coverage in national public spheres (de Vreese et al. 2006; Grill and Boomgaarden 2017; Adam et al. 2019) and increased exposure of EU citizens in national media (Walter 2017a). In relation to crises, each attempt can be seen as a response to the perceived democratic or communicative deficit of the EU. Scholarly work seems to aim to analyse the extent to which normal citizens are involved, engaged and informed about EU politics and are able to express, share, and formulate their opinion about this to increase the legitimacy of the EU.

2.5. Measuring a European public sphere with content analyses

One line of research into the European public sphere has been to conduct content analyses, mostly by analysing vast amounts of newspaper articles to measure frequency of mentions of Europe, European issues, or European actors. These content analyses were often ambitious, cross-country analyses of newspaper contents (Trenz 2004; Hepp et al. 2016, 78–92; Brüggemann and Kleinen-von Königslöw 2009; Kleinen-von Königslöw 2012). It is worth presenting some main findings of these content analyses. As early as 2004, Trenz already argued on the basis of an analysis of 11 daily, quality newspapers from 6 EU member states that a European public sphere "has come into existence," based on how many articles refer to Europe (1 out of 3) or report directly about a European issue (1 out of 5). He also sees "a common universe of issues and debates which determine the visibility of the political Europe." (Trenz 2004, 311). Brüggeman and Kleinen-von Königslöw (2009) even analysed 3000 articles from five EU member states over a period of 20 years until 2003. They find the same segmented

Europeanisation as outlined above: increased mention of EU actors is not necessarily combined with interaction across different member states. Nevertheless, they do find evidence of a shared 'us'-narrative in analysed national newspapers in relation to European issues. A meta-analysis of 17 studies conducting content analyses since the 1990s shows us that in 2006, there were only early signs of a European public sphere, as European topics and European actors were an "extremely small proportion" in the reporting by national media (Machill, Beiler, and Fischer 2006, 78–79).

These content analyses show us the degree to which 'EU-topics' have been increasingly mentioned in national newspapers as a way of measuring Europeanisation of national public spheres. Although European issues, European actors, and Europe as a whole are increasingly mentioned in national newspapers, it remains small in comparison to national news. We also know that some actors are more visible than others: government actors are particularly visible in a European public sphere based on content analyses (Koopmans 2010). Particularly the European Commission is more visible than EU citizens or European civil society actors (Walter 2017a).

2.6. Changes to a European public sphere

Research on a European public sphere has died down since the initial boom after the 2005 referenda. This might be because the concept of a public sphere has become much more elusive due to transformations in the media landscape. Traditional media have undergone drastic transformations, seeing how every printed newspaper has a strong online presence, and how other media such as television and radio have become less likely to be consumed linearly. Moreover, the rise of large tech platforms (such as Facebook and Google) has created what Pasquale called "A Mediated Public Sphere" (Pasquale 2017): large tech companies play an incredibly central role in determining information consumption and selection. Algorithms play an increasing role in moderating public debate and exchange of opinions in an increasingly automated world. What you consume is more determined by algorithms than rational exchange of views. This situation is too complex and multifaceted to cover adequately in this thesis, particularly related to topics such as the rise of disinformation, yet it determines many of the aspects that I refer to as 'transformations in media.' Although some scepticism about the promises on the realisation of the public sphere as a consequence of innovations in media productions is in place (Splichal 2009), research has been done into the role of the internet in

"circumventing traditional media" in a public sphere (Koopmans and Zimmerman 2010) and the inability of social media to revitalise public spheres (Kruse, Norris, and Flinchum 2018).

The political reality of Europe has also not stood still since the Eurozone crisis, which formed the last 'wave' of research on the European public sphere. The Eurozone crisis was followed by the Arab Spring, the war in Syria, the annexation of Crimea, the so-called migration crisis, Brexit, the COVID-19 pandemic, the Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022 and the increasing effects of the climate crisis on Europe. All of these crises have drastically changed the way European politics is today and have potentially created opportunities for increased Europeanisation of national public spheres.

Given all of this, analysing only newspaper articles on print will no longer give researchers a concrete perspective to the extent to which national public spheres are Europeanizing. As Brüggemann and Schulz-Forberg phrase it: "There are limits as to what may be concluded from the mentioning of institutions in media and the relation of this to the public sphere, its contents, deliberation processes and dominant discourses" (Brüggemann and Schulz-Forberg 2009, 695). Rather than conducting more content analysis (which is increasingly difficult due to the reasons outlined above) this thesis will shed light on how the people working in a European public sphere (journalists) relate to the concept.

Melado argues that there are two ways of looking at the "performative components of journalism": looking at the news production process and routines or looking at the news product as an outcome (Mellado 2015, 597). Content analyses look at the news product as an outcome, whereas this thesis looks at the news production process by researching journalists who produce European news. The research question of this thesis is: *how do Dutch journalists working on European affairs relate to the concept of a European public sphere?* It will answer this research question on the basis of 10 semi-structured interviews with journalists.

The following sub-chapter functions to provide insight into what research has been done so far into the relationship between journalists and a European public sphere.

2.6. Journalists in a European public sphere

Even though the media landscape transformed, and the political context of the EU has changed drastically, there are constants in relation to a European public sphere. This thesis devotes specific attention to how Dutch journalists covering EU affairs relate to the concept of a European public sphere. There are journalists who are currently covering European affairs for

their respective medium – just as there were journalists at the Maastricht Treaty in 1992, the Constitutional referendums in 2005, the Eurozone crisis from 2008 onwards, and all the European crises that followed. Especially in a media context that is increasingly automated, as Pasquale argues, there's an innately human element to the journalist collecting, interpreting, producing, and sharing news and human interactions (Russell 2019).

As argued previously, journalists fulfil an essential role as mediators between the EU on the one hand and citizens on the other. They are neither representatives of the people nor leading forces in a public sphere (Heikkilä and Kunelius 2006, 67). They supply information to the public domain and are crucial in the decision of which information gets published (Statham 2010b, 125). As such, they are an important actor in a European public sphere and make possible this "people's public's use of reason" (Habermas 2011, 27) that we referred to before. Statham puts it more clearly: journalists are professionals who aim to enable citizens to make informed decisions about public governance (Statham 2010b, 126–27). Heikkilä points out that journalists working on European affairs are not just news journalists: there's a much wider variety of journalists that work on a variety of stories that feed a public sphere (Heikkilä 2007, 431). As will be shown later in the empirical section of this thesis, this means that there are journalists that focus solely on reporting on the Commission's every step, yet also journalists who report on wider stories. The journalists working are simply with fewer people to fulfil these tasks in comparison with an average national news desk.

There are a variety of different roles that fall under the umbrella of journalists covering EU affairs. Although the role of journalists is changing, there is still a strong professional identity and ideology connected to journalism as a profession (Deuze 2005), which leads to journalists having outspoken opinions about their work (Deuze and Witschge 2018) (Deuze and Witschge 2018). EU correspondents represent one specific subgroup that are based in Brussels on behalf of their media. Heikkilä and Kunelius describe them on the basis of the AIM-research findings as a "rare transnationally minded community of journalists who are acutely aware of the changing contexts of journalism" (Heikkilä and Kunelius 2008, 391). The future of the role of correspondents for newspapers was previously questioned by some scholars (Hamilton and Jenner 2004) considering a wider access to foreign news than having a 'man on the ground.' However, although journalists are for the most part reliant on official sources from EU institutions, non-official information channels are "the primary asset for communication" in Brussels specifically (Martins, Lecheler, and De Vreese 2012, 316) This would prove the relevance of correspondents in this day and age. Terzis finds that EU correspondents have been

accused by their editors or even readerships of becoming too "native" to Brussels (Terzis 2008, 537). Heikkilä and Kunelius have similar findings and see how they "tend to be questioned from two directions at once: from EU institutions for being too nationalistic, and from their own news desk for being too interested and often biased towards the EU" (Heikkilä and Kunelius 2008, 391). Baisnée describes that correspondents are "socialized into the EU political system and possess the analytical framework necessary to understand and analyse politics in Brussels." As such, they are sometimes wrongfully considered to be a "public" to EU-institutions, whereas they consider themselves just as "professional reporters in need of information." Baisnée argues that this shows their ambiguity as a group (Baisnée 2004, 153). Moreover, although these correspondents might be sent as a 'Brussels' correspondent, some find they rarely reported on anything other than EU affairs (i.e., not on Belgian or NATO affairs) (Terzis 2008, 537).

There have been three large research projects that analysed how journalists relate to the concept of a European public sphere. Where it relates to journalists, these research projects focused on the professional imaginaries of journalists (AIM), their perceptions of their own role and of their audience (EUROPUB), and their professional network ('Transformations of the State'). Of these three research projects, only EUROPUB researched the Netherlands, by looking at three national (*AD, De Telegraaf, De Volskrant)* and one regional newspaper (*Leeuwaarder Courant*).

