Chapter 5

OPINION-ORIENTED NEWS AS A SOURCE OF POLARIZED DISINFORMATION ON THE EU: A CASE STUDY ANALYSIS DURING THE 2019 EP ELECTIONS

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Introduction

The role of facts for public opinion is being put into question in the era of fake news. This is specially observed in election campaigns, which have become an objective of disinformation (Blassnig et al., 2019). Journalists show a preference for opinionated stories in a growing worldwide trend. The emergence of online news consumption meant a change in the relationship between politics and journalism, moving away the latter from its traditional function of providing keys for the understanding of the public sphere (Bennett & Livingston, 2018).

One of the consequences of the digital era is a news coverage focused on personalities (Van Aelst et al., 2012). In this context, the journalistic production has become cannibalistic as the media outlets compete more than ever with each other (Carlson, 2018). The coverage of the European Union (EU) is strongly affected by those problems. The European project is usually linked to matters of national policy, finding a utilitarian view of its policies. Besides that, when the EU is addressed as a singular issue, it is associated with diplomacy and corporatism, reinforcing the feeling of remoteness (Baisnée, 2014).

Another additional problem reporting EU is the difficulty in generating interest on this matter. Citizen disaffection has increased at the same time that some

institutional actions to promote Europeanism were introduced, showing the inability of public communication policy to achieve a Europeanization of the journalistic treatment (Walter, 2017). Elections to the European Parliament are even considered third-order elections by political actors, which is reflected in low turnout (Haßler et al., 2021).

The huge pro-European mobilization after EU enlargement in countries like Spain did not bring a better news coverage (Papaioannou & Gupta, 2018). In the framework of an increasingly interconnected political journalism faced with post-truth phenomena, this EU communication deficit has been widely studied in the literature in recent years (Goldberg et al., 2021). The use of national approaches is pointed out as the immediate cause of this problem of journalistic treatment.

Bearing those trends in mind, this research aims to conceptualize the role of opinionated news in disinformation, as this practice takes advantage of a polarized public opinion (Wagner & Boczkowski, 2019). Beyond a theoretical approach, we use the multiple-case study as research strategy to assess the degree of opinion-oriented stories about the EU. The report of this issue suffers from cultural clashes that threaten its journalistic quality (Norris & Inglehart, 2019).

Disinformation on EU issues

Covering the EU: the challenge of remoteness

Legacy media have formally attached some importance to the EU in their teams, as can be seen in the presence of correspondents before the European institutions in Brussels (Lloyd & Marconi, 2014). However, the coverage has continued to be carried out from a national perspective and without continuity, mostly depending on events (van Spanje & de Vreese, 2014). Initiatives to develop European journalistic narratives are scarce and usually financed by the EU institutions, but they overlap with a potential European Public Sphere (Rivas-de-Roca & García-Gordillo, 2022).

The number of EU news does not seem to influence citizen evaluations of its activity, but the use of crisis frames has contributed to heightening mistrust in the European institutions (Brosius et al., 2019). An informed citizenry is a necessary step for the well-functioning of a democracy regarding the European project. Transparency about elections improves the possible effects of information (Grill & Boomgaarden, 2017), although the EU has been traditionally accused of lack of clarity.

An example of the poor journalistic treatment of EU issues is that the press looks unable to build European identity in historical relevant moments, which has been accelerated by the rise of disinformation (Kermer & Nijmeijer, 2020; Otto et al., 2021). The failed Constitution for Europe of 2005, the refugee crisis in 2015 or Brexit were not accompanied by a proper EU news coverage. Following a chronological order of these events, the first of them was the failure to approve a Constitution for Europe in 2005. After public consultations, France and the Netherlands rejected that initiative. In the campaigns of these referendums, the media focused on national debates on Europe rather than European ones; thus, the text to be ratified was almost sidelined (Papaioannou & Gupta, 2018).

Strong national public spheres coexist with a weak and nascent European Public Sphere (EPS) on common interests, which have a recent example in Commission's proposal to put an end to seasonal clock changes. The prevalence of domestic affairs is not unexpectedly considering the robustness of state political systems and the richness of national identities. What is most relevant is that each of these two types of spheres imply different levels of expectations, impacting on participation models (Herkman & Harjuniemi, 2015). In this sense, the space for dialogue at the EU level is still limited.

On this backdrop, the EU institutions also play a role in fighting disinformation. Some initiatives adopted during the latest EP elections such as "Act, React, Impact" (2014) or "This time I´m voting" (2019) were useful to promote a well-informed society (Rivas-de-Roca & García-Gordillo, 2022). In addition to that, the EU officials employ day-to-day strategies to counteract fake

news on social networks, illustrating the institutional character of the EPS and the absence of fact-checking platforms that tackle with Europe.

The rise of disinformation in the digital age

The current news coverage of the EU occurs in a post-truth era, in which political journalists are forced to justify each of their statements to legitimize their work because of the proliferation of fake news (Carlson, 2018). 2016 is considered a turning point in leaving behind facts and the emergence of criticism of traditional media, both in the United States with the victory of Donald Trump (Pérez-Curiel et al., 2021) and in the EU with Brexit referendum (Lilleker et al., 2021). The withdrawal of the United Kingdom (UK) from the EU shows the challenge that disinformation involves for the European project, having different impact by country (Hameleers et al., 2021).

Southern European audiences have shown little resilience to disinformation given the polarized tradition of these countries (Roses & Humanes, 2019). While in the 19th century a mass commercial press emerged in the UK, countries such as Spain were still immersed in the opinion press model, focused on disseminating political ideas. Despite the active role of journalism in the period of political transition to democracy, the historical backwardness of the Spanish press is evidenced in lower reading rates compared to most European countries (Hallin & Mancini, 2004).

However, digital convergence is also a concern for journalistic quality. Critics of convergence see platforms as fuel for misinformation (Innes & Innes, 2021). There is a lack of specialization due to less knowledge of the sources, to which is added the limited time frames. Journalists have to work on stories disseminated through multiple digital channels (Humprecht et al., 2020). All these phenomena influence quality of the news items (Pavlik, 2013).

The way the news is made determines the social vision of politicians. Focusing on the statements of the leaders, now shared via social networks, supposes to delve into the personalization of politics (McAllister, 2007).

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Likewise, it means the distortion of the value of facts for democracy, losing importance in the face of selected quotes without public relevance (Vázquez Bermúdez, 2006). These practices are a breeding ground for disinformation, identified as a frequent practice of current political communication that reduces the trust in democratic institutions. In fact, politicians are more important than the media in the dissemination of disinformation (Heiberger et al., 2021).

Previous studies on disinformation across Europe suggest that EU institutions prioritize reporting false content on social networks (Tuñón Navarro et al., 2019). Fact checkers or think tanks are defining structures to fight disinformation at the European level. Regarding the European Commission, disinformation represents a key challenge in its current action, but it has not been possible to stop this problem of spreading false information for negative purposes as seen in the Covid-19 pandemic (Salaverría et al., 2020).

Method

This research seeks to conceptualize the role of opinionated news in disinformation regarding the EU. We defined three research questions (RQs) on this matter:

RQ1. Which are the bias and the protagonists of the headlines?
RQ2. How is the negative bias towards EU institutions built?
RQ3. What is the reaction of readers to these news items on the EU?

According to our research design, we compared the coverage of EU affairs in local media from Germany, the UK and Spain during the framework of the 2019 EP elections. The analysis was performed on a sample of news items on European issues, collected over a six-month period (from January 1 to June 30, 2019). The elections took place on 23-26 May, meanwhile the EP published its first pre-electoral survey in February. This chapter only considers the journalistic pieces on topics related the EU, that is, their institutions and processes. In total, 612 units of analysis were captured.

Our study includes six local media outlets, two for each country, in some of the most populated cities of Germany, the UK and Spain. All those countries have a different historical relationship with the European project. We selected local newspapers because of its social function in nearby communities (Hess & Waller, 2017). Since the 1980s there are more personalization and negativity in the political coverage (Kuhn & Nielsen, 2014), but the journalism cultures by countries also play a role on this matter (Obijiofor & Hanusch, 2011). For this reason, our research carries out a comparative approach across Europe.

This study focused on two main items: personalization and negativity. These variables were analyzed through several categories: headlines, topics and reader's comments. We developed an analysis sheet with exclusive categories to gather the data, following the content analysis parameters of Krippendorff (2012). The collection of the sample was carried out manually and then analyzed through the software IBM SPSS Statistics, Version 28.

The research design was applied by a single researcher, but we also carried out two previous rounds of coding training to refine the categories and achieve scientific validity. New rules were added to the coding manual after these rounds. The use of one encoder tries to provide homogeneity, as this chapter is part of an extended research project.

The categories created aim to deepen in the fact that the EU does not have its own media system, which is assessed by the literature as basis for proper news coverage. In addition to that, citizens vote according to identity and values, so one might wonder about whether these values exist at the European level. The lack of common identity leads to voting in a national perspective, explaining the low participation rates in the elections to the European Parliament. In the 2014 elections, the turnout in the EU as a whole stood at 43%, although there were several Eastern countries in which it did not reach 30%. In 2019, the first general increase since 1994 was observed, reaching half of voters (50%). Therefore, the period of the EP elections is chosen as a timeframe of our study.

