

Chapter 9

Negative News, Negative Public?

Previous chapters focused on major changes in the process of political communications within the news media and parties. Theories of videomalaise emphasize that modern developments have transformed the contents of news, with the growth of 'infotainment', 'negative' news, and 'tabloidization', contributing towards widespread cynicism about government and political leaders. To examine these claims we need systematic evidence about the contents of news coverage and the public's response. We are concerned here with public attitudes, understood as political preferences towards the major policy issues facing the polity, as distinct to levels of knowledge and information which are dealt with in subsequent chapters. This chapter assumes that three interrelated conditions need to be met for the news media to change public attitudes at aggregate level, namely:

- (i) The news media needs to provide reasonably extensive coverage of an issue;
- (ii) The coverage which is provided needs to display a consistent directional bias; and,
- (iii) The public needs to be attentive to news cues, compared with other sources of information, such as those provided by parties, political leaders, specialist experts, social and political groups, interpersonal communications, objective conditions, and personal experiences¹.

The reasoning is that if news coverage of an issue proves fleeting and ephemeral then in a complex world of rapidly changing information this is unlikely to have much impact on public awareness. Impressions of one event will be swept away by another, leaving no residue in a world of flux. If the first condition is met and there is persistent coverage but this proves to be largely balanced, either internally within a news outlet or externally between different news sources, then this will be unlikely to shift public opinion in a consistent direction. If positive and negative stories are roughly equal, termed by Zaller 'two-sided' information flows², then the effects are likely to cancel each other out at aggregate level. People are most likely to be swayed if a series of stories strongly and persistently reinforce one side or another of a debate. Lastly if the public is presented with a consistent stream of stories, for example a series of reports headlining a political scandal like the Lewinsky affair, but they prefer to rely upon other sources of opinion cues, which perhaps they trust more than the media, then the third condition fails to be met. In this regard we need to distinguish between the effect of opinion cues transmitted via the press, such as official government briefings, party leadership speeches, or commentary from scientific authorities, and the independent effects of news media reporting per se. To examine these assumptions we need information about the amount of coverage, the direction of coverage, and its influence upon the collective public.

This chapter compares these issues within the context of the European Union (EU). If most news about the Community is overwhelmingly negative, - for example if there are a steady stream of Euroskeptical headlines about the inefficiency and incompetence of the Commission bureaucracy, the failure and waste of EU policies like the Common Agricultural policy, and the excessive costs of the budget to member states - and the public takes its cues from the news media, then this could plausibly contribute towards a growing disconnect between European leaders and the public. The first sections of this chapter describe the context and the data used in this study. We then examine the evidence for the three conditions we assume need to be met for the news media to influence public support for the EU: is information about the European Union and its policies easily available in newspapers and television news? Is the direction or tone of news coverage overwhelmingly negative or more balanced? And what is the association between trends in negative coverage in the news media and public disillusionment with the EU? The conclusion summarizes the major findings and considers how far we can generalize from the European Union to other contexts.

Evidence and Data

The European Union provides a suitable context to test theories of *videomalaise* because in recent years many have expressed concern about a growing 'democratic deficit' within the Community and the contribution of the news media to this problem. Many factors may have contributed towards problems of democratic legitimation in the EU, including the structure of EU institutions, the continued weakness of the European Parliament *vis a vis* the Commission, the lack of transparency of decision-making within the Council of Ministers, and the unwillingness of parties to contest European parliamentary elections on the basis of European issues³. Although we lack systematic evidence, news about the EU may plausibly contribute towards this problem, exacerbating the lack of public awareness of the European Union, at best, and fuelling public hostility, at worst⁴. As one commentator expressed this view, when explaining record levels of non-voting in the June 1999 European elections: "*The media hasn't really got to grips with communicating the very complicated and complex things which happen in Europe, which just compounds people's general misunderstanding. We go from the tabloid's scare reporting of straight bananas through to the jargon-laden language of some of the highbrow media. It's a turn-off and people lose interest.*"⁵ Anderson and Weymouth use discourse analysis to present a convincing case for the pervasive Euroskeptical bias across about three-quarters of the British press, with a few exceptions like the *Financial Times* and the *Guardian*⁶.

Studies of public opinion suggest that the media may be more likely to shape perceptions of foreign policy than of domestic politics⁷. The reason is that in our daily lives we often have direct experience of the impact of taxes, prices or crime, which can counterbalance and outweigh other sources of information like the media. People have personal contact with public agencies like unemployment offices, schools and hospitals. Yet, despite public information campaigns, the European Union seems to remain disconnected from the lives of most citizens. The public may not regard the EU as responsible for programs like regional aid or training subsidies, since initiatives are implemented through national legislation and local

bodies. When asked about their sources of information about the EU, only 3% of the public had contacted the EU directly within the prior three months, whereas in contrast three-quarters of the public had seen something on television news and over half had heard something on the radio or read about the EU in a newspaper⁸. As a result, the news media can be expected to prove particularly influential in framing public perceptions of EU institutions and policies, in the same way that coverage may shape views of issues like Kosovo or perceptions of NATO.

These propositions can be tested with systematic evidence from regular Eurobarometer and Europinion tracking surveys of public opinion and monthly content analysis of news coverage of the European Union in the fifteen-member states, with data provided by the European Commission⁹. As discussed in detail in Appendix A, data is derived from *Monitoring Euromedia*, a unique monthly report measuring coverage of the European Union and its policies in newspapers and television news. This 33-month period spanned important developments in European politics from the enlargement of the EU in January 1995, with the inclusion of Sweden, Finland and Austria, to the signature of the Amsterdam treaty in autumn 1997. The research design uses a three-stage process. First we need to establish which issues received extended coverage during the period under review. Second, we can examine the direction of coverage of these issues. We can then focus on the impact of news coverage of these issues on aggregate public opinion.

The Visibility of the EU in the News

To establish baseline trends, the first task is to analyze how much news about the European Union and its policies was reported in newspapers and television news. We can draw a simple distinction between 'routine' news on a monthly basis and 'event-driven' news when coverage peaked around bi-annual meetings of national ministers at the European Council.

The pattern of routine news about the EU is drawn from the monthly *Monitoring Euromedia* reports that provide an overview of the hundreds of news stories about the EU generated in every member state. This indicates the typical amount of coverage 'of the EU and its policies', counting the total number of stories per country and classifying the contents into 21 different issue topics. This process allows us to filter out those stories that prove ephemeral or of only passing interest, announcing the appointment of a particular Commissioner, a meeting of the European Council, or a new initiative on competition or trade policy. Many topics fell into this category¹⁰, such as disputes about fisheries policy, the Schengen agreement on open borders, 'Mad Cow' disease or BSE, and the position of the Kurds in Turkey. These type of stories were excluded from the second stage of analysis because they did not feature heavily or consistently in the news headlines throughout the selected period. As argued earlier, if coverage proves fleeting then we would not expect these stories to have much impact on public attitudes towards Europe, for good or ill, and these issues fail to meet the first condition in our model of media influence.

Routine television news was monitored in the monthly time-series analysis in six countries (Belgium, Italy, France, Germany, UK and Spain) from 1995-1997. Overall 576 news programmes were analyzed by

Monitoring Euromedia during this period. These included 487 items referring to the European Union and its policies, representing on average almost one item (0.85) per program¹¹. As a proportion of the schedule, we can estimate that 3.4% of the evening news was devoted to EU affairs, representing about 4.2 minutes of news per day. Of course, this underestimates total European coverage because this figure does not include news about the EU available on the many other bulletins and current affairs programmes shown on different channels and at different times throughout the day. As we have already noted there has been a proliferation and diversification of news outlets, from discussion programmes to 24-hour news on cable and satellite stations, not to speak of sources like newspaper, radio and the Internet, none of which are counted in the estimate¹². Routine coverage was fairly low-key throughout all member states although there were some cross-national variations, for example during this period Spanish and British television news devoted about twice as much time to the EU as French and Italian TV.

Critics may regard this amount of news coverage devoted to European affairs as far too limited, but there is no simple and universally agreed yardstick to evaluate whether it is adequate, since judgments depend upon political priorities and news values. There can be endless unresolved debates of the 'half-empty, half-full' variety. Press officers, politicians and officials working within the Parliament or Commission may well feel that this represents far too little attention: one study found that many British MEPs were clearly dissatisfied with the volume and quality of coverage given to Parliament in the national and local press¹³. There is some survey evidence that many members of the public sympathize with this view: when asked to evaluate the availability of coverage of European Union affairs, more than a third of the public (38%) thought there was 'too little' television news, while in contrast only 9% complained there was 'too much', and almost half the public (45%) believed coverage was 'about right'¹⁴.

If we accept that news about the EU is limited, the most important point for our argument is that this fact in itself restricts the ability of television news to shape anti-European or pro-European sentiments, since most people watching most regular news programmes most of the time will encounter relatively little about the activities of Brussels, Luxembourg and Strasbourg. Only a few exceptional issues, like the launch of the Euro, become sufficiently visible over a longer period to meet the first condition specified in our model of media influence. Little reporting of EU affairs can certainly influence levels of knowledge or interest about Europe, but it should minimize the media impact upon political attitudes.

[Figure 9.1 about here]

Certain European issues or events attracted more extended treatment on television, whether measured by the proportion of stories or time (see Figure 9.1)¹⁵. There was a pronounced cyclical pattern with news peaking around the bi-annual meetings of national ministers at the European Council. This was evident in June 1995 (with the Cannes Council focusing on unemployment and aid for the Mediterranean region), in Christmas 1995 (when the new currency was christened the 'euro' by the Madrid Council); in spring 1996 (with the Turin Inter-Governmental Conference looking at institutional reform); in mid-summer 1997 (around

the time of the Florence Council and the beef row); in Christmas 1996 (around the time of the Dublin Councils I and II); and lastly in mid-summer 1997 (concerning the third stage of EMU, the Amsterdam Council's decisions on the Stability and Growth Pact, and the convergence criteria member states had to meet to participate in the euro-zone). This regular cycle suggests that the routine daily grind of European parliamentary debates, Commission business or presidential initiatives remains largely invisible to the public but key summits, where government leaders meet every six months at the European Council, provide the sense of heightened drama which attracts the international media. Over 3000 journalists from around the world usually travel in the wake of Council summits.

[Figure 9.2 about here]

The monthly trends in newspaper coverage, shown in Figure 9.2, has somewhat flatter peaks and troughs but it confirms the importance of key summits in attracting heightened news coverage of European affairs. The average number of stories fluctuated throughout 1995 but never rose above 6,000 per month. Coverage rose sharply, however, at the time of the Turin Inter-Governmental conference in spring 1996, discussing institutional reform, and soared again to over 12,000 for the Dublin Councils in December 1996.

[Figure 9.3 about here]

The pattern of newspaper coverage also varied substantially between member states¹⁶. By far the highest proportion of stories were found in the German and British press, while in contrast there were relatively few stories in newspapers from smaller member states like Greece, Luxembourg and Ireland (see Figure 9.3). Cross-national differences could be a product of many factors, including party debate over Europe and the salience of the EU on the national political agenda. Greater coverage in the German press may be due to Chancellor Kohl's pivotal leadership in mobilizing support for the euro during this period. The British press devoted extensive front-page coverage to Europe because of the controversy over the BSE crisis and the British opt out clause from the EMU that John Major had been negotiated at Maastricht, deeply dividing the governing Conservative party into irreconcilable factions of Eurosceptics and Europhiles.

The Issue Agenda

So far we have examined general trends in television and newspaper coverage, but what EU policies featured in these stories? The peaks and troughs that we have already observed suggest a tendency for the news agenda to focus on dramatic developments, such as the BSE health crisis and the launch of the euro-zone, and events like Council summits. But did journalists also inform the public about more routine policy initiatives, such as debates about environmental protection, employment programs, or competition policy? Stories were assigned two or three different '**topic**' codes, since most covered more than one subject. The 21 categories included issues such as foreign policy, agricultural policy, and EU institutions (see Appendix A for details of the full list).

[Figure 9.4 and 9.5 on the same page about here]

The Newspaper Agenda

Economic and monetary policy proved the single most important topic in the newspaper agenda during these years, absorbing just over one quarter of the total stories (see Figure 9.4). The category of 'EU development', including reports about the Inter-Governmental Conference, enlargement, and reform of the decision-making process, absorbed about one-fifth of the press coverage. The next topics, in rank order, were foreign policy (including conflict in Bosnia), agriculture (including the BSE story, at least in part¹⁷), EU institutions (such as reports about the Presidency, Council, Commission and Parliament), and social policy (including employment and health). Although there was a scattering of occasional stories, none of the other policy areas like transport or the environment achieved more than 5% of the press coverage¹⁸.

The Television Agenda

The range of issues on routine television news presents a slightly different pattern (see Figure 9.5), partly because this only covers television in six countries in the period from May 1995 to May 1996. Foreign policy emerged as the top issue on television, reflecting dramatic conflict in the Balkans. The development of the European Union proved almost equally important, generating one fifth of all items, followed by TV coverage of EU institutions, and economic/monetary policy, in that order. One difference with the analysis of the press is that agriculture did not feature as a major story on television news because the BES crisis only hit the headlines in late March 1996. Many of the more routine but still important policy issues where the EU has been active, such as regional aid, competition policy and environmental protection, received little attention on TV.

Given the premises of our argument we can disregard those issues that did not receive much coverage in the news media in the period under review. Two topics were selected for further analysis: the ambitious and far-reaching project on Economic and Monetary Union (EMU) and the issue of EU development. Both these issues provide a robust test of the videomalaise thesis. If extensive negative news about these topics has little or no impact upon public opinion, then we would expect more fleeting issues to have even less influence.

EMU

Throughout this period the project on European Economic and Monetary Union (EMU) was high on the agenda¹⁹. The most important development concerned the single currency. In 1989 the Delors committee recommended moving towards EMU in a three-step plan involving closer economic and monetary coordination, a single currency, and a European Central Bank. In July 1990 the first stage of EMU began with the free movement of capital. In December 1991 the European Council agreed to EMU with subsequent opt out agreements with Britain and then Denmark. In November 1993 the Maastricht Treaty came into force.

In December 1995 the new currency was officially termed the 'Euro' by the Madrid Council. The following two years saw discussion of the convergence criteria for membership and speculation about which countries would manage to meet these in order to join the euro-zone. Plans for monetary union continued to advance at the March 1996 Turin Council

and the June 1996 Florence Council. In June 1997 the Amsterdam Council adopted the Stability and Growth Pact securing the conditions for participation in the third stage of EMU, such as the need for sound government finances, sustainable growth and stable prices. The uncertainty about EMU was resolved in May 1998 at a special meeting of the European Council where it was decided that 11 member states qualified for entry, not including Britain, Denmark, Sweden and Greece. The Euro was first launched on the world market on 1st January 1999 with monetary policy coming under the direction of the European Central Bank. In the following six months the Euro steadily lost against its initial value in trading on world currency markets. If all goes according to plan, use of euro notes and coins is due to start in the euro-zone in 2002. Therefore EMU, which started as one of the most abstract and technical issues of European politics, has come to affect the daily lives of all its citizens. Because of this the Commission launched information campaigns to inform the public about the consequences of the single currency on matters like the transition to new notes and coins, charges for currency conversion, and retail prices. Since the euro represents a new issue, which the public had not encountered before during their lifetimes, this provides an exceptionally good 'natural experiment' to test learning effects from the information provided by the news media and other sources.

[Figure 9.6 about here]

The importance of EMU in press coverage of Europe over the whole period under review is illustrated in Figure 9.6. There were some substantial fluctuations in the number of stories about this issue, caused by particular initiatives or events. Press reports about economic and monetary policy represented about 12-16% of all European stories in spring 1995, rising sharply to represent almost one third of all EU coverage in January 1996, after the Madrid Council christened the Euro. Reports on monetary union fluctuated sharply in spring 1996, then rose again from autumn 1996 to the Amsterdam Treaty in June 1997. The cyclical pattern of European coverage that we have already uncovered is also evident on this issue.

EU Development

The second issue selected for extended analysis concerns EU development including the proposed enlargement of the EU to embrace Central and Eastern European states and the potential reform of EU governance to promote greater accountability and efficiency. The 1993 Copenhagen Council agreed on a number of criteria that countries wanting to join the EU had to meet, including respect for democracy and human rights, a level of economic development close to existing member states, and protection of the environment. In spring 1998 accession negotiations commenced with the Czech Republic, Cyprus, Estonia, Hungary, Slovenia, and Poland, while the Commission set up Accession Partnerships with Bulgaria, Latvia, Lithuania, Romania and Slovakia to help prepare for their membership. There was also discussion of membership by Turkey and Malta. Most debate has revolved around the economic and political conditions for accession. The consensus in the Community is that European decision-making and budgetary processes need to be reformed before engaging upon further enlargement.

These years also saw heated debate about the institutional development of the EU. The issue of the 'democratic deficit' has long

generated arguments about inadequate mechanisms for accountability, transparency and representation in the EU policymaking process. Equally important, there has been much concern about the efficiency of the Community decision-making process as the scope and complexity of EU policy has grown, along with the range of players due to enlargement from the original EU-6 to the current EU-15. Many of the debates about institutional reform involve fairly technical although important issues, such as the principle of subsidiarity concerning who should take decisions in areas transcending national borders, the Parliament's co-decision-making powers with the Council of Ministers, and the veto powers of member states within Council. These discussions progressed at several events, including the March 1996 Turin Inter-Governmental Conference, the June 1996 Florence Council, the September-October Dublin Council I and the December 1996 Dublin Council II, and several institutional reform expanding the powers of parliament were agreed in the 1997 Amsterdam Treaty. News about EU development reflected this debate with peaks and troughs of coverage throughout this period.

Directional Balance: A Steady Diet Of Negative News?

Given that the issues of EMU and EU development received extensive coverage in news about Europe, we can examine whether they met the second condition of our model, namely did media coverage of these issues display a consistent directional bias? If news about Europe proves overwhelmingly negative, as some believe, then we would expect to find a succession of 'bad news' headlines highlighting quarrels between member states, the sluggishness of the euro, the inefficiency, red tape and extravagance of Brussels, and so on, which would feed Euroskepticism among the public. On the other hand if coverage proved fairly neutral, then the influence of some critical stories about Europe should be counterbalanced by more positive reports. '*Directional*' balance is measured by whether stories are positive or negative from the perspective of each political actor, for example whether the introduction of the euro was regarded as a good development, or whether the article expressed approval of the actions of the Commission or the President²⁰. As described in detail in Appendix A, the directional code ranged from very negative (-2.0) to very positive (+2.0).

[Figure 9.7 about here]

Newspaper Directional Bias

The results show that newspapers usually adopted a Euroskeptic tone on most issues, although the degree of negative bias remained limited. Out of twenty-five separate issues, all but four leaned in a negative direction (see Figure 9.7). The classification of newspaper coverage shows that the most critical stories concerned the Commission, the role of EU policy towards the Kurds in Turkey, the audit of EU finances, Bosnian policy, the fisheries dispute, the Schengen agreement on open borders, and the Cannes summit. All of these reports were rated as significantly negative (defined as stories rated greater than -0.20). The only exceptions that leaned in a slightly positive direction were the issues of social policy (including health and jobs), the stability pact, the Western European Union, and Mediterranean policy. If we take the average tone of press coverage of all EU issues per month the direction fluctuated slightly but clearly fell within the

negative zone throughout this period, with the single exception of the month of December 1995 that saw a positive blip at the Madrid Council.

Television Directional Bias

We might expect that given the public service ethos emphasizing political impartiality, television news would provide more balanced coverage than the more partisan press. The available evidence for the directional bias of TV news in six countries suggests that, contrary to expectations, in fact the tone of television news proved consistently more negative towards Europe than the press. As shown in Figure 9.9, the most highly critical news about the EU was shown on the BBC, especially in mid-summer 1995, with stories that reflected the Eurosceptic position of leading spokespersons within the governing Conservative party. Belgian news was also strongly negative while in contrast German television proved more neutral, while Italian TV was more positive. The trends show a significant correlation between the overall direction of coverage in newspapers and television ($R=.66$ sig.p.01), increasing confidence in the consistency and reliability of the indicators.

[Figure 9.8 about here]

Overall coverage of the Community in newspapers and television news therefore often proved anti-Europe. Newspaper headlines commonly highlighted issues such as lax financial control and cronyism by the Commission, sluggish economic growth, profligate agricultural subsidies, the euro's slide on world markets, the failure of Europe to act in the Balkans conflict independently of American leadership, and deep-seated quarrels over the pace and extent of European integration. Negative coverage was perhaps most evident in the Eurosceptic British press, who have produced a series of headlines about mythical Brussels demands to introduce straight bananas, ban British bangers and out-law Women's Institute jam, which have entered popular folklore²¹. If an endemic 'bad news' or Eurosceptic frame characterizes most EU coverage, drowning out positive news about progress on budgetary reform or European defense, then plausibly this may fuel public disillusionment with Europe.

The Influence on the Public?

This leads us to the last and most important issue concerning the association between news coverage and public opinion. The impact of bad news on public disaffection is widely assumed but rarely demonstrated. As argued earlier in Chapter 3, trend analysis at aggregate level is open to many criticisms on methodological grounds. The most important concerns the interaction between the media coverage and the public opinion, including the classic 'chicken and egg' of who leads and who follows. On the one hand, coverage of the EU by television and the press may drive public support towards Europe. But, equally plausibly, the broader political culture may influence journalists and help frame media reports. Spurious correlations may be produced by independent factors, for example political leaders may act as cue-givers, influencing both reporters and the public. For all these reasons, trend analysis at aggregate level remains inherently more flawed and difficult to interpret than individual-level approaches, analyzed in subsequent chapters. Nevertheless this approach allows us

to test the common videomalaise claim that the steady drumbeat of negative media messages is correlated with public opinion at national level.

We can examine the impact of press coverage about the EU on public opinion utilizing three dependent variables. The news media could either influence 'diffuse' support, meaning general orientations towards the European Union and its institutions, or 'specific' support meaning orientations towards particular policies²². Diffuse support for the EU is measured by the standard indicators of 'membership' and 'benefit' that have been widely employed since the start of the Eurobarometer series²³. Specific support is measured according to agreement or disagreement with the following statement about the euro²⁴: "*There has to be one single currency, the euro, replacing the [national currency] and all other national currencies in the European Union.*" Responses allow us to monitor diffuse and specific support for the EU every month in each country using the Eurobarometer tracking surveys. To increase the reliability of the analysis, the study compared the measurement of press coverage and public opinion per country every month, producing 180 observation points for analysis.

Two independent variables are used to monitor the direction of news coverage, focusing on the selected issues of monetary union and EU development. Throughout 1995 the tone of newspaper stories about EMU showed a highly negative tendency, with a stepped descent, reaching its nadir in October 1995. Coverage subsequently moved into the neutral zone for 1996. It was only at the very end of the series, in summer 1997, that coverage started to move in a more positive direction (see Figure 9.10). The direction of news about EU development was measured by coverage of the 1996 Inter-Governmental Conference, which focused on the enlargement of membership and institutional reforms to the decision-making process. The tone of the news about the IGC fluctuated, and treatment over the whole 33-month period was occasionally neutral or even briefly positive, but the predominant coverage was persistently in the negative zone (Figure 9.9). Most people reading articles about the debate over EU development would have received critical coverage of these issues.

[Figure 9.9 about here]

Simple bivariate correlations were run to analyze the impact of monthly trends in the tone of press coverage on European support. The results of these correlations confirmed that *the tone of news about monetary union was strongly and significantly related to diffuse support for EU membership and to specific support for the euro* (see Table 9.1). In contrast, negative press coverage of the IGC was not associated with public support for the EU.

Regression models were run to see whether the tone of press coverage continued to prove significant after introducing controls for nation. The results in Table 9.2 confirm the pattern found with simple correlations, namely the tone of press coverage towards EMU continued to predict public support for the euro and diffuse support for EU membership (although not EU benefits). The national variables performed as expected, for example Ireland proved relatively positive, while the UK proved negative, across all three indicators of European support, with the overall models explaining a high proportion of variance in the dependent variables. More formal modeling supports this conclusion.

Although the results are not reported here, a number of time-series models were estimated to test whether the tone of each month's news on EMU related to a measurable change in diffuse and specific public support. The results of these models confirm a significant relationship.

[Table 9.1 and 9.2 about here]

Why should we find a relationship between press coverage and public opinion concerning the euro, but no impact from the coverage of European development? Many reasons may plausibly account for this difference. It may be that the issue of 'EU development' is too complex and abstract, including many different elements within the same category. People could plausibly favour institutional reform, for example, but still not want to enlarge membership to Central and East European states. A wide range of complex and technical reforms fall under the broad heading of 'EU development'. Alternatively, perhaps the measures that we are using are insufficiently sensitive to gauge subtle shifts in public opinion towards these issues; ideally we should have monthly data monitoring specific support for enlargement or institutional reform. Nevertheless the fact that we have demonstrated a significant link between trends in negative news coverage of the euro and the level of public support towards a single European currency is important. In principle the methodology could be extended and applied to other types of issues in other contexts. This process would help us to understand the conditionality of media effects, both when the news media can, and cannot, influence mass attitudes.

Conclusions: Negative News, Turned Off Public?

There has long been concern that a steady diet of negative news has contributed towards public disillusionment with government and political leaders. This issue is believed to affect many post-industrial societies, from the United States to Japan, but it can be examined systematically within the context of the European Union. European citizens cannot be expected to care much about European elections, to feel connected to MEPs, or to know much about their rights within the EU, if there is minimal news coverage of parliamentary debates in Strasbourg, if major initiatives concerning aid for the Balkans, monetary union, or employment programs go unreported in the press, or if the only coverage which is widely publicized is generally hostile towards Community institutions and policies.

In the early years of the Community it was assumed that there was a 'permissive consensus' about the future development of Europe, and that decisions by the Council of Ministers and Commission were broadly in line with public opinion. The public displayed passive acquiescence towards Europe, delegating and legitimating the decisions of European policymakers in Brussels, Luxembourg and Strasbourg²⁵. In recent years the growth in the powers and responsibilities of European institutions has been considerable, through the Single European Act and the Maastricht Treaty, as well as through the enlargement of EU membership to Austria, Sweden and Finland. With a population of almost 300 million, the EU is now the world's largest trading group, and one of the three most important players on the global economic scene, alongside the USA and Japan. Many fear that processes of

representation and accountability have not kept pace with that expansion. The resignation of the entire European Commission in March 1999, following a scathing report on mismanagement, underscored the need for greater democratic control over the Brussels bureaucracy.

In the last decade, while the scope and responsibilities of the Community have grown, there has been a significant erosion of public support. Behavioural indicators like turnout for European elections, reaching record lows of under half the electorate (49.2%) in June 1999, suggest profound apathy, or possibly even growing alienation, from the European project. Although institutional arrangements play a large role explaining cross-national variations in turnout, these factors are less satisfactory in explaining the downwards trend²⁶. Attitudinal indicators gauge whether people think that their country's membership of the European Union is a good thing ('*membership*') and whether people believe that the EU has benefited their own country ('*benefited*')²⁷. These indicators, which were stable or rising during the 1980s, fell from 1990 to 1997. In 1998, just over half (54%) of the public believed that European membership was a 'good thing', well down from the peak in spring 1990 when almost three-quarters expressed approval. Euroscepticism is most widespread among the latecomers to the Community, including Sweden, Austria and Finland, as well as the UK.

This situation is compounded by the fact that the institutions of European governance remain so distant from the lives of most European citizens, and the decision-making processes usually occur behind closed doors. Citizens are linked to EU governing institutions via two primary channels of representative democracy²⁸. In the *intergovernmental* model citizens convey their preferences over Europe via established channels of democracy within the nation-state, through parties, parliaments and governments to European institutions, for example when national ministers meet behind closed doors in the European Council. In the *federal* model the electorate express their policy choices directly to the European Parliament, and indirectly to other levels of European governance. Yet there are major flaws with both routes. The activities of the European parliament, the most democratic forum in EU politics, often appears only weakly related to the public they represent. Without any direct experience of European politics, most people have to rely upon other sources of information for their knowledge and evaluations of EU institutions and policies. Europe therefore provides a strong test case for the videomalaise thesis: if the public take their cues from the news media, then we would expect that negative messages in the press and television would shape public support for the EU.

Major Findings

To summarize the results of this analysis, we assumed that the news media could influence aggregate public opinion under three conditions: (i) if there is extensive media coverage of an issue, (ii) if this coverage displays a consistent directional bias and, (iii) if the public is willing to take its cues from the news media.

In terms of the **amount** of coverage, the evidence shows that *most European issues received minimal coverage in the news media*. Routine news about EU affairs was limited although there was a cyclical pattern, with newspaper and television coverage regularly peaking around the six-monthly meetings of the European Council. If the attention of the news media proves ephemeral and sporadic, with only a

few occasional stories about issues like competition or trade policy, then we would not expect that this coverage could have much impact.

News about Europe devoted most coverage to the two topics selected for further analysis, namely monetary union and EU development. These issues raise important questions about widening and/or deepening the EU. Monetary union has provoked a heated debate that recurred throughout the period under review. The development of a single currency is probably the most controversial and important issue in Community politics that will ultimately affect the future direction of Europe and the lives of all its citizens. The issue about reform of EU institutions is at the heart of the European agenda. If news about these issues fails to sway public attitudes, then it seems legitimate to assume that people will have been influenced even less by issues further down the news agenda, such as EU policy on energy, consumer affairs, or education.

In terms of the *direction* of coverage, we found that *when the media reported about the EU, while sometimes news was neutral, the coverage was usually given a negative-leaning slant.* Although the bias was only modest, it proved fairly consistent. The attentive public reading about Europe in newspapers or watching TV news will receive a steady diet of 'bad' news. This can be criticized from a normative standpoint. As argued earlier, for the news media to act as an effective civic forum, European citizens should be able to hear the pros and cons concerning controversies about the future development of the Community. If political leaders are divided over the euro or enlargement, and people can only read or watch one side of the argument, then this potentially impