Why European tv news matters: a cross-nationally comparative analysis of tv news about the European Union and its effects

Peter, J.

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Why the television news coverage of the EU matters

The first goal of this book was to identify, from a cross-nationally comparative perspective, the basic parameters and underlying patterns of EU coverage in television news. The second goal was to study the effects of this coverage on EU citizens' opinions and fears about the EU by employing explanations that combine individual-level and country-level characteristics. By doing so, it was also attempted to gain new insights into the conceptualization of media effects. To tackle the goals, six studies were conducted in which specific (sub-)research questions were investigated. This chapter moves away from the specific results of the six preceding chapters to an integrative general view on main the topic of this book – the television coverage of the European Union and its effects. The specific findings have been summarized at the end of each chapter; the implications of these findings have been discussed in the respective discussion sections and do not need to be repeated here. Instead, this chapter focuses on the bigger picture. I will start the section on both the EU coverage and on its effects by outlining limitations to what can be inferred from the data used and analyzed in this book. This set-up may not only be of help for future researchers but may also render more comprehensible the general conclusions subsequently drawn.

8.1 Europe on the television screen – the bigger picture

The investigation of television news coverage of the EU proceeded in two steps: a descriptive first step in which the basic parameters of EU coverage were identified and a more explanatory second step in which the underlying structure of EU coverage was revealed. This was based on two content analyses: one conducted in 14 EU member states during the 1999 European election campaign and another carried out in five EU countries over an eleven-month period throughout 2000. Content analyses of such scope are always based on compromises. What may be theoretically desirable, may be organizationally and financially infeasible. And what may be organizationally and financially possible, may be methodologically problematic. As a result, two general limitations can be identified. Moreover, one basic limitation of the explanatory analyses needs to be discussed.
8.1.1 Limitations

The following two problems may limit inference from the two content analyses. First, the investigation of just one public and one private outlet may not sufficiently represent the television news landscape of a particular country. However, several analyses have suggested that this selection of outlets may be a sensible approximation to the television coverage in a particular country (Hans-Bredow-Institut, 2002; European Journalism Centre, 2002). Second, the study of EU coverage in routine and summit periods (Chapter 3) was based on only five countries. This was the result of integrating an across-time perspective in the investigation, analyzing eleven months in 2000. It has been mentioned in the Chapter 3 why these countries had been selected. However, the fact that reporting in the five selected countries seems to be more similar in comparison to some Mediterranean countries (e.g., Greece with long bulletins and a lot of stories), may limit the generalizability of the findings of Chapter 3 (for differences between Northern and Southern European reporting styles, see Heinderycks, 1993). In short, the results presented in Chapter 3 may not be generalized to all EU member states as long as future research has not established similar patterns especially in Mediterranean countries.

The basic limitation of the explanatory analysis may result from the fact that characteristics of journalists such as attitudes towards EU politics or work routines and further characteristics of the outlets such as organizational constraints or financial resources could not be included in the analysis. As a consequence, it may be that the current models are under-specified. With respect to the analyses presented in Chapter 2 and 3, it may be worth investigating how many journalists deal, per outlet, with EU politics or how much money networks invest in the coverage of EU affairs. Moreover, it might be worthwhile to study how the journalists who report about EU affairs for a particular outlet approach the topic. The fact that characteristics of journalists were not taken into account may also have some broader implications. Based on existing literature (see the discussion at the end of section 2.1.1), I assumed that coverage responds to some extent to contextual characteristics and processes, i.e., in the context of this book: to domestic characteristics and processes. However, there are also scholars who emphasize that journalists may be important mediators or even transformers of such characteristics and processes (e.g., Kepplinger, 1989c, 1992; Schulz, 1976; Shoemaker, 1987, 1991). As a consequence, journalists may create a reality that does not necessarily correspond fully with the reality in which they are embedded. The relationships between the 'world out there' and media reality are complex and cannot be discussed here. Nevertheless, it must be emphasized that the explanations of EU coverage put forward in this book may be causally more intricate and may include various reciprocal relationships. The (values of) the contextual variables may not only affect the EU coverage, but may, in turn, be influenced by the coverage.