First, the *Adequate Information and Management in Europe* (AIM) was a research project that ran from 2004 until 2007 and aimed at "investigating the media's impact on the European public sphere with regard to actors and mechanism" (Kopper 2007). Only the 'final activity report' is available online; any other information about the program is no longer accessible. As part of this project, 167 newsroom journalists from eleven European countries and 142 EU correspondents were interviewed. The most notable publications that are still available and make use of this are by Heikkilä and Kunelius (Heikkilä and Kunelius 2006; 2008) and (Raeymaeckers, Cosijn, and Deprez 2007). Just as with the concept of a public sphere, Heikkilä and Kunelius point out that "much of what we have come to see as natural elements of the profession of journalism have been developed in the context and special protection of *nation states*" (2008, 378). The national frame of reference is therefore also the starting point of most journalism (Heikkilä and Kunelius 2008, 386). The EU as an increasingly relevant locus of the work of journalists poses challenges to journalists that are similar to challenges faced by media as outlined above. Heikkilä and Kunelius label these as political, cultural, and economic

challenges. The political challenges stem from an increase in political actors on an EU level, who are involved in policy areas that previously belonged in the domain of the nation state. The cultural challenges relate to how EU politics are not merely 'foreign reporting,' but are intrinsically connected to domestic politics and that this poses challenges to how journalists relate to their audiences. They argue that the economic challenges stem from shifts in the media industry that result into decreasing revenue from readership of newspapers, urging media to focus on more on specific identities – rather than a European focus. The last argument is very different from the analysis from Varga, who mostly addressed the difficulties of advertisement revenue on an EU level (Varga 2011). A last, relevant observation from Heikkilä and Kunelius is that they found that some journalists, who perceive themselves as "down-to-earth" people found questions about a European public spheres "baffling and even irritatingly theoretical" (2008, 67).

Second, the research EUROPUB (short for "the Europeanisation of Political Communication and Mobilisation in Euroepean Public Sphere) is also not accessible online. The funding from the project allowed the publication of an edited volume by Koopmans and Statham (Koopmans and Statham 2010a), that includes a chapter on how journalists decide what to commentate and write news reports about by 110 interviews with journalists from twenty-eight national or regional newspapers and four 'transnational' newspapers (Statham 2010b). The findings on specifically the interviews with the transnational journalists were published separately (Firmstone 2008). The interviews were conducted between 2003–2004 (Statham 2010b, 130). Researching the concerns of journalists in their reporting, Statham found how the highest-ranking concerns amongst the journalists interviewed are "Availability of news space" and "The necessity to capture audience attention" (Statham 2010b, 139–40). The main obstacle here is that the complexity of EU governance makes it hard to write about in a captivating way that relates to audiences. This results in articles on EU affairs being underrepresented in newspapers or hard to sell. We know from other research that there are tensions between the profit-making objectives of news organizations and the journalistic integrity of journalists (Bunce 2019).

Statham also found that journalists mostly write for their own national readerships and target national public opinion. EU correspondents mostly aim at addressing national governments and political parties, rather than EU institutions and political actors (Statham 2010b, 146–47). If journalists writing on EU affairs, including EU correspondents, mostly target EU audiences, it is useful to link this back to the cultures of political discourse and see if there are some

overlapping patterns in reporting, or whether also the reporting (style) differs widely per member states.

Third, the 'Transformations of the State' publication series resulted in a publication by Hepp et al. (2016). This is the most recent and arguably most ambitious publication on the linkage of journalism with a European public sphere. It took an explicitly transnational approach, void of methodological nationalism, to find Europeanised patterns of reporting. The studies were undertaken in autumn 2008 by conducting interviews and newsroom studies in six European countries, spread over 23 quality, tabloid and regional newspapers. A total of 216 interviews were conducted (36 per country) with numerous journalists in different roles.

Hepp at al. finds through interviews with EU and foreign affairs editors from quality and tabloid dailies and regional newspapers how EU topics are more likely to make it to the newspaper's agenda when journalists can relate them to the national context of their readership, or that readers feel most familiar with (Hepp et al. 2009, 51–52). Just like Heikkilä and Kunelius, they also find that journalists often operate from a national framework as starting point, calling it the "re-articulation of the nation in everyday practice of journalists (Hepp et al. 2016, 30).

Based on their newsroom studies and interviews with journalists, Hepp et al. formulate four archetypes of journalists (or "modes of addressing audiences"). First, there is the *analyst* that is mostly devoted to extensively analysing political process in Europe, which are seen as a culturally and politically relevant. Second, there is the *ambassador* that is focused on explaining Europe in such a way that relates to the readers' daily lives. Third is the *reporter* who provides basic and neutral coverage that might be constrained by economic considerations. Finally, there are *caterers* who are aimed at comforting readers by engaging with the European news in a 'soft' way, primarily those readers that might be more Eurosceptic and of lower socio-economic standing (Hepp et al. 2016, 64–69). These descriptions go beyond the formal job title or description and provide a way of making sense of the roles that journalists fulfil in a European public sphere.

Although these research projects were conducted in the past, the findings are evidently old. This is an obstacle, considering the argument that was made above about the transformations in the media and political changes in Europe that renders research on the European public sphere relevant once again. None of the datasets compiled by the research above are (still) accessible to use in this thesis. Moreover, there has up until today not been a single study that

focuses exclusively on the Netherlands or includes a sample size as large as the 10 interviews conducted for this thesis.

2.3. Conclusion of literature review and contribution

This chapter included a discussion on the definition of public spheres and showed how it became possible to think about the concept of a European public sphere. It embedded Habermas's definition of a European public sphere in the broader engagement of the field with the concept of a European public sphere. Furthermore, previous scholarly work on the European public sphere established the concepts of (vertical and horizontal) Europeanisation and politicization that are useful for looking at the relationship between national public spheres and a European public sphere. Previous research has either researched the professional imaginaries of journalists (AIM), their perceptions of their own role and of their audience (EUROPUB), and their professional network ('Transformations of the State'). To date, there has not been research that has discussed these three dimensions in the context of the Dutch public sphere and the role that journalists fulfil in this. To answer the research question (How do Dutch journalists covering European affairs relate to the concept of a European public sphere?), I engage in interviews with journalists for an open conversation about their work, their views, and the European public sphere, incorporating different angles from the abovementioned research. This thesis contributes to the academic debate the findings of 10 interviews that focus on four themes: 1) perceived role, 2) perceived audience, 3) perceived cooperation with other journalists, and 4) their perceptions of a European public sphere.

3. Methodology

In order to answer the research question "how do Dutch journalists working on European affairs relate to the concept of a European public sphere?", this thesis produces empirical analysis. I will present a chapter on the findings of the 10 semi-structured, qualitative interviews conducted with 10 journalists from The Netherlands that were conducted in May and June 2023. This methodology chapter will provide a justification for The Netherlands as case selection and elaborate on the choice for qualitative interviews to answer the research questions.

In this thesis I tried to find out how journalists, whose job it is to function in the public sphere, relate to the concept of a European one. The key term in this is 'relate,' with which I mean the way in which they view their role or connection to the European public sphere, yet also how the European public sphere connects to them.

Semi-structured, qualitative interviews are an excellent research method to find out interviewees' points of views and allow for rambling and associative talking which can show what interviewees see as relevant and important (Bryman 2012, 470). Qualitative interviews as a research method are well established in social sciences. They are also often used in the context of European public sphere (Statham 2010b; 2008; Hepp et al. 2016; Heikkilä and Kunelius 2008; 2006), journalism in a European context (Chronaki and Frangonikolopoulos 2020; Gleissner and De Vreese 2005; Raeymaeckers, Cosijn, and Deprez 2007; Firmstone 2008; Morgan 1995; Terzis 2008; Baisnée 2004) or journalists in general (Mellado 2015)

In the semi-structured qualitative interviews, I asked 10 journalists from The Netherlands in a variety of roles about four themes. First, their perceived role as a journalist covering European affairs. I did so by prompting them to talk about their current role, how they ended up there and what drives them. Second, their perceived readership or audience for their work. There is a distinction between audiences and readerships. I consider audiences the wider group of people who encounter certain media, in this case written press. One could consider this connected to reach. I consider readership to be the actual people who end up consuming that media, which includes subscribers to in this case printed press. Target groups are the aimed audiences of media companies. In the interviews, I used the Dutch terms *'doelgroep'* and *'publiek'* that encompass elements of all of these terms. Third, how they perceive their cooperation with other journalists that function in the European public sphere as well. Fourth, their perceptions and opinions about a European public sphere, by asking them if they see a future for it and otherwise prompt them by asking them how they think about European journalism. I use the terms 'perceive' and 'perceptions' as these encompass both their understanding of the concept and how the see it. These four themes formed the backbone of my interview guide. The questions about the first three themes served to on the one hand see how they describe their work to contextualize it in a European public sphere but on the other hand to prompt them to think about their work, to make them susceptible to a question about an abstract concept like a European public sphere.

The selected journalists are presented in the table below, presented in chronological order of when their interview took place. The journalists were not asked about their citizenship, nor did it matter for their role as journalists in a European public sphere. All journalists spoke Dutch at a native level, had lived in the Netherlands for extended periods of time, and wrote or worked in relation to The Netherlands. As such they all had the Dutch language and political context of the Netherlands as a common point of reference for reflecting on the Dutch public sphere and talk about their ideas about a European public sphere. Therefore, I consider them and will refer to them as Dutch journalists.