It should be noted that the EU model has some democratic legitimacy through holding elections to the European Parliament every five years. A democratic system requires the existence of public opinion as a way for its citizens to make informed decisions, based on an idea of deliberative democracy. Nevertheless, the different views in the Member States and the little concern for EU issues call into question the journalistic coverage that we explore here.

Results

Headline bias

The headline is the classic entrance to the information. There are different elements to assess, but we focus on knowing the protagonist of the headline, insofar as this data reveals to whom the media's attention is oriented. Brief messages stand here as a source of political journalism, since political parties share messages in a massive way and easily convertible into headlines.

The topics or the people addressed by headlines are one of the factors that determines the first impression of EU news coverage. For this reason, we seek to know the degree of relationship that each type of headline has with the bias delivered to the European project, that is, if the personalities or thematic issues are more likely to some approaches. This makes it possible to understand which actors the Eurosceptic news is targeting.

	Positive	Neutral	Negative	Positive / negative
EU personality	15.0	**65.0**	3.7	**16.3**
Non-EU personality	10.8	45.5	**33.7**	10.0
European affairs	**30.6**	44.9	10.1	14.4
Non-European affairs	22.2	**60.5**	9.0	8.3
Total (average rate)	19.6	54.1	14.1	12.2

Table 1 - Distribution of the bias of the message according to the orientation of the headline (%). *In bold outstanding findings.

The frequency of headline bias remains mainly neutral, although some differences emerge. The highest positive frame is present in European affairs (30.6%), while non-EU personalities, mostly national, receive a negative bias above the average (33.7%). This data is relevant, illustrating how negativity points to these profiles of personalities outside the European bubble, which lead us to reflect upon whether the polarization of the EU comes from national spheres.

In the mix of positive and negative biases, no large differences are detected, but the first practice is slightly more common in the items that refer to the EU (EU personality and European affairs). The relationship of this finding with the customary nature of the EU and the deficit of politization with European politics could be studied in future research. Moreover, the positive bias attributed to purely European issues may be linked to the presence in the sample of two historically pro-European countries such as Germany and Spain.

It should be taken into account that the EU news items in these media are not located in local or regional sections, but rather in political descriptors. In this regard, the approach for these pieces almost never goes through a nearby perspective, but through national or European approaches. This may be connected with the progressive politicization of the European project (de Wilde et al., 2016), which rises its influence in many areas and, hence, compels to consider political aspects in its coverage. However, findings such as the national orientation of the headlines mean that these interpretations are not clear. The media prefer a national orientation in the headlines, understood as gateway to the information, perhaps because they believe that it may foster more clicks on their web pages.

Topic bias

The majority bias on the EU news is usually neutral along the time (Lloyd & Marconi, 2014). This is not an obstacle to the existence of topics that generate polarizations of interest (table 2), with greater differences than those seen in the headlines. The classification of topics provided refers to the main issues of debate in the 2019 EP elections, triggered from an observation of the Twitter profiles of the candidates to preside over the European Commission. They were named as 'Spitzenkandidaten' (leading candidates).

	Positive	Neutral	Negative	Positive / negative
Institutional issues	24.2	**35.5**	12.2	**28.1**
Electoral contest	19.2	**69.3**	6.4	5.1
Brexit	12.0	**62.4**	17.9	7.7
External relations	**43.5**	35.4	10.3	10.8
Economy	30.4	**42.8**	10.9	15.9
Migration	15.0	**37.6**	**30.7**	16.7
Environment	**41.5**	34.6	8.5	15.4
EU-funded projects	**83.1**	13.6	0.0	3.3
Digital market	23.5	**28.9**	19.3	**28.3**
Social policy	**48.4**	36.7	6.7	8.2
Other issues	6.8	**72.8**	20.4	0.0
Total (overage rate)	31.6	**42.7**	13.0	12.7

Table 2 - Distribution of message bias according to topic (%). *In bold outstanding findings.

One of the most noteworthy data is the huge positive bias of EU-funded projects (83.1%), which also happens on a smaller scale in social policy (48.4%), external relations (43.5%), and the environment (41.5%). By contrast, the topic of migrations (30.7%) doubles the average of information with a negative tone. The news item of figure 1 shows a positive tone about European investments. This overlaps with a utilitarian perspective of what the EU does for me at the local level.