These limitations present important qualifications of the explanatory analyses in this book. However, it should be kept in mind that there was a simple reason why journalistic
variables could not be included in the explanatory analyses. Research has produced interesting
and important insights through in-depth interviewing of leading journalists about their take on
Europe (e.g., de Vreese, 2002 for Denmark, the Netherlands, and the UK). But such data (a)
do not exist for all countries investigated in this book, (b) are often not comparable, and (c) do
not readily lend themselves to statistical analyses. Consequently, there is an unavoidable
'black box' in the analyses presented in this book. Nevertheless, the analyses may advance the
field in turning our attention away from establishing differences to looking for the underlying
patterns. The first chapter illustrated that previous research has merely accumulated specific
country differences in the EU coverage without attempting to tackle general explanatory
issues. Chapters 2 and 3 have changed what has been the predominant close-up view to a
broader panorama perspective. And this bigger picture is to be looked at now.

8.1.2 Basic parameters of the television news coverage of the EU

In television news, the EU is located somewhere between invisible importance and
unimportant visibility. If a key event such as the European elections remains virtually
unnoticed in several EU member states; if, in other periods, a maximum of one in ten political
news stories deals with the EU; if EU officials rarely appear in stories about the EU, then EU
citizens can hardly build a sound opinion on what happens "up there in Brussels and
Strasbourg" on the basis of the information available in the main evening news. Although
there are some outlets and some countries in which EU coverage takes up a greater share of
the political coverage, the overall picture of news about Europe resembles that of some blue
and yellow stains on a broad canvas. These stains may form some clusters around particular
topics or events, yet an overall pattern is not discernable.

Television news coverage neglects a large-scale development in Europe that may
shape the future of Europe more than did other developments after the Second World War. About
ten years after the Treaty of Maastricht with its goal of an ever closer EU and in the
face of the eastward enlargement of the EU, potential discussions about whether five or seven
or nine percent of EU coverage are sufficient are literally out of dimension. A project as
encompassing as European integration is not adequately mediated if European elections are
ignored in several EU member countries and if, in non-election periods, only EU summits
attract media attention. What is more, if the EU's visibility comes at the cost of its
presentational importance (unimportant visibility) and if the EU's presentational importance
comes at the cost of its visibility (invisible importance), then the EU is always somehow
underrepresented in television coverage. The discrepancy between the relevance of real-world
developments to citizens and their representation in the media is a recurring pattern of media
coverage and not confined to the EU. It has been demonstrated with respect to the coverage of
issues as diverse as crime (Fishman, 1978; Funkhouser, 1973), race relations, poverty,
environmental pollution (Funkhouser, 1973), and new technologies (Kepplinger, 1989a,
1992). Nevertheless, the discrepancy between the importance of the EU for an entire continent
and its representation in television news coverage may not necessarily reduce worries about
the future of European integration. If EU citizens' orientation about politics depends on
information from the media, television coverage of the EU is of not much help to EU citizens.
On the map of television coverage, the EU resembles an unknown territory in which the EU citizen may find him/herself lost. It seems that EU citizens have to orient themselves about the whereabouts of the EU by solely relying on the position of the sun while they urgently also need a compass.

Several scholars have discussed the emergence of a European public sphere (Habermas, 1994, 1997; Kunelius & Sparks, 2001). Although such notions may be desirable and theoretically challenging, the data presented in the second and third chapter tell us something else: there is no European public sphere. Traces of a European public sphere may exist in some international elite media and in issue-specific circles of political, economic, or cultural elites (Schlesinger, 1997, 1999), but not in mainstream national television news coverage. Given that television is the primary source of information for the vast majority of EU citizens, it is questionable how EU citizens can inform themselves adequately about EU affairs by relying on television news coverage. What is more, even more cautious notions of a Europeanized national public sphere are not tenable (see for a similar conclusion: Gerhards, 2000). It has become obvious that the media do not adequately represent the power shift from the national to the European level. This is not only reflected in the sheer amount of coverage devoted to European affairs, it is also demonstrated by the fact that news stories seem to be either exclusively about the EU or do not deal with the EU at all. The interplay of domestic and European politics is hardly represented. The Europeanization of television coverage is an admirable goal, but far from becoming reality. And television, it seems, has never left the nation state.

So, where is the good news? Well, not in the news coverage of the EU. The EU itself, its performance and its representatives are depicted with a negative slant. This dovetails with findings from previous research (Norris, 2000). There is no evidence, however, that the EU or EU politics are depicted more negatively than other political institutions or politics in general. EU coverage instead appears to follow the characteristics of general coverage, which is slightly negative. One may argue that it is not the role of journalism to praise the Lord and sing Hallelujah. As the so-called fourth estate in modern democracies, the media need to point out the shortcomings and failures of politics. However, it is striking that, nearly without exception, in all countries and at different periods of time the coverage had a negative slant. Although it should be kept in mind that the largest part of the coverage was neutral, the consistent negative tendency in EU news is conspicuous. The findings concerning the 1979 European election coverage showed a relatively positive embrace of the then EEC (Blumler, 1983). The results presented earlier in this book seem to indicate a fundamental change in how EU affairs are approached in television news coverage.
8.1.3 Patterns underlying the television news coverage of the EU

In contrast to previous research, this book has emphasized that the analysis of television coverage of the EU must not stop with descriptive accounts. Consequently, I have tried to detect some more general patterns underlying EU coverage and have focused on some tentative explanations of what may shape the coverage. In line with other research on the EU, EU coverage is affected by domestic characteristics. Satisfaction with domestic democracy and, during the European election campaign, opinions of national political elites about the EU appear to influence EU coverage. Admittedly, the two may only be symptoms of more profound domestic processes that have not been investigated in this book. Nevertheless, they point to the fact that the domestic pervades the European – not only in European elections, but also in European coverage. If we want to understand how frequently the EU is covered, we need to look at domestic developments.

In trying to detect what shapes EU coverage, the integration of domestic processes and national characteristics is crucial for a simple reason. Journalistic work is essentially about illustrating and exemplifying what abstract politics means to the citizens (e.g., von LaRoche, 1992). Whether EU politics is found newsworthy at all and how it is subsequently illustrated and exemplified, depends heavily on the domestic context. If the EU is considered a fait accompli about which no political party bothers to argue, there will hardly be any coverage. In this case, the EU is presented as a silent, unspectacular reality to the citizens of the particular country. Conversely, if domestic governance causes dissatisfaction in particular countries and if European governance can be influenced in elections of the European Parliament, then the European election campaign means something to the citizens of such countries and will be reported. Much of the influence of such domestic processes still presents a puzzle as Chapters 2 and 3 showed with the opposing influence of satisfaction with domestic democracy. Nevertheless, the findings presented here begin to structure a dispersed and to some extent inconclusive field and may serve as a starting point for future research.

As we face the European elections in 2004, the finding that long-term member states of the EU seem to be tired of European elections deserves some further attention. In election campaigns, it is pivotal for citizens to receive some information about candidates and their positions, for example from television news coverage. Consequently, it seems troublesome that the coverage of EU representatives decreases with each successive European election. In a "second-order election" (Reif & Schmitt, 1980; van der Eijk & Franklin, 1996), EU representatives are treated like third-order actors. It will be interesting to see in the 2004 elections whether some more recent EU entrants will adjust to this overall pattern. In the worst case, EU representatives will more or less disappear from the screen in television news. There is, of course, more to television than news, and citizens may have the chance to see EU representatives in election spots or in election specials. Nevertheless, for both citizens and EU candidates in traditional EU countries there may be some simple advice with respect to the forthcoming European elections: Don't rely on television news. Citizens trying to inform themselves about EU representatives may therefore want to look for alternative sources of information. Candidates for the European Parliament should try to "get across" in outlets
other than television news or media other than television – even if campaign managers may tell them otherwise.

Whether a news outlet belonged to public or commercial television affects how frequently and how prominently television outlets report about the EU. Viewers of commercial television news outlets are less likely to be confronted both with news about European election campaign and, in non-election periods, with EU officials. Moreover, in non-election periods, private television presents EU affairs as less important than does public television. In their accumulation, then, the findings render obvious a more general picture: the EU seems to be rather small in television coverage, but in commercial television it somehow resembles a dwarf – and this poor little creature does not even have a face. Of course, there are countries in which the amount of EU coverage on public and commercial television coverage does not differ much. However, taking the findings of the two studies together, it becomes clear that private television puts less emphasis on the coverage of EU affairs.

This has two broader implications. First, debates about differences between public and private television sometimes tend to be theoretically overdetermined and empirically underdetermined (see detailed discussions in sections 2.4.2 and 3.4.2). Although limited to EU coverage, the studies in the second and third chapter put some empirical flesh on the theoretical bones of these debates. Moreover, the studies make a plea for strictly separating fact from fiction by demonstrating that, despite the claimed convergence of public and private television, notable differences between the two types of television exist. Second, the differences in the EU coverage between public and private television are in contrast to the alleged (or desired) power of television in particular and of media in general to integrate Europe (Diaz-Nosty, 1997). While aspects of the EU are at least occasionally discernable in public television, they are only presented in reduced form in private television. And if aspects of the EU are only rudimentarily present, television coverage (at least coverage on private television) can hardly integrate Europe.

8.2 Europe on the television screen – and its effects

It has already been mentioned above that what is theoretically and methodologically desirable often collides with what is financially and organizationally feasible, particularly in cross-nationally comparative research. This applies to the second overarching goal of this book – the investigation of the effects of television EU coverage. However, studying media effects cross-nationally also entails a number of general problems. These problems present important qualifications of the effects found in Chapters 4 to 7. They may also be relevant to future research, particularly given that some of these problems have hardly been acknowledged in existing research.
8.2.1 Limitations

Five general limitations of the effect studies presented in this book can be identified. The first two limitations refer to the general problem of internal validity in non-experimental effects research, which is multiplied in a cross-nationally comparative context. Limitation three concerns the problem of comparability in cross-nationally comparative approaches to media effects; the fourth limitation is related to the precise explication of contextual influences, the fifth limitation refers to what we can learn about media effects by linking survey and content analytic data. Taken together, the five limitations may help to critically assess the methodological and conceptual precision of the effect patterns detected in Chapters 4 to 7 and essentially qualify the accuracy of the causal inference in those chapters.

1. None of the effect studies could establish a baseline measure of the opinions and fears in question. This hampers causal reasoning in that it cannot compellingly be demonstrated that the coverage indeed led to opinion formation or change. Clearly, a panel design would have been preferable to tackle this issue and is desirable for any study investigating media effects in a non-experimental design. However, two points should be kept in mind. First, conducting a panel study in 14 systems (as would have been desirable for the studies in Chapters 4 and 5) with a reasonable number of respondents and linking it to a properly done content analysis requires enormous organizational and financial resources. In other words, limited resources always lead to a tradeoff between enriching cross-nationally comparative perspectives on the one hand and internal validity on the other. In this book, the cross-nationally comparative aspect was favored over methodological issues of internal validity because cross-nationally comparative perspectives on media effects are underrepresented in media effects research. Second, in the most extreme case, all relationships that have been conceptualized with media coverage as cause may turn out to be reciprocal. However, even this presents an advancement over previous research that has not yet established the relationships found in this book.

2. All effects studies focused on a single country characteristic at a time as moderator of effect patterns. This derived from the lack of previous research to draw upon, which precludes elaborate theoretical hypothesizing without running the risk of indulging in mere speculation. However, countries are obviously characterized by many more features than the ones employed in the various analyses. What is more, the characteristics may offer alternative explanations or act as additional moderators. Consequently, some of the patterns found might be more complex or, in the worst case, spurious. Such possibilities, however, can only be assessed by future research.

3. It cannot fully be ruled out that the content features systematically differ across countries despite the meticulous and identical application of operational definitions. For example, evaluations classified as positive in different countries might differ in their intensity across countries or may systematically be presented differently. Although the operational definitions of the various content categories always referred to explicit assertions, the quality of the assertions may yet differ. For example, journalists in one country may be blunt in their evaluations, whereas journalists in another country may be explicit, yet less
plain in their assertion. In the extreme, people in a particular country may be exposed to a qualitatively different type of, for example, evaluations than their counterparts in another. This touches upon the recurring issue in cross-nationally comparative research whether, in different countries, particular concepts can be operationalized with identical indicators or whether equivalent indicators have to used instead (Dogan & Pelassy, 1990; Przeworski & Teune, 1970). In the analyses of this book, identical indicators were used because there was no indication from previous research that, for the measures employed, identical indicators would be inappropriate. Moreover, it was ensured that the measures were identically applied. Particularly in cross-national studies with a lot of different people being involved in the coding process at different places, a lack of comparability may result from idiosyncratic understanding of operational definitions (for an elaborate reasoning, see Peter & Lauf, 2002). In the content analyses presented here, most of the work was centrally done in Amsterdam and carefully coordinated between the various country groups. It, therefore, seems unlikely that the content measures lack comparability or that content properties differed beyond the operationalizations in the coding scheme. However, even despite such precautions, such differences cannot be precluded with total certainty.

4. The finding that contextual (or more specifically country) characteristics are important moderators of effect patterns will probably be embraced by most social scientists who are not methodological individualists. However, if the findings are not to convey the miraculous impression of social alchemy, it is important to specify how context or, in this book, country characteristics impinge upon individuals. In the various chapters, I have tried to formulate theoretical propositions how and why country characteristics may be relevant to effect processes following suggestions by Pan and McLeod (1991) and Price et al. (1991). Although such specific reasoning is necessary to outline the particular relationships between individual and contextual variables, it cannot substitute for a general account of how country characteristics impinge upon individual opinions. Apparently, such a general account takes more than one book to be explicated, but some tentative suggestions can be made here. Because of the conceptual problems surrounding research on emotions (or fears, for that matter) as to whether they are independent of cognitions (for summary, see Taylor & Fiske, 1991, chapter 10), I restrict the following considerations to opinions.

In line with recent cognitive conceptualizations of how individuals reason (for a review, see Higgins, 1996), I assume that opinions are largely based upon what is cognitively accessible in an individual's mind. That is, individuals may not always express the same opinion. This rather depends on which cognitions are in the forefront of their mind. One can further distinguish between temporary and chronic accessibility. Temporarily accessible cognitions disappear after a certain period of time if not further activated or used. Chronically accessibly cognitions, in turn, belong to a person's cognitive toolkit and are routinely employed when this person judges something (provided the cognition is thematically applicable). I further assume that objective country characteristics must have been transformed into cognitions, this is, they must in principle be available in an individual's memory. If an individual is asked, for example, whether he/she is afraid that smaller countries may lose power in the wake of European integration, his/her cognition
(or, more precisely unit of knowledge) about the size of his/her country is activated, thereby becomes more easily accessible and is eventually likely to be taken into account when answering. However, in answering, individuals may not only incorporate cognitions that are rendered temporarily accessible. They may also refer to some chronically accessibly cognitions (note that such processes can be unconscious). In terms of an institution that originated as the European Economic Community and that is predominantly economically tangible (e.g., no customs, new currency), this may be economic cognitions, for example whether a country is better off without the EU (see Chapter 6). When judging the importance of European integration, people may rely on the cognitive cues they get from elite discourse about the EU and draw conclusions about the importance of an issue from the contentiousness of the issue (see Chapter 4). Finally, only particular cognitions may be available and accessible to citizens if media coverage is consonant. Provided that consonant coverage persists over a longer period of time, consonant coverage would lead to chronic accessibility of particular cognitions (see Chapter 5).

All these processes are probably more intricate than just outlined. However, they could initially be investigated without too much effort. Particularly sociotropic measures seem important in this respect, i.e., measures that tap an individual's perception of his social context. Clearly, such measures are not necessary when certain perceptions can be taken for granted, for example perceptions of a country's size. However, they may be very helpful when measuring to what extent people perceive their country's trade to be dependent on the EU or to what extent elite opinion is polarized. Analytically, such measures are beneficial in that they are located at the individual level. Conceptually, such measures imply that one person's context may not be another person's one. In other words, like most of the analyses that include country characteristics, the analyses in this book are based on the assumption that the country context is the same for all individuals in the particular country. Objectively, this may be correct. However, the subjective logic of how individuals form their opinions may look very differently and may depend on differences in perceptions of the context (for a detailed outline of this problem, see van Egmond, 2003).

5. The idea that there are differences in how individuals perceive and receive contextual information may also apply to the link between media content and individuals or, technically, between content analysis and survey. Although different ways of linking content to individual opinions and fears were used in this book (Chapters 4 and 5 versus Chapters 6 and 7), they were based on the same assumption: that individuals perceive and receive the content as identified in the content analysis. The content measures used in the book were not so intricate that major discrepancies are likely to occur. Moreover, the measures were designed such that they are in line with findings from reception research (e.g., the evaluation differential). Nevertheless, the equivalence of content broadcast and content received has not been proven and is questionable in a number of respects. Kepplinger (1989b) has pointed out that a link between content analysis and survey may be aggravated by two more problems. First, because content analyses typically center upon discrete elements of coverage, the link between single content measures and survey
questions may ignore the broader picture of coverage, which, though diffuse, may be relevant to the recipient. Second, the reception of particular contents may depend on recipient characteristics, for example education or attention. These aspects call for reception research as the missing link between content analysis and effects research. Particularly in the context of EU coverage with its remote and abstract character, such research may be beneficial not only in terms of fundamental research, but also in terms of practical changes in the coverage. The studies presented in this book cannot solve this problem and future research will show to what extent they were based on flawed assumptions.

However, given Coombs' (1964) dictum that "we buy information with assumptions" (p. 5), the studies in this book may at least tentatively increase our knowledge about two important issues. First, the studies may inform us about the effects of television coverage of the EU on opinions and fears about the EU. Second, the studies may advance our knowledge about how media effects on opinions and fears can be conceptualized. The first aspect has several implications for both general research on the EU and the practice of communicating Europe; the second aspect is of primary interest to media effects research in both the EU context and otherwise.

8.2.2 Effects on opinions and fears about the EU

Television coverage affects opinions and fears about the EU. However, one should hasten to add, not always and not everywhere. The notion that the same properties of EU coverage elicit the same effects all over Europe is both theoretically questionable and empirically untenable. The crucial factor in bringing about media effects is specific country characteristics. Greater amounts of EU coverage increase the perceived importance of the EU if national elite opinion is polarized, but they fail to do so if elite opinion is consensual. The tone of coverage affects people's opinion towards European integration if the coverage as a whole is consonant, but it lacks any effect if the coverage as a whole is dissonant. Only if a particular country was less dependent on trade with the remaining EU countries do citizens from the given country oppose the negative performance depictions of the EU in their opinion about the EU; if trade dependencies were strong, no effects were obtained. Citizens from bigger EU countries became more afraid of losing cultural identity in the wake of European integration as the tone of EU coverage becomes positive; citizens from smaller countries do not. There is no unified Europe in terms of media effects.

However, even if notions of hypodermic needle television in Europe have to be rejected, the influence of television coverage should not be ignored, either. Scholars of opinions about the EU have largely treated media coverage as something to speculate about in conclusion sections, but rarely considered it worth being investigated in its own right. The studies in this book have demonstrated that television coverage matters for how people think and feel about the EU. Ex post, one may argue that this is not surprising because EU citizens rely on the media and especially television as the biannual Eurobarometer surveys consistently show. Still, then, the question remains why so few have bothered to include the
media as potential influences on opinions and fears about the EU in their analyses. If we ultimately strive for increasing our knowledge about what affects people's opinions and fears about the EU, then television coverage in particular and media coverage in general should no longer be ignored.

Integrating media coverage in explanations of opinions and fears about the EU may be sensible even if there is little coverage as the analyses in Chapters 4 to 7 have shown. The intuitive presumption that only a lot of coverage affects people's thinking may not be justified with respect to EU coverage. Admittedly, the effects found were not strong. However, effects were established despite controlling for basically all competing explanations of opinions about the EU that previous research has identified. The findings suggest that the conceptualization of media effects as moderated by country characteristics may be a crucial component in the search for media influence on opinions and fears about the EU (see the following section). Moreover, as Chapters 6 and 7 have shown, more advanced modeling of effects, which takes into account forgetting of information, may help to identify media influence. In sum, the effect studies in this book point to the fact that it is not necessarily "big" coverage that brings about effects. When trying to investigate media effects on opinions and fears towards the EU, it seems more important to look for an appropriate approach than to search for the ideal situation for media effects to occur.

The fact that media effects on opinions and fears about the EU depend on specific country characteristics renders them difficult to predict. What is more, statements about which property of coverage will have which effect can only be formulated with precise respect to country characteristics. Although this insight may sound simple once stated, it has far-reaching consequences. First, debates about the communication deficit of the EU are always connected with the notion that media information about the EU is crucial to enable citizens to competently participate in politics. On normative grounds, this notion is hard to reject because, in modern democracies, citizens should in principle be able to inform themselves about political processes. Implicitly, however, this notion is based upon the across-the-board assumption that more EU coverage somehow increases participation. If one considers people's perception of the importance of European integration a necessary condition for participation at the EU level, then Chapter 4 teaches a more specific lesson. More coverage does not necessarily affect people's importance perceptions – it depends on country characteristics, in this case the nature of elite opinion. Second, organizational and financial constraints may sometimes force campaigners to launch the same campaign all over Europe. However, this 'One Europe, one campaign' approach may have no or even opposed effects depending on specific country characteristics. As McDonald's offers milk and a McKroket in the Netherlands and La petite crudité in France, campaigners should be sensitive to country characteristics when trying to maximize the effect of their campaign.

The context dependency of media effects on opinions and fears about the EU becomes intricate when it comes to the evaluative features of coverage, in this book the tone towards EU representatives and the EU and depictions of the EU's performance in terms of success or failure. Here, I focus on the more practical implications; the theoretical implications will be dealt with in the following section. Common sense would have it that positive evaluations
elicit positive opinions and negative evaluations elicit negative opinions. However, as Chapter 5 has shown, this simple equidirectionality of content and effect only emerges if media in a particular country report consonantly about the EU. In the two remaining studies, the pattern of results was more complex. Depending on specific country characteristics (see Chapters 6 and 7), the effect of depictions of the EU's performance was usually in contrast to the valence of the depiction. Unfavorable depictions had a positive influence, favorable depictions had a negative impact. The same was true for the impact of general evaluations of the EU. It goes without saying that the effects found are also conditional on the opinion or fear in question and need to be studied with respect to a wider array of opinions and fears.

Having these caveats in mind, do EU officials then have to worry about bad coverage? The answer is "yes", if there is a consistently negative tone in a consonant media system – in this case, no coverage is good coverage. The answer is "no", if the coverage in a country is dissonant. Ironically, EU officials do not have to be afraid of television coverage, either, if the EU's performance is depicted unfavorably. Tentatively, the findings suggest that citizens may be resistant to or even opposed to unfavorable depictions of the EU's record – and the depictions are usually slightly unfavorable as Chapter 3 has shown. That said, the findings also suggest that citizens may start worrying about a successful EU. These patterns need to be investigated with respect to other potentially moderating country characteristics. Additionally, scholars should study whether various country characteristics interact (see above). Nevertheless, there seems to be no reason for the EU or EU officials to impede television coverage. If the communication deficit results from EU officials' fears of losing support (Gramberger, 1997; Meyer, 1999), the findings presented in this book demonstrate that such fears may usually be exaggerated, correct though they may be under the condition of consonantly negative coverage.

8.2.3 Implications for the conceptualization of media effects

Complementary to such practical implications, the findings also have several theoretical implications and may shed a slightly different light on the conceptualization of media effects. This aspect is, in this book, inextricably linked to the logic of comparative research and the possibility to include country characteristics as additional explanations. The introduction, therefore, emphasized the potential of cross-nationally comparative research and outlined in general terms the basic strategy of considering country characteristics as moderators of effect patterns. Subsequently, this strategy was applied to one of the best researched concepts in media effects research, agenda-setting, and to an idea which is considered a turning point in media effects research, Noelle-Neumann's (1973) consonance concept. Further, this strategy was used when studying the interplay between media coverage and a prominent notion in political science research on opinions, the dependency of EU support on economic conditions. Finally, the strategy was extended to the largely ignored field of media effects on citizens' fears about European integration. All of these studies have provided evidence of one basic proposition: context matters.
The idea that context matters is not new. Nevertheless, in the empirical-analytical tradition of media effect research, it has to some extent never really become en vogue. If studies extended their scope to the context of the individual, then they usually centered upon the concept of interpersonal communication, thereby indirectly tapping social groups as context, for example in research on the two-step flow of information and on opinion leaders (Lazarsfeld, Berelson, Gaudet, 1944; Katz & Lazarsfeld, 1955; for a review Weimann, 1995), in attempts to link cognitive processes and social identification theory (Price 1988, 1989) or in Ball-Rokeach and DeFleur's dependency model (Ball-Rokeach & DeFleur, 1976; Ball-Rokeach, 1985). However, the whole spectrum of contexts in which the individual is embedded has rarely been studied in its additional explanatory potential (for a more elaborate outline of this aspect, see Pan & McLeod, 1991; McLeod et al., 1995). Cross-nationally comparative research in the field has at least been aware of an influence of the country context, but has often not adequately translated this insight into empirical research as illustrated in the first chapter. In sum, the fact that contextual factors were ignored along with the low exploitation of the potential of cross-nationally comparative research has lead to the unusual situation that a step back had to be taken before a step forward could be made.

In other words, this book does not claim to revolutionize social-scientific thinking. But it does not reinvent the wheel, either. The contextualization of media effects pursued in this book by means of cross-nationally comparative research has helped to achieve two things — first, to modify or to confirm the character of established concepts and, second, to shed some new light on the general nature of media effects. Agenda-setting and the consonance concept are established concepts in media effects research and have been around for about 30 years — agenda-setting, introduced by McCombs and Shaw in 1972; the consonance idea advanced by Noelle-Neumann in 1973. However, none of them was able to walk on its cross-nationally comparative leg. The consonance idea calls for cross-nationally comparative research — but has never been investigated in this fashion. Scholars of agenda-setting have repeatedly called for cross-nationally comparative research (Rogers & Dearing, 1996) — but have done little about it. As this book shows, agenda-setting is obviously conditional on the contentiousness of an issues within a particular country. This is a simple finding, yet could only be established with cross-nationally comparative research. The tone of coverage may shove people in a certain direction, but push comes to shove only if the media within a particular country are consonant. Again, this is a simple result that could only be achieved by means of cross-nationally comparative research.

The conceptualization of country characteristics as a moderating influence on effect patterns implies an important extension of the nature of media effects. As abstractly shown in the first chapter and illustrated in Chapters 4 to 7, media effects are allowed to vary across countries. In other words, it is conceptually possible that effects emerge in some countries and not in others or, what is more, that they have a particular direction in one country and an opposing one in another. The latter adjustment/opposition pattern has not fully been considered yet in effects research. Typically, notions of media effects assume equidirectionality between properties of the content and the effect. More coverage causes more of a particular effect as, for example, in the concepts of agenda-setting, cultivation, or knowledge gap; a particular tone in coverage causes a change of public opinion in this
particular direction as, for example, in the spiral of silence concept. To avoid any misunderstanding, the assumption of equidirectionality often makes sense and it requires careful theoretical reasoning why in addition to adjustment effects also opposition effects should emerge. However, some interesting studies have shown that, under certain conditions, people may come to quite contrary conclusions after exposure to the same media content. People may count different numbers of fouls in a football match depending on which team they support (Hastorf & Cantril, 1954), they may interpret anti-racist cartoons or chauvinist persons very differently depending on whether they themselves are prejudiced or not (Kendall & Wolff, 1949; Vidmar & Rokeach, 1974), or they may identify different biases in news depending on their partisanship (Vallone et al., 1985). If one takes these results from the level of reception to the level of potential effects, one may conclude that the dominant equidirectionality notion may be too narrow and possibly preclude interesting and important effects. Chapters 6 and 7, in particular, have shown that a specific direction in coverage may elicit contrary reactions. The results did not show a clear adjustment/opposition effect pattern. Nevertheless, they may illustrate that effects research may benefit from conceptualizing effects as conditional on the characteristics of countries or, more generally, of contexts.

In sum, the effects part of this book has shown that bringing context (back) in by means of cross-nationally comparative research may enhance our current understanding and future conceptualization of media effects. What is more, it may encourage researchers to broaden their view from micro-level variables to contextual variables. This may not only sharpen our view on media effects, it may also help to include the richness of social-scientific thinking in the study of media effects. At which level of the micro-macro continuum (Eulau, 1977, 1986) the contextual variables are located, is very much linked to theoretical concerns. In conjunction with its cross-nationally comparative perspective, this book has focused on the "big" context and on country characteristics, but equally interesting research issues may be related to "smaller" contexts and group or network characteristics. Regardless of which contextual unit or level is chosen, however, it seems important to not only talk about communication as cross-level discipline, but to translate it into research. More than ten years ago, Ritchie and Price (1991) criticized that "the popularity of the refrain that 'communication crosses levels'" (p. 137) was not adequately mirrored by empirical research activities. Though not necessarily with respect to cross-nationally comparative research, the authors call for more empirical cross-level studies. If, with respect to cross-nationally comparative research on media effects, Chapters 4 to 7 can respond to this request, then the second part of this book has done its job.

91 The results of some of these studies may also be interpreted in terms of assimilation/contrast effects. However, opposition or adjustment to media messages as found in Chapters 6 and 7 is conceptually different from assimilation and contrast effects which typically require an anchor or reference point toward or from which judgments are displaced.
Epilogue

As I write this, the European Commission threatens Portugal and Germany with sanctions, Polish farmers worry about their country's potential entry into the EU in 2004, and my neighbor finds everything hideously expensive since the introduction of the euro. Some days ago, the President of the European Commission, Romano Prodi, called the stability pact "stupid". At the December 2002 Copenhagen summit, the final decision about the date of the eastward enlargement of the EU will be taken, and my barber cannot understand why somebody writes a whole book on "something boring like Europe" (hmm...). Last night, a German economics professor warned on television that the euro might be the ruin of Europe, in 2004 a new European Parliament is going to be elected, and I am slightly amused by a friend of mine whose hobby as of late it is to obtain one exemplar of the eight different euro coins from each of the twelve countries that introduced the euro.

Theses arbitrary examples may illustrate that the EU shapes and pervades life in Europe today and will probably do so even more in the future. This insight is not so sizzling. However, this book has shown that television coverage may play an important role in this process. If the reader by now knows a little more about the television coverage of the European Union and its effects, then this book has achieved its goal. The book also promised political scientists an answer to the question of whether they should include media coverage in their investigations about the EU; and it promised communication scientists an answer to the question of whether they should include the EU in their media studies. Admittedly, it was a long journey through the media landscape of Europe and several obstacles had to be surmounted before the view became clear. At the beginning of this journey, I emphasized that Europe matters. At the end of this journey, I think I may add: television, too.