Interviewee	**Media type**	**Date**	**Length + place**
EU Correspondent *Trouw*	National newspaper	22.05.2023	26m 52s, online
EU Correspondent *NRC*	National newspaper	23.05.2023	24m 06s, online
Editor-in-Chief *EUobserver*	Pan-European online news medium	23.05.2023	44m 46s, online
Editor/Commentator Europe *De Volkskrant*	National newspaper	24.05.2023	18m 44s, online
Team lead *Follow the Money EU*	Online investigative journalism medium	26.05.2023	21m 58s, online
EU Correspondent *Algemeen Dagblad*	National newspaper, with 7 regional newspapers	26.05.2023	52m 44s, online
EU Correspondent *De Volkskrant*	National newspaper	26.05.2023	44m 39s, online
Leading Editor 'Western Europe' at *The European Correspondent*	Pan-European online news medium	26.05.2023	38m 44s, in person
Freelance journalist	National media outlets	04.06.2023	Written interview
Editor-in-Chief *Brusselse Nieuwe*	National online news medium	06.06.2023	24m 26s, by phone

I will refer to them by their function as listed in the "Interviewee" column. To the extent to which this was possible, I tried to talk to people who are involved with European affairs journalism from different perspectives. The largest group are EU correspondents (4), followed by three journalists who have been or are Editors-in-Chief (EIC) of their medium (3, of which

one is currently the EU correspondent of *AD*). Two journalists are currently in 'editor' roles and one person is a team lead of 'Bureau Brussels' of the investigative journalism platform *FTM*.[1] I was only able to find one freelance journalist who I deemed to have worked in relation to European affairs.

Out of the 10 interviews, eight interviews took place online using Zoom. One interview took place in person in a bar in Utrecht and one interview took place over the phone. All interviews were recorded and subsequently transcribed. By using MAXQDA, the transcripts were coded. These four themes that formed the backbone of my interview guide were also the starting themes for the process of coding the interviews. As such, it was mostly deductive in that the questions in the semi-structured interviews guided the search for themes in the data. However, I also formulated subcodes within the larger themes. My code system ultimately consisted of 751 coded segments from the 10 interviews.

The interviews with the journalists were conducted in Dutch and were generally informal. Some of the language that interviewees used was also quite informal and in translating the fragments, I have tried to stay as close as possible to the original meaning. This is important, as the way the phrase themselves represents their ideas best.

Reaching out to these journalists was sometimes difficult as journalists have varying degrees of online presence and not always publicly visible contact details. There is also not a clear-cut list of journalists covering European affairs, partially because the EU does not provide data on journalists with an accreditation to the EU. I just know that in 2020 there were 14 Dutch media organizations with accumulatively less than 64, but more than 5 journalists with some form of accreditation to the EU institutions (General Secretariat of the Council of the European Union 2022). If possible, I invited journalists using email, yet otherwise resorted to LinkedIn messages. Twitter was sometimes impossible as some journalists had the ability to send messages turned off. During the interviews, I have asked interviewees for further suggestions. This allowed me to see if I had not overlooked any important people, especially since Dutch journalists working in pan-European media were hard to find. Some journalists turned down

[1] Team lead is the closest translation to the term 'chef,' which is quite widespread in Dutch (hierarchical) organizations and refers to a supervisor role of a certain team. The 'chef' makes decisions about the course of action of a certain team, so some of the correspondents account for their work to the 'Chef Buitenland' (i.e., foreign news desk) or the 'Chef Haagse redactie' (i.e., domestic political affairs).

the invitation, saying they did not have time (such as the EU-correspondent *De Telegraaf*, or that they did not feel that they were the right people to talk to (such as a Europe commentator at *NRC*). Some people never responded (such as the EU correspondents for *FD*) .

I only reached out to journalists who are currently working for written press (either printed or online). Writing allows for a certain level of abstraction that is harder on television, which remains (and is increasingly so) visually based. Although it would be interesting to see how journalists working for visual media talk about the European public sphere, I find that it would make it harder to compare the responses of journalists as their work is so fundamentally different. However, as pointed out in the theoretical framework, transformations in the media landscape have increasingly led to media companies becoming increasingly multi-modal (by creating podcasts, explainers, documentaries).

4. Empirics

This chapter consist of two parts. First, it will provide a sub-chapter on the structural analysis of the European media landscape. That sub-chapter will function as a background chapter to describe the place and role of different outlets. This is useful to situate the interviewed journalists and will help to contextualise the responses of journalists during the semi-structured qualitative interviews. Second, it will present the findings from coding the interview transcripts. In total 751 segments were coded which will be discussed according to the lines of the original themes of the interview guide: their perceived role, their perceived audience, their perceived cooperation with other journalists, and their perceptions of a European public sphere. Each theme will include a discussion of the findings, linking them back to the literature review and the structural analysis of the European media landscape.

4.1. Structural analysis of the media landscape

This thesis focuses on how Dutch journalists covering EU affairs relate to the concept of a European public sphere. In 2020, there were 811 journalists in Brussels with an accreditation for the EU institutions – a number which had peaked in 2013 with around 1130 accredited journalists. This is traditionally one of the largest press corps in the world, yet its numbers are declining (Raeymaeckers, Cosijn, and Deprez 2007; General Secretariat of the Council of the European Union 2022, 33). Of those 811 remaining journalists, the majority (around 50 to

60%) were from national media (General Secretariat of the Council of the European Union 2022, 33–34). This means that most journalists reporting on Europe are writing for media organisations diffused across 27 member states. Eighteen per cent of the 811 journalists serve a "pan-European" or global audience. The feasibility problem at hand is finding where there are Dutch journalists. This structural analysis of the media landscape helps to show the context in which these journalists operate and contextualise the contemporary context in which journalists function.

4.1.1. The media landscape

As was shown in the literature review, most academic research on the European public sphere has focused on the Europeanisation of national public spheres. This 'turn' took place after finding obstacles to the development of a supranational or transnational public spheres, such as linguistic, cultural, and financial obstacles of for pan-European media. However, that does not mean that there are no pan-European or transnational media at all. Brüggemann and Schulz-Forberg categorised media that "address audiences beyond and across national borders (2009, 696). They show how there is a range of media (from global to national with an international mission) on different levels that function to some extent as transnational media. The field of media globally is too varied to cover entirely. When thinking about written press that covers European affairs, the following examples help to exemplify the field. On a *global* level there are media such as *The Economist* or *Financial Times* that follow financial news worldwide and thus have an active interest in EU news, or the monthly *Le Monde diplomatique* who publish worldwide in a variety of languages. All three of these have higher audiences outside the country where they are based than inside (Brüggemann and Schulz-Forberg 2009, 704–5). On a *pan-European* level there are most notably *Politico* (7.400.000 monthly visits), *EURACTIV* (2.000.000 monthly visits) and *EUobserver* (650.000 monthly visits online).[2] On a national level there are famous domestic written press with a readership abroad, such as *Le Monde*, *El Pais*, or *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung (FAZ)*.

One of the main characteristics of the EU is its immense linguistic and cultural internal diversity. There has been some research on the obstacles for pan-European media who aim to abridge these differences and to reach a European audience (Varga 2011; Firmstone 2008).

[2] These numbers are self-reported as found on their website.

Varga found that there are four primary obstacles for European media, that he put in order of priority. Firstly, there is a lack of a European advertising market because there is no demand for advertising on a European level and a lack of audience that can be effectively reached through these advertisements. Secondly, he finds that English is the primary language of the pan-European media analysed in his study, and it is not clear if providing content in more languages would effectively expand the audience of European media. Thirdly, Varga finds that there are different national traditions in reporting, yet no overarching European reporting culture. Consequently, reporting becomes void of cultural symbols that entice readership on a national level. Fourthly, there is a threefold reason for why the EU political communication deficit creates difficulties for reporting by journalists covering EU politics, including journalists of European media: the EU produces excessive amounts of information, in language full of jargon, and through a complex, lengthy decision-making structure that creates difficulties for reporting on newsworthiness (Varga 2011, 144–48). It is for this last reason that the general audience for these pan-European media is mostly an elite audience of well-informed citizens and EU policymakers (Walter 2017b, 567).

Firmstone (2008) and Varga (2011) both mentioned examples of pan-European or global media focusing on Europe that simply do no longer exist today: *European Voice, Café Babel, Wall Street Journal Europe* and *International Herald Tribune.* This goes to show that the that the turnover in pan-European media is big, as European media logically do not operate in a vacuum: they are not only in competition with each other, but also with national media, who each cover European politics as well to some degree, yet do not have the same obstacles as pan-European media.

4.1.2. Global trends

There is an increased competition of advertisement markets for traditional media. We know from the research by Varga (2011) mentioned above, that this has always been a weakness for pan-European media. Since the introduction of Facebook and Google as major players in the advertisement market, all traditional media experience stiff competition due to their tools for targeted advertisements and by them showing media products on their own platforms.

This increased competition has been the main driver for the rapid market concentration in the Netherlands that was mentioned in the introduction. Belgian media companies *Mediahuis* and *DPG Media* have an accumulative share of 90% - based on the latest available data on

circulation from 2017 (CvdM 2021). The Dutch market is significant to them: *Mediahuis* gets 46 per cent of its turnover from their activities in NL (CvdM 2022).

4.1.3. European trends

As pointed out before, there is a high turnover of pan-European media. *EUobserver* is the last brand in this category that still exists under its original name and has remained independent since its foundation, with a business model mostly focused on subscribers. New initiatives pop up everywhere: *The European Correspondent, Are We Europe, The European Review of Books*. These are all relatively new and take a different approach from traditional written press, by seemingly covering more stories of human interest and with a cultural focus. Moreover, they seem to be explicitly not Brussels media, but aim to be European media.

Financial Times was traditionally the most well-read medium in Brussels (Corcoran and Fahy 2009) but has in recent years been overtaken by Politico (BCW 2022). The investment of Axel Springer as mentioned in the introduction thus pays off. Of the 10 most influential news sources, only 3 (Euronews, Euractiv, euobserver) are truly 'European.' Politico started as an American organisation and the other global media also anglophone. Since Brexit, a discussion has been ongoing about whether the EU still has autonomy over their own narrative considering this overwhelming share of anglophone media. (Münchau 2021) Another conclusion from this poll by BCW is that in Brussels they mainly read news in English. This raises questions about how reflective this is of the linguistic diversity of the EU. However, Frans Timmermans argued in a recent speech that there is a global, or at least European, lingua Franca in the world: Bad English (Timmermans 2023).

These examples show that the market on European media is shifting, and with it arguably the borders that existed between the different bubbles of media reporting existing between the 24 official languages in the EU.

4.1.4. Dutch trends

The Netherlands has traditionally had a very pluralistic news landscape for a country of 17.8 million inhabitants (CBS 2023). There are 6 major dailies: *De Telegraaf, Algemeen Dagblad (AD), De Volkskrant*, NRC, *Het Financieele Dagblad (FD)* and *Trouw*. There are no tabloids in NL, yet *Telegraaf* can be considered 'popular' and has been used in research (Koopmans and Statham 2010b, 51), however *AD* and *Telegraaf* can be considered 'commercial,' meaning that they cater for your average citizens. The lack of tabloids sets it apart from other European

countries, primarily knowing how the tabloids are a major part in thinking about multi-segmentation of public spheres (Kleinen-von Königslöw 2012). Although there were fears about the future of the newspaper in NL (partially due to transformations in the news cycle that are a global phenomenon) (Bakker 2015), budgets of newspapers have stabilised: it's apparently possible to still maintain a solid basis of subscribers online, without people buying papers. Media companies have invested heavily in multimedia material: *AD* surpassed *Telegraaf* as the biggest newspaper, purely because of the size of its online newspaper/app; *NRC* has some of the most listened to podcasts in NL.

Dutch media organizations have a relatively large presence in the Brussels: 14 accredited news organisations by 2020 (General Secretariat of the Council of the European Union 2022, 10), coming in after Belgium, Spain, Germany, Italy, France (in that order). In absolute numbers, there were 37 Brussels/EU correspondents in Brussels in 2004 (which accumulated to 4% of the Press corps in Brussels, after Germany, Belgium, UK, Italy, Spain, France) (Raeymaeckers, Cosijn, and Deprez 2007, 106) The number of EU correspondents has been declining (Raeymaeckers, Cosijn, and Deprez 2007; General Secretariat of the Council of the European Union 2022; Peeperkorn 2010). Currently, all national dailies have 1 correspondent in Brussels, only *FD* has 2 and FTM started a dedicated office in Brussels consisting of at least 4 journalists.

4.2. Qualitative interviews with Dutch journalists working on European affairs

As outlined in my methodological chapter, I asked my interviewees about four larger themes. All the questions prompted them to think about the concept of a European public sphere, by talking about their work. The semi-structured interview questions allowed them to freely associate and express from their own experience. First, the journalists were asked about their perceived role: how do they describe their current role, how did they get there and what drives or motivates them? Second, they were asked about their audience: who do they regard as their target group, for whom do they write? These questions also related to questions about the extent to which they felt European stories are a 'hard sell'? And what are the expectations from their editors are in that respect. Do they sometimes consider publishing elsewhere or translating their writing? Thirdly, they were asked about their cooperation with other journalists: do they cooperate, what does that cooperation look like? Are these fellow Dutch journalists, or 'foreign' journalists? Lastly, they were asked about the concept of a European public sphere:

how do they feel about it? Do they see a future in it? How do they regard (the future of) European journalism?

4.2.1. General observations

The interviews had varying lengths (see table in methodology chapter), ranging from 18 minutes to 52 minutes. To entice the journalists to participate in the research and guarantee the comparability of the research, my aim was to have every interview be about half an hour. On average, the conversations lasted about 33 minutes. The length of the interviews seemed mostly determined by the extent to which people felt eager to talk about the topic. This was in part determined by the extent to which they felt like they were maybe not the right person to talk about this topic. Another major difference determining the length of the interviews was how busy they appeared to be. Two journalists were audibly receiving notifications from emails and WhatsApp messages and one interview had to be interrupted for them to answer a phone call. The fact that these interviews were conducted online might have played a part in how 'in the moment' the journalists were.

One thing that struck me about the interviews that all of them were very accustomed to explaining how the EU works. The EU correspondent from *AD* had just started his position as correspondent and said early in the interview: "I thought, like you might also think [about yourself], that I knew Europe. (…) I am interested, so I thought that I knew approximately how stuff worked around here. That turned out to be a misconception." The EU correspondent from *NRC* said something similar: "To be honest, I knew very little of European politics, so I really had to start from scratch here. (…) I'm talking about the jargon-like things such as the political set-up, so the Council of the European Union, the European Council, European Parliament, the European Commission and how that all works together. The role of the Ambassadors here: I didn't know all of that." This might mean that they felt inclined to explain the EU to me, since they did not know about it. Another explanation is that they are very accustomed to explaining the EU to their audience in their reporting and to the people around them in daily life. It really appeared like second nature to them.

At least six journalists mentioned how they had a background in working in *"Den Haag"* or *"de Haagse redactie."* The Hague is the political capital of The Netherlands and the seat of all the Dutch national branches of government. Working in The Hague means that you follow national politics and the Dutch political intrigue. As such, many comparisons were drawn in

the interviews between 'how things work in The Hague' and 'how things go in Brussels.' This contrast between The Hague and Brussels was consistent amongst interviews. Nearly all of them worked for written press before as well, only the freelancer and the Editor-in-Chief of *Brusselse Nieuwe* had backgrounds in respectively radio and television. The *FTM-Team Lead* worked as a freelancer in Brussels before starting a Brussels office for Follow the Money.

At the time of conducting the interviews, there had recently been the Dutch elections for the 12 provincial councils. These elections determine the distribution of seats in the Dutch Senate (*'Eerste Kamer'*), and the members of the Senate were elected by the elected members of the provincial councils on 30 May. These elections resulted in a landslide victory for the Farmer-Citizen Movement (BBB, or BoerBurgerBeweging) in relation to the ongoing 'nitrogen crisis' in the Netherlands.[3] These events repeatedly returned in the common frame of reference of all interviewees, for example in relation to the Nature Reservation Law that is, at the time of writing this thesis, under discussion in the European Parliament. Another point of common reference was the 'migration crisis' in the Netherlands that relates to inability of the Dutch government to provide shelter to refugees and migrants coming to the Netherlands and whose residency applications are waiting to be processed. This in turn relates to ongoing efforts of the Dutch government to limit the influx of migration at the external borders of the EU. The attendance of Mark Rutte at the EU-Tunisia summit at time of writing this thesis should be seen in relation to this. Both these examples featured in multiple interviews and exemplify a common frame of reference of journalists with regards to the Europeanisation of the Dutch public sphere. Domestic issues are increasingly discussed in relation to European affairs.

4.2.2. Perceived roles of journalists

When asked if they could describe their role, all interviewees understood the question as being about their profession or current position. In the cases of the correspondents, they sometimes referred to themselves as the correspondent "in Brussels." What that role means to them differed per correspondent. Some mentioned that there is not a "job description" for the

[3] The 'nitrogen crisis' (*'stikstofcrisis'* in Dutch) is an ongoing political problem with regards to required reduction of nitrogen emissions in The Netherlands. The Dutch public debate on it revolves around the questions the extent to which binding European agreements with regards to nature preservation, will possibly lead to the closure of actors in agriculture responsible for significant amounts of nitrogen emmissions.

correspondent (EU correspondent *Trouw*), some mention that it's "usually the task of a correspondent" to describe what happens in Brussels (EU correspondent *AD*). It becomes clear from all of them that they are solely in Brussels to report on EU affairs. Since all the correspondents I spoke to are currently fulfilling this job alone, they do not cover Belgian or NATO politics. It becomes clear that both *NRC* and *Volkskrant* have separate people discussing European foreign politics or geopolitics.

The *Team lead* Bureau Brussels for *FTM* describes how the goal behind their work is: "doing more investigation in issues related to the EU. And to cooperate with journalists from other member states for that." As such, they were the only journalist who described their role as intrinsically linked with cooperation with foreign journalists and a mission devoted to a certain degree of "cross-border journalism."

Primarily for the journalists working for a Dutch medium, their role perceptions relate to reporting about European affairs to a Dutch audience. The *Brusselse Nieuwe*-EIC used the term "translating" what is happening on a European level. The EU correspondent from NRC says: "there's so much information coming at you. It's my role of course to 'translate,'[4] like: 'there's happening extremely much, but now you should really pay attention!' Taking the reader by the hand and say: 'This is important!' It's also your task as a newspaper to… I follow everything so I know everything here, but I have to filter and say to the reader, such as my mum, like: 'There's a lot going on, but now you really have to pay attention: this is actually *really* important!'" This is exemplary of a high level of focus on policy and policy-making processes in the EU that are represented in some of the interviews with journalists. The *Trouw* correspondent says for example: "I see myself as someone who enquires what is going to happen to readers as a consequence of EU-policies."

Amongst journalists, there are different perspectives on explaining. The correspondent for *AD* describes how he just started by answering the questions that their readers have. "So, I start from the interests[5] of the reader. If I start with what's happening here, I won't reach that reader.

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[4] The word used was 'vertaalslag,' meaning to translate or a translation, but more comparable to "applying a concept/idea from one situation to another," meaning that the function of a journalist is to contextualise European affairs in the framework of reference for readers.

[5] Inerests in Dutch is either 'belangstelling' (meaning, 'having an interst in something') or belang (meaning, an involvement, share, stake or *interest* in something. When using the English 'interest,' which is the translation for both, it might therefore be a translation for either of these two meanings.

No matter how good the article might be: it doesn't matter if it's not read." He acknowledges that answering the questions that readers might have, is "unfortunately" something different from 'reporting' EU affairs. They explain this by mentioning the mission statement of *AD*: "keeping it close to the reader" and say: "We try to write everything in such a way that it makes you feel something. And we try to explain it."

Those journalists in leadership roles (in this case the Editor-in-Chiefs) describe their personal task, mostly in relation to their own media organization. The *EUobserver*-EIC says for example: "I see my role, as my previous boss used to say, as a sort of 'shit umbrella.' So, all the shit that comes in at a media organization, I catch that, so that everyone who works with me and produces journalism, can do their best work and doesn't have to concern themselves with all the… side issues."

Some journalists explicitly stress their responsibility of being a "watchdog," as the Editor-in-Chief of *Brusselse Nieuwe* called it himself. "It's my task to critically follow 'power,'" the EU correspondent for *NRC* says. They are not ideologically pro or anti-Europe but say: "It's simply a level of governance that needs to be followed." The Team Lead at *FTM* describes her focus on the 'interests' behind Brussels policy making: "The communicative lines/lines of interests from Brussels, also go to the other capitals. If you want to follow a lobby thoroughly, you also must understand how the lobbies of industries in certain countries, capitals, etcetera, have also had an impact on the policy-making process." Their mission is thus to explicate the motives and interests behind decision-making, which are not the same but linked to the role as a 'watchdog.'

The Western-Europe editor at *The European Correspondent* remarked how they were driven by the idea of justice and truth" in their work, after witnessing the aftermath of the murder of investigative journalist Daphne Carune Galizia on Malta. This relates to a broader desire to 'uncover' how things go in Europe to a broader audience. The *NRC*-correspondent says: "My most important task is to follow political proceedings here. (…) That comes down in practice to, how I also describe it: 'Seeing how the sausage is made.' There's a lot of policy that's daily, weekly, monthly, yearly being poured out over us from Brussels and there's a background to that, which is tweaked here, and there's a variety of political powers involved. There are many interests that play a role and I try to uncover how that happens." This is closely related to abovementioned remarks of the *FTM*-Team Lead who describes that to fully grasp the lobby for the policy-making process, you need a wide perspective on the lobby from different

industries in member states and capitals. The *NRC*-correspondent describes how those balancing of interests in Brussels, "the tug-of-war of who decides what and how things go" is important to describe to her readership.

In the interviews there is an emphasis on explaining to the public what is happening in the EU. This is in part to bridge the gap between the EU and citizens (who are sometimes referred to as "the people," by the Editor-in-Chief of *EUobserver* and the Western-Europe editor from *The European Correspondent*). For example, the Editor-in-Chief of *EUobserver* described the role of media: "The function that we could fulfil as media, is to be a more direct bridge between EU-citizens and EU-rules and EU-affairs. So… A less filtered lens. So that people can understand: why have decisions been taken? And in that way can *form an opinion of their own* about how that should be implement in the Netherlands."

They describe the freedom that they have in how they cover European affairs differently. I assumed that this was related to a certain editorial line, but this did not appear to be the case for any of the journalists that I spoke to. The *AD* correspondent described how he is free to pick whatever topic he wanted, "maybe too free." He lets himself be guided the questions of their readers. For *NRC* and *Volkskrant,* it appeared to mostly be driven by the topicalities of what happens to be "the most important topics" (NRC-correspondent) at a given time, but aside from that, also personal interests and a certain amount of coincidence. The *Volkskrant*-correspondent describes that this happens by spending a large part of his week "waffling on with diplomats, Commission officials, MEPs," and spending another part "going over genuinely endless heaps of paper." The *Trouw*-correspondent also experiences a lot of freedom but says: "I have to decide between what is going to be read and what is not going to be read." For the freelance journalists it is the strongest motivation to work as freelancers: "I can determine in complete freedom which assignments I do and don't accept.

With regards to personal motivation, interviewees mention the importance of Europe to them. Many saw an increasing importance and relevance of European affairs to Dutch politics or at the very least a Dutch readership. A common trope was also that the majority of our laws come from a European level. The drive of the Editor-in-Chief of *Brusselse Nieuwe* has been to draw more attention to European decision-making after he saw it to be important for the Netherlands.

The EU correspondent of *Volkskrant* explains that he is driven by a fascination of EU decision making, speaking of a certain level of amazement at how that "group of by now 27 countries is even able to come to a decision together." He found reporting on Brussels more exciting, using a football analogy that European politics if more like the *EUFA Champions League* in comparison to the Dutch *Eredivisie*.

Talking more generally about the joys of journalism as a profession, both the EU Correspondent from *NRC* and the *EUobserver*-EICmade clear that they have desire to learn about new things and wide variety of topics. "I just really enjoy working in news, in the media. Simply the fact that you can be working on so many different things. That you can develop a new interest from one day to another. And that you then have an excuse to speak with people that know the most about that. That's the first: a personal, capricious curiosity that drives me" (Editor-in-Chief *EUobserver*)

The Correspondent from *AD* remarks how the work challenges him: "It's a huge, new challenge: something that keeps me very alert. I have to do my very best."

4.2.3. Perceived audience and readership

As became clear in the findings from the perceived role of journalists, their perceived readership and audience play an important part in how the journalists I spoke to work. The *Trouw*-correspondent described it as having to know what will and what will not be read. The *AD*-correspondent says: "You must know what audience you write for." In general, the perceived audiences of the interviewed journalists can be divided into three categories: readers of their respective media outlet, a wider European audience, and specifically Dutch readers.

First, the correspondents of the national newspapers and *FTM* mostly gave a description of the reader of their respective medium. All these mediums described a 'stereotype' of their typical reader ("an older white man" in the case of *NRC*, "for people like my parents; people who lived through [WW2] and for whom the world changes rapidly" in the case of *Trouw* a relatively well-educated reader in the case of both the *Volkskrant* journalists, and readers who are "already interested above average" in the case of *FTM*.

Second, the *EUobserver* Editor-in-Chief, the Western-Europe editor from *The European Correspondent* and the *FTM*-team lead all described the potential of a wider European audience. For *The European Correspondent* and *EUobserver* this makes sense as they are pan-

European media platforms, yet *FTM* is currently trying to reach a wider European audience with their reports. One of the ways that they are trying to do that is by cooperating with journalists in cross-border journalistic projects. Both the pan-European journalists had elaborate ideas about how you could potentially grow that group, providing the idea that potentially everybody could be interested in European news. The idea for *The European Correspondent* is to also reach people that are not necessarily interested in policy or the EU, but just want to know "what happens on their continent" are also able to inform themselves about that. The *EUobserver*-EIC argues that "many people, due to a lack of knowledge or accessible communication from both journalism and the EU, don't *know* they could be interested." At *EUobserver* he does not want to aim at a certain 'target group,' because that target group determines how you write and that you should actually write articles that have in-depth information, that is not filled with jargon, and that is written in a tone that even "casual people" can understand what is happening.

Other pan-European media, such as *Politico* and *EURACTIV*, are criticized from both the perspectives of the journalists of pan-European and Dutch media. They argue that these media organisations reach audiences that are already interested and, according to *FTM*-Team lead, "lobbyists and diplomats" who mostly want to be up to date about the latest developments for their work. The Team Lead characterizes these media as 'service media.' The *Brusselse Nieuwe*-EIC says that *Politico* is "entirely focused on the bubble" and the NRC-correspondent says: "[*Politico*] is not read really anywhere outside of Brussels. (…) I think that it will remain a very limited audience."

Third, the freelance journalist and the *Brusselse Nieuwe* Editor-in-Chief stated that they only write for a Dutch audience and about those topics that are relevant to Dutch readers. All journalists seemed to agree that to a certain degree, they mostly reach readers that are already interested in European affairs. The Editor-in-Chief of *Brussels Nieuwe* puts it bluntly and says: "*Brusselse Nieuwe* is an online platform that has as its goal to provide European news for the Netherlands, from a Dutch perspective." He argues that it must relate to the Dutch context and the Dutch readers, as "I also don't give a damn about what happens in Southern-Greece or in Italy. Unless it relates to me." The *AD*-correspondent goes a bit further arguing that *AD*-readers are "first and foremost interested in the things that relate to him personally. You might even say that part of our readership first feels and then judges. And that it's up to me to help them

think." He repeatedly mentions the necessity to explain to people why something is important, and argues that you should not frame it as European but start from what problem we are faced with to make people engaged. That problem should be something that relates to the daily lives of "normal" people. He argues that this sets them apart from other domestic newspapers with a different audience: "The correspondent of *FD* will write for a totally different audience than me. I also write differently. The audience of *NRC* is also different from ours. [Their readers] are interested in stuff that doesn't relate to them personally, and also institutional news." He also argues that his audience is mostly living outside of the main metropolitan areas of the Netherlands (commonly referred to as De Randstad), so that he must cater it differently than media in Amsterdam (like *NRC* and *Volkskrant*).

Even if the media say they do not write from an explicitly Dutch perspective, they are still challenged in making their writing match the point of reference of their readership. The *NRC*-correspondent described how even for the demographic that they reach; they still must actively try to get their readers interested. One of the ways that journalists described doing this was by finding "Dutch hooks" (*Volkskrant*-correspondent). This is a certain angle that is expected to increase the interest of their audience. This hook is often based on a national point of reference. And often cited example is somebody like Commissioner Frans Timmermans: people know him and have heard of him, so it's easier to connect a story to it. One of the difficulties that becomes clear from the interviews, relates to the abovementioned concept of 'translating' news. The figures on a European level are portrayed to be less recognisable. "People don't know them" (Both *AD*-correspondent and *Volkskrant*-correspondent). *AD*-correspondent explains that he thus always looks for a Dutch angle and covers Dutch actors and political parties. The *Volkskrant*-correspondent finds that in comparison to European colleagues, he takes a much more "European approach." He will use the Dutch 'hook,' but argues that colleagues in other member states seem to ask questions in the press room that use national politicians as a starting point (i.e., Italians asking questions about EU affairs based on Georgia Meloni). *FTM* publish in both English and Dutch and the Team Lead describes how, for their cross-border journalism project, they do attempt to change the angle depending on whether they publish it in English (for a European audience) or in Dutch (for a Dutch audience).

Journalists argue that European politics seems far away to readers. One of the dimensions in this is that the effects of Dutch politics are perceived to be more "direct" (*Volkskrant*-

correspondent and Western-Europe editor at *The European Correspondent*). Decision-making on a European level is portrayed as being longer and windier, which causes it to be harder to make people relate to it.

All in all, they seem confident that there is actual interest amongst people in news about European affairs. The *Trouw*-correspondent says: "In general, the European citizen is very much interested in what happens in Europe." The *FTM* Team Lead remarks: "as long as you know how to present it" (*FTM*).

One last important angle is the extent to which they measure their success in engaging with their audience. This is in part related to the idea of 'selling Europe,' which is generally assumed to be hard. The interesting thing is that the correspondents did not seem to have an eye for what literally sells or not. The Editor-in-Chief of *EUobserver* and the *AD*-correspondent (former Editor-in-Chief of *AD*) had stronger views on this since they have experience from a financial, strategic and organizational perspective. While the Editor-in-Chief of *EUobserver* said that the biggest problem for them is that there is no European advertisement market, the former *AD*-editor-in-chief explained how other things took prevalence over improving reporting on other issues and the general well-being of the newspaper. The Editor-in-Chief of *Brusselse Niewue* (much smaller than the two media outlets mentioned above) argued that selling Europe is hard, unless you work in a niche (such as agriculture, where he started his career). One element of this strategic thinking about the written press business, that was reflected in the way that journalists talked about their audience, is the role of metrics. Metrics show how often specific articles are read online. The Western-Europe editor of *The European Correspondent*, the Europe editor of *Volkskrant*, and the *AD*-correspondent all mentioned how metrics were shared within their news organisations. The Europe editor says: "I always notice that… We of course have some of those lists of best-read stories. Stuff about Europe ranks quite high often. Sometimes it surprises me a bit too. That's after all a pretty tough, policy-oriented subject. That's still read quite well. If I can believe those lists. I think it might also because of Brexit." The Western-Europe editor was frustrated about how little foreign news was read during her time at Belgian newspaper *De Morgen*, whereas the Europe editor and *AD*-correspondent were both pleased about how well European news was read by their audience. The *AD*-correspondent noted that his articles "did better" than the articles from his predecessor. These journalists perceived that the relative engagement of readers with an article online, was a measurement of how well their work "did."

The Team Lead at *FTM* and the *NRC*-correspondent both stressed the extent to which their news made an impact on the European Commission. The *NRC*-correspondent described how she perceives *NRC* as a small newspaper in European standards, even if it is large for Dutch standards. Both journalists argue that the Commission would not be bothered by individual reporting by a Dutch newspaper. *FTM* argued that by cooperating with other journalists and publishing in a more coordinated way with media outlets in other member states, this would have more impact. These journalists were the only people who described the European Commission (or any other EU institution) as a potential audience for their journalism in the interviews I had.

4.2.4. Perceived cooperation with other journalists

One of the major differences between 'The Hague' and 'Brussels,' relates to the collegiality of the EU correspondents. All the people I interviewed knew how close the Dutch EU correspondents in Brussels are. The Europe editor of *Volkskrant* laughed and said: "It is quite noticeable in Brussels: they are quite tight as a group. They help each other out if they couldn't be somewhere or something, then they send recordings or exchange phone numbers. So, there's quite amicable contact between them over there." The EU correspondents referred to it themselves as well as "collegial." Interestingly, they all used the example of the recordings, which indicates that this probably happens often. The EU-correspondent from *Trouw* mentioned how she organized a dinner for colleagues around Christmas; the *AD*-correspondents mentioned how they went to the 'Schuman Show' (coincidentally co-founded by the Team Lead at *FTM*), and the *NRC*-correspondent mentions how they hang out in bars together.

This is contrasted with the perceived competition of domestic reporting in The Hague and the desire for scoops of *Politico* and *FT*. All the journalists with experience in 'The Hague reporting' recall how in The Hague, different newspapers would sit at different tables, avoid each other and are very much competitors of each other. The *Trouw*-correspondent describes how at European Council summits, all these different Dutch correspondents literally share a table together at press conferences. Suddenly they are all part of the same team.

Both the *Trouw*-correspondent and *Brusselse Nieuwe*-EIC characterise reporting in The Hague as being filled more with political drama and intrigue. "The Hague editors write much less about policy than about who argues with whom" (*Trouw*-correspondent)." *Brusselse Nieuwe*-

EIC says about the European politics, specifically with regards to the European parliament: "It's never messy, never dirty. It's always polite," arguing that there is not much spectacle involved.

The other reason that kept coming back was that journalists for Dutch media in Brussels consider it impossible to really chase scoops. They argue that only the most senior amongst them (*Volkskrant*-correspondent) has the authority and access to information, but that they themselves do not have the staffing, the network or time to produce scoops. The dynamic that they characterise The Hague reporting, is according to them visible with pan-European media. According to the *NRC*-correspondent, her colleague at *Financial Times* did not experience the same collegiality in her work and was much more focused on producing scoops. The *EUobserver*-EIC says about *Politico* and *EURACTIV*: "I think they still very much believe in that model of exclusivity of news. So, if they have something, they are not going to share that as they want to be the only one that publishes that."

The correspondents, the *EUobserver*-EIC, and the *FTM.EU* Team Lead describe how the EU is so big, how there is so much information, and so many different topics happening at the same time. The *FTM.EU* team lead describes how for her as investigative journalists, she has been amazed how many topics were "literally up for grabs." The *EUobserver*-EIC describes how he does not believe in competition in media, because "it is never a zero-sum game." He argues that it is better to cooperate with as many different people as possible to widen your distribution and reach as much as possible. This is very much in line with the way that the *FTM.EU* team lead describes the sense of cross-border journalism and publishing. She described how by cooperating with journalists from media outlets in other member states, you can make a larger impact: "Suddenly it becomes something that they have to consider. You see there's also more effect: more questions from MEPs. In turn, you begin to be force of power in European democracy." In a sense, she seems to argue that there is power in numbers to overcome the relatively small size of media outlets in NL. The *Volkskrant*-correspondent describes that there are "of course" too few EU correspondents in Brussels from The Netherlands, especially for the number of topics out there, but says that there's a limit to how much he shares and keeps his personal schedule private, since his colleagues are also still his competitors.

However, with correspondents from other member states or foreign journalists, none of the Dutch correspondents feel any competition. The readers of those newspapers do not overlap at all. There is an even stronger collegiality with them in many ways. Correspondents and the

FTM.eu Team lead describe them as an easy way of finding out more about developments in another member state. The *FTM.eu* Team Lead describes how much it helps for their work as investigative journalists to be in contact with journalists from other member states: "Sometimes I call a German journalist. I'll say: 'I see that there's a German company involved, could you check up in that? He'll then look that up for me, 'no strings attached.' And some other time, I'll help him out."

The *Volkskrant*-correspondent describes how he was also approached by foreign colleagues recently who were asking question about the results of the Dutch Senate elections. He sees it as part of a larger development of media increasingly following elections in other member states. Those elections have an impact on what the government looks like in different member states: "that prime minister sits at the European table, the ministers will take seat in the Councils of Ministers. That has an impact on each other, as you ultimately must make compromises." Besides being an interesting source for articles, he also argues that the contact with foreign journalists helps him become more sensitive for other points of view. He argues that "you have to receptive to the points of views from other countries," otherwise a correspondent cannot do their job properly.

The *Brusselse Nieuwe*-EIC, freelancer, and the Europe editor at *Volkskrant* say that they do not cooperate with journalists from other member states at all and seemed to think that was more something that belonged to the work of a correspondent. The *Volkskrant* Europe Editor says: "I work from Amsterdam, eh? That's my post and the basis of my work. (…) Either way, you're not really supposed to enter each other's field of work without communicating about it." This shows how in a domestic context, outside of Brussels, the practice is a bit more like the exclusivity of news that the *EUobserver*-EIC described.

Another form of cooperation that is relevant in the context of this research, is the cooperation with the domestic news desks of newspapers. The correspondents from *Volkskrant* and *AD* describe how they are actively trying to involve journalists with domestic portfolios. "I try to delegate part of what I do to colleagues in Amsterdam. Everything about the Digital Services Act, those IT things, I try to get my IT-colleagues to do those. Things about the banking union and the capital market union, I try to sell to my economics colleagues" (*Volkskrant*-correspondent). He sees it as a part of a larger development of national news desks becoming more involved in reporting on European affairs. One such development is that he was able to convince the editorial board of *Volkskrant* that he should be part of 'The Hague' news desk

instead of the foreign news desk. This development was also implemented at *Trouw*. The *AD*-correspondent reflects on his time at *NRC*, by recalling that *NRC* never succeeded in truly integrating journalists with domestic portfolios into reporting of Europe. He describes how he is currently trying to involve journalists at the general news desk: "When a colleague asks me a question about what Europe thinks of something – to get an answer from me – I encourage them: you should text these, these, and these people." The *NRC*-correspondent describes how she mostly cooperates with other journalists at *NRC*, by writing stories together: "What I can do well is show the tug-of-war here, but when it's about very specific, detailed knowledge about portfolio's, my colleagues often know the ins and outs of the matter." She concludes: "That's also how you serve the reader best: by just working together well."

4.2.5. Perceptions of the concept of a European public sphere

To fully answer the research question, it was necessary to talk about the European public sphere directly. This is what the last phase of the interview was devoted to. At the beginning of the interview, I gave them the definition of a European public sphere as outlined in the literature review. Some people knew the concept from Habermas, yet most did not. It helped that we had already talked about their work, other journalists, European media, their audience, so they could continue to associate from there.

Sometimes the concept required more explanation. *Brusselse Nieuwe*-EIC: "I still can't picture this. What happens then? Who's talking with whom? And where?" And some journalists seem to be searching for what exactly they would relate to the concept, such as the *AD*-correspondent: "Well, look, I don't know. I find your definition difficult."

Nevertheless, even the critics of the concept were able to formulate opinions on why they did not agree with it. The staunchest in this opinion were *Brusselse Nieuwe*-EIC ("I don't believe some sort of pan-European concept. Because I don't give a damn about what happens in South-Greece or in Italy. Unless it relates to me.") and the Freelancer ("If what is meant some sort of European medium that should be interesting to all Europeans, then I don't think it even has a chance of success.") The freelancer later added: "To be honest: no. It might sound egoistic, but I'm mostly busy with my own stuff and am not a big 'thinker' about journalistic matters, etcetera. Your research was, I think, the first occasion that I ever thought extensively about European journalism." Notably, these were also the people who described in the fiercest language that they only reporting European affairs with an explicit Dutch focus.

Most other journalists were willing to have a longer conversation about the concept. There were some common observations amongst them. In the way that had previously described their contact with fellow journalists (both foreign and domestic) they did formulate that to a certain extent their community in Brussels could be considered a European public sphere to some extent. The *NRC*-correspondent argues that a European public sphere does exist to a certain extent, "but of course mostly here in Brussels." They were doubting the extent to which they were able to engage citizens with that. The *AD*-correspondent says: "we are unable to engage the citizens. **(pause)** So, the danger of the European public sphere Is that we all very much agree with each other at [Place du Luxembourg] and feel like we're nicely involved internationally. And that 'back-home' people are not following that at all." The *Trouw*-correspondent describes how it would be a challenge to engage "lower-educated people" in that process.[6] She says that the long decision-making processes of the EU are an obstacle, as some decisions take "six years", and she argues that not all people would have "the ability to think on an abstract level" that this requires. In relation to their role as translator, the question was also raised by the *NRC*-correspondent to what extent "a random Dutch person would read the *Corriere dela Sera* for a bit for fun, to read what they have to say about [former Dutch minister of Finance Wopke] Hoekstra."

The *EUobserver*-EIC had very elaborate thoughts about the public sphere. He believes in a European public sphere, but in a sense of "extreme multiformity," which he considers both a weakness and a strength. "It does not exist in the way that Habermas described it, but it does exist in the following sense: there are people in different parts of Europe that all appreciate the same sort of music, you know? And maybe they don't identify that as a shared public space, but it essentially is. And this principle exists in so many forms in so many ways, that it cannot be capsulated in one whole." He considers it in a way that according to him is similar to asking people about a European identity or European values: everyone sees it slightly differently. This would prevent it from becoming one whole, but "that's also its strength." According to him, a

[6] It is very common in the Netherlands to refer to social stratification based on education levels. The concept of class is not very much intertwined with public discourse. Instead, "upper-class" is substituted by "hoogopgeleid" (i.e., well-educated) and "lower-class" with "laagopgeleid" (i.e., people without a higher education degree).

European public sphere can only exist if it can be done from “all sides, all topics, all backgrounds.” This theme of segmentation and plurality is echoed in the remarks of other journalists. For example, the Western-Europe editor of *The European Correspondent* says: “There are many journalists that are [in Brussels] for their own little country. Not to do European journalism, but to tell in their own country: hey, this is what they do here in the EU and that is interesting because of this reason. But not: ‘this is what happens in Europe, and you should know about that because you live on this continent.’” The *Volkskrant*-correspondent links this more explicitly to segmentation when describing how ‘the European elections’ are actually just national elections for their delegation to the European parliament: "it makes that you understand much better how that European discussion goes, but actually it's not a European discussion. It's more... It's 27 national discussions about European topics." He argues, though, that in those countries, the national debates on European affairs are increasing.

This is, according to him, a consequence of increased public debate on European affairs that started with the Eurozone crisis, and to a lesser extent the constitutional referendum in the Netherlands. The Eurozone crisis started right when he returned to Brussels as a correspondent: “the [Eurozone crisis] made something vital very clear, not just in The Netherlands, but in many countries: okay, we’re members of a club, and if the club does badly, then all of us feel that.” The *Trouw*-correspondent recognizes a similar role played by the Russian invasion of Ukraine: “Waging war helps a lot. Since the war in Ukraine, the love for the EU has become much larger, as well as that European feeling of identity, because we have an enemy that we go against together. This helps in achieving some sort of discussion space.” The *NRC*-correspondent argues that COVID-19 helped in creating a more European public sphere: “I noticed that right away in the [COVID-19] crisis, that when it relates to the European public sphere that you’re talking about, it has strengthened a lot.” She noticed that there was much more attention for the Netherlands, mostly due to the more hardline approach that the Dutch government took in the early stages of the pandemic with regards to financial aid. She describes how Google Translate allowed both her and colleagues to actively follow what is being said in different countries about them. She says: “I think that’s really new and something that plays an increasing role.”

All journalists found it important that citizens were properly informed about European affairs, and they saw it as their role to explain and ‘translate’ the EU to their respective readerships.

They differed in opinion on who would be at play to improve that: some said the media, some said national governments.

The *Trouw*-correspondent described how it seemed to her that foreign news has lost some of its importance in Dutch media. When asked about what could be done about that, she said: "I am not sure if that's my role. (…) I think I could maybe… You're sort of right… there's naturally a desire to write about 'what does this mean for the Netherlands,' in my case, that is quite big, and because of that I write less about what happens in all of Europe of how [this] plays a part in other countries. That part of the story disappears from the picture…" She also mentions how being the only one on the job, does not fully allow for such a coverage. This concern about staffing is widespread amongst the journalists who I interviewed. The lack of staffing is called "staggering" (*Brusselse Nieuwe*-EIC) and "embarrassing" (*FTM.EU* Team Lead) and falling short in doing proper European coverage "journalistic disgrace" (*AD*-correspondent). The *Volkskrant*-correspondent explicitly expressed a desire to have at least two EU correspondents per newspaper and was optimistic that this would happen considering the increasing importance of the EU. The *FTM.EU* team lead is more sceptical, noticing how there are fewer correspondents in Brussels each year. What also unpleasantly surprised her was how there were barely any freelancers in Brussels and even fewer investigative journalists. She suggests that journalism students are not encouraged in school to go to Brussels, which results in it staying out of the collective imagination of journalists. Therefore, *FTM* started providing masterclasses that would train starting journalists in doing cross-border journalism on European affairs, hoping that it would be an advantage in any place where those journalists end up having that experience. The Western-Europe editor of *The European Correspondent* feels that it is the responsibility of media to "close the gap" between citizens and the EU, saying: "It's our job, right? To translate boring stuff in something that is interesting to the *people*. So that they can be informed about what is happening and that they can formulate an opinion about that. (…) If the media is incapable to communicate about European policy and European decision-making and what's happening *'überhaupt'* in Europe – because that's where we live – then you can't really call that a democracy."

Other journalists leaned more towards a role for a responsibility for the Dutch government in this respect. The *Volkskrant*-correspondent and the *EUobserver*-EIC are frustrated with the tendency to blame 'Brussels' for decisions. They both point out that this narrative from

ministers is incredible, as they all are involved in every decision that the EU makes. The *Volkskrant*-correspondent says: "It all starts with the prime minister and the ministers, that simply have to start explaining and saying: '*I* have decided this with my colleagues. After every Council of Ministers meeting, every EU summit: this is what we decided. Not: 'this is what Brussels decided.'" The *EUobserver*-EIC stresses the responsibility of media in pointing out this incredible narrative: "It cannot be that Mark Rutte says, like: 'Yeah, no, that was the EU!' *You are the fucking EU!* You sit at that table. You simply participate. You can't blame anyone else. And those are the sort of things where actually national media fail. You must teach people… you have to make them see that [Rutte not being the EU] is not the case." The *Trouw*-correspondent looks at this from a different perspective, saying that the government should explicitly say that some laws are European policy: "If Rutte keeps doing as if he came up with the idea of granting fathers more parental leave, then [people] will never find out that Brussel is about much more than they originally knew."

4.3. Discussion of qualitative interviews: linking the literature review and findings

The semi-structured, qualitative interviews were conducted to answer the research question of this thesis: "How do Dutch journalists reporting on European affairs relate to the concept of a European public sphere?" The interviews were structured based on four themes: the perceived role of the journalists, their perceived audience, their perceived cooperation with other journalists, and their perception of a European public sphere. This subchapter will link the findings to the respective theory from the literature review.

4.3.1. Europeanization of national public sphere

The responses related strongly to the vertical Europeanisation of national public spheres as defined by Koopmans and Statham (Koopmans and Statham 2010b, 38–43). There are evidently strong communicative linkages between the national and European level, as the journalists see their role as a "translator" of European affairs to a national level. Journalists express how they try to link European affairs to the national point of references for the readership. This is also reflected in the (attempted) Europeanisation of national news desks. Correspondents for national newspapers actively try to involve colleagues at national news desks in the coverage of European affairs. They all seem to consider the EU not as foreign news, but more as domestic news. This is in part due to the background of many journalists, of

whom many worked for the *Haagse redactie* and therefore compared a lot between the dynamics in Brussels and the dynamics at home.

We can thus conclude that there is a strong focus on the vertical dimension of Europeanisation of the national public sphere in how the journalists talk about their role and audience in a European public sphere. Horizontal Europeanisation also seemed to be increasing, as one journalist mentioned how they were paying closer attention to elections in other EU member states. This would constitute an incorporation of European actors and topics of other EU member states in a national public sphere. They themselves, seemed sceptical about the degree to which this in fact took place. One of the characterisations, was that for the most part, European topics were discussed separately in every member state, rather than that there was a on overarching European public debate. Fact remains, that the practice of searching for "hooks" in reporting is mostly indicative of vertical Europeanization. This could be indicative of the concept of 'segmentation,' which is caused by a strong level of vertical Europeanisation, in combination with low levels of horizontal Europeanisation. Journalists seem to agree, that the more journalists would be involved in reporting European affairs, the better they could fulfil their role for their audience.

Journalists believed as well that there had been pivotal moments in recent history (Eurozone crisis, Ukraine, and COVID-19) that had let to an increased public debate on European matters. This closely aligns with wat Risse called "politicization" of European integration. This could in turn, based on our literature review, make a European public sphere stronger.

4.3.2. Relating to a European public sphere

In general, mostly all journalists were able to formulate concrete ideas about a European public sphere. Even those that were outspokenly critical of it (such as the freelancer and the *Brusselse Nieuwe*-EIC) still were able to argue about why they were skeptical about it. So, they were opinionated. They engaged with the concept. This proved the findings of Heikkilä and Kunelius wrong, who argued that journalists would get frustrated to talk about the concept of a European public sphere. Even if they did not necessarily believe in the existence or feasibility of it, there were still traces of a European public sphere in how they described their work. They seemed to identify their own community as a bubble (even the non-Dutch media journalists), that some of them identified as a European public sphere. This worried for example AD man who felt that they were disconnected from the wider population.

They all seem very excited about the way in which they learn more about the EU through their international colleagues but seem to think that this is unachievable for normal citizens. This would indicate that there is a European public sphere due to horizontal Europeanization for them, but not for a larger audience: they are strongly connected people from other member states, because they are uniquely connected to each other and other journalists. This demonstrates itself in a certain level of collegiality and a different perspective on competition. The Dutch case in this regard is interesting as it seems as if European news coverage is uniquely detached in their perceptions of competition from pan-European media such as Politico and Euractiv or transnational media such as FT who "don't want to cooperate" and are after scoops. Yet at the same time they argue that they are themselves not able to make as much of an impact due to their own size. The reflections on "power in numbers" indicated that stronger cooperation across borders, is perceived by some journalists as being a tool to strengthening European democracy by facilitating the coordinated exchange of political information in a European public sphere.

They seemed to be looking sometimes for what I wanted from them, which leads to the suggestions that maybe my phrasing of a European public sphere caused confusion or my attempt to try to encapsulate their work in some larger theme. Then again, some journalists seemed to utter the words that Habermas et sui used to describe a European public sphere, speaking of a "people," "form an opinion," etcetera.

4.3.3. Role of pan-European media

They were mostly all sceptical about the ability of the big pan-European media to make a difference for a European public sphere. They saw it really is only focused on Brussels. To the people working for pan-European media themselves that was a problem, as they wanted to reach a wider European audience. For now, it seems as if pan-European media are seen by the journalists that I interviewed as organised for people that are interested in the nitty-gritty of Brussels politics.

4.3.3. Selected interviewees

In the interviews, there was a clear focus on the European correspondents as they seemed to be most strongly connected. Their collective frame of reference in turn became overrepresented to a degree in the report of the interviews. It seemed as if 'being in Brussels' makes a difference

to how connected you feel with European affairs. The selection of my interviews would have benefitted from taking an even wider selection of different journalists in different position. It mostly would have benefitted from more freelance journalist working in Brussels (rather than in the Netherlands) and journalists working for pan-European media. This is linked too to the issue of staffing: there are relatively few journalists that I could find who exclusively cover European affairs and are not a correspondent. It would be important for a future mapping of the Dutch media landscape if *De Telegraaf* was also included in future research, just as journalists from *FD*.

4.3.4. Suggestions for further research

For future research, it would be interesting to ask journalist about what they benchmark their work to. Furthermore, more in dept mapping of the reporting in niches would allude more to the extent that there are perhaps more 'bubbles' of European public spheres in which there is a thickened flow of concentrated political communication. The most significant contribution to the field could be made by conducting anthropological research on domestic news desks to see how the claims from the correspondents and journalists interviewed in this research, are reflected in the wider organisation. Another interesting angle could be to task them not only about what their audience is, but what impact they hope to make with their reporting beyond informing the public. Most of all, this research underpins the need for more future studies on the perceptions of the European public sphere in non-core EU countries, EU-candidate members or countries surrounding the EU. One aspect that this research could not cover but is essential for future studies of the public sphere is a broader scope on media products, incorporating podcasts, culture, videos. Even 'written press' might not fit the description of media in a future European public sphere.

5. Conclusion

The research question of this thesis was: "how do Dutch journalists working on European affairs relate to the concept of a European public sphere?" By conducting and analysing the transcripts of 10 semi-structured qualitiative interviews, this thesis finds that Dutch journalists working on European affairs, do in fact relate to some degree with the concept of a European public sphere. Some people did not believe in the feasibility of a European public sphere, but

they were all in agreement about importance of linking the EU to citizens. Journalists in this research described themselves as “translators” of European affairs to a domestic audience, yet the journalists of pan-European media also of a European audience at large. They see an important role for themselves as explainers of the EU and in some cases bridging the gap between the EU and citizens. To do so, journalists working for domestic media outlets describe the practice of finding “hooks” in European reporting: actors or policy areas that relate to the national framework of readers. Consequently, the vertical Europeanisation is quite strong, meaning that EU actors and EU affairs feature increasingly in the Dutch public sphere. Journalists also described their attempt to Europeanise their national news desk, for example by incorporating their role as EU-correspondent into the news desk for domestic politics rather than the foreign news desk or by involving domestic journalists in the process of reporting European affairs. They discern a certain European public sphere amongst themselves and other EU correspondent and journalists in Brussels yet argue that it is challenging to involve wider audiences into that process. To the journalists interviewed for this thesis, a European public sphere is segmented into national public spheres and for most their primary focus is on the Dutch public sphere.

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