Europa subvenciona a 21 municipios sevillanos para implantar WiFi en espacios públicos
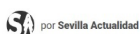
por **Sevilla Actualidad**

Fig. 1. Journalistic piece on EU-funded projects with a positive bias that tells the benefits of EU funding (Sevilla Actualidad (Spanish digital media outlet), June 30, 2019). Source: https://bit.ly/32aVjKn

Besides that, typical EU issues such as the EP electoral contest (26.9%) and the digital market (28.6%) bring together the combination of positive and negative approaches, following the trend towards moderation proper of European politics. In any case, the figures reveal that there are some issues close to the EU that tend to concentrate positive or negative approaches. Thus, depending on the prevailing agenda, the European project will be subject to different kinds of biases. We also observed that the topic influences on the type of authorship. Most of the pieces are signed by the agencies, but journalists stand out as authors for the EP electoral contest, Brexit, and social policy.

Positivity towards the EU institutions is higher in pro-European countries and is determined by the issues tackled in the journalistic field. For instance, there is greater negativity towards migration. As a consequence, the media agenda on the EU can shape the tone of journalistic messages. This means a learning for the European institutions, which must set the topics of interest if they want the media conversation to take place from a Europeanist logic.

Reader comments

News relevance is key in the gatekeeping process. A proof of the importance in the current digital pieces is the number of comments, which is related to discursive participation. The reception of a greater number of comments has the potential to cause the news production to be more audience-oriented,

so the number of these interactions is measured for the cases of each country of the sample.

	0-5 comments	6-15 comments	Over 15 comments
German local media	**100.0**	0.0	0.0
British local media	53.8	**29.5**	**16.7**
Spanish local media	94.5	4.5	0.9
Total (average rate)	82.8	11.3	5.9

Table 3 - Frequency of the figure of comments by country (%). *In bold outstanding findings.

As can be seen from table 3, the two German media do not receive comments, which is also found in one of the Spanish media outlets. The British media are more likely to generate interactions (29.5% of the pieces between 5 and 15 comments, and 16.7% with more than 15). These frequencies seem significant compared to the other two countries. Therefore, in the framework of this chapter the EU news suffer from a lack of interest in relation to comments, being the UK the only exception.

The reader comments on the webs are sometimes plagued by incivility messages, which reverts to the interest in participating and the feeling of quality of the news item (Prochazka et al., 2018). Additionally, the reasons to intervene in these spaces change among countries depending on their journalistic cultures. This happens at a historical moment in which the use of digital tools undermines trust in institutions, instead of spurring a true public discussion.

Specifically, the tone of the messages on the Internet is a factor in the process of crisis of journalism and democracy (Costera Meijer & Groot Kormelink, 2021). In this sense, Table 4 shows how the bias of the readers' comments is exposed. The tone of these comments is analyzed in relation to the European project, as the Eurosceptic discourses may shape their contents.

	Favorable	Neutral	Unfavorable	No comments
German local media	0.0	0.0	0.0	**100.0**
British local media	3.3	33.2	**34.3**	29.2
Spanish local media	0.8	**15.4**	6.6	**77.2**
Total (average rate)	1.4	16.2	13.6	68.8

Table 4 - Bias of comments by country (%). *In bold outstanding findings.

The results reveal that positive comments about the EU are scarce (1.4% of the total), with neutral and negative messages prevailing. It may be noted that the media that receive the most unfavorable comments belong to the country that generated the highest volume of interactions: the United Kingdom (34.3% of their comments are negative). This significant data is illustrative of how the interaction occurs under negative parameters.

While in the British media the attention attached by the EU is linked to negativity and neutral approaches (33.2%), these neutral ones are preferred in the Spanish media (15.4% versus 6.6% of unfavorable messages). According to the data, the EU is hardly associated with positive issues on most of the audience, which shows the presence of an idea of crisis attributed to the European project.

In our study, negativity is much stronger in a country with a long Eurosceptic tradition like the United Kingdom. The frequencies of news items without comments are significant, which leads to the conclusion that the corpus is not extensive enough to assess this point in depth. However, this finding also evidences that the EU is not able to mobilize public reactions as it is usual of opinion-oriented news.

Conclusions and Discussion

This chapter aimed to examine the role of opinionated journalism in the breakthrough of disinformation about the EU. The timeframe of the 2019 EP elections is used as a relevant moment for the future of the European

institutions. Prior research on EU communication has primarily focused on the political dimension of legacy media, but it is also necessary to shed light on the role of local journalism as having a closer relationship with citizens. Because of the distant character of the European project, innovation in communication should be key for both institutions and media. Nevertheless, the primary contribution of this study is to evidence that local media lack from originality in their texts about the EU, not fostering a true public discussion.

The reasons for the poor quality could be found in the fact that the topic is not really an important issue for them, together with the structural weaknesses of a local press traditionally blamed for bad practices (López García & Maciá Mercadé, 2007). Our observance found little features of an in-depth coverage to the extent that most of the pieces are brief and have few sources.

Drawing upon a corpus of 612 news items, we provide three interrelated theoretical contributions that also answer to research questions. First, the headlines show a greater presence of thematic elements than of personalities, illustrating a preferential attention for fragmented news rather than for individuals. Non-EU personalities are those with the highest percentage of negative approaches. Hence, national politics work as a polarized cleavage in the EU field, meanwhile the European affairs trigger more positive views. Beyond that, it is noteworthy that the news items collected are mainly placed in political sections, leaving behind the local or regional dimension.

Our second contribution offers insightful findings on the different biases by topic. EU-funded projects, social policy, external relations and the environment are reported from a positive view. However, the negative tone is remarkable regarding migrations. This means that the agenda-setting is essential for the European debates, since the most mentioned issues triggered different biases among the population.

Regarding the third, we further our understanding on the working of readers' responses. Our study reveals that the EU is not relevant for the audience in terms of comments, although the EP elections took place during the

research. The selected British media are an exception, having some pieces with more than 5 comments. Moreover, we analyzed the tone of these messages to explore possible Eurosceptic narratives. On this matter, positive comments are very rare. People who decide to interact through the formula of comments do so to express neutral or negative views. The unfavorable outlook is especially frequent in the UK, whose local media were those that evidenced a more negative approach towards the EU.

Based on the literature review and the three contributions provided, we argue that the prominence of opinion-oriented news about the EU could boost polarized disinformation. Our theoretical approach through the multiple-case study underlines how the current state of play of journalism influences the success of polarization in the digital sphere. In a context of fragmentation of audiences, opinion-oriented news is key for disinformation phenomena addressing liberal institutions. This disruptive communication around individualization could mean a decline of democracies such as the EU (Bennett & Livingston, 2018), since facts are no longer relevant for the audience.

The findings overlap with theoretical concepts such as the comparing media systems (Hallin & Mancini, 2004) and the journalistic cultures (Obijiofor & Hanusch, 2011). Polarization is more frequent in the UK (polarized liberal model), while the German press shows approaches that seek a balance from different sources. The low negativity in Spain could be explained through a Europeanist political culture. It would be interesting to find out if a higher polarization affects EU issues in Germany and Spain in the coming years. Eurosceptic parties are already present in their national parliaments, changing the traditional political discussion.

As outlined before, our results suggest that the European project is not evaluated as a useful topic by the local media, notwithstanding the EU rules have a strong impact on the nearby communities. The local or regional approaches are substantially ignored when covering the EU on these media. Specifically, this is concerning because the phenomenon of disinformation

is growing in contexts of proximity, supported by the advantages of geographical close groups to know better the effectiveness of mechanisms of propaganda (Correia et al., 2019).

The reduced appearance of EU personalities in the headlines may be explained through the low personalization of the European project. Despite a global tendency to personalize politics (McAllister, 2007), the EU has not succeeded in creating identification with recognizable leaders. The biggest recent example is the procedure of 'Spitzenkandidaten'. This attempt to develop leading candidates has not implied that the campaign moved around these Europeanized actors.

We should acknowledge some limitations of the study, as the sample is small and focuses on cases of interest by city and country. The trends of the European project (elite-driven integration or corporatism) could be reasons for the particular style of disinformation detected. EU news are mostly ruled by national parameters and one of the most striking findings is the negativity in both headlines and reader comments in the UK. This has to do with a great use of political statements as a source in that country.

Taking these results together, we argue that academia will have to empirically strengthen our understanding about the local spheres as spaces of transnational discussions. The EPS is a widely studied concept. Many authors talk about the building of a single EPS or the Europeanization of national spheres. Our proposal is to revisit from a proximity approach this concept, primarily defined as a common space of deliberation for citizens that may serve against disinformation.

Accordingly, future research should expand the scope to examine the impact of journalism about the EU in local spheres. Disinformation is also related to low-quality journalism and the rise of opinion-oriented news. The disconnection between the EU and its citizens is likely rooted in structural reasons that have to be with the unpopular bias of the European integration. Nevertheless, this deficit does not prevent that the EU policies have

a great impact on the life of people. Hence, we need cross-cutting models to attain a better understanding of the network agenda and the shaping of disinformation in contexts of proximity.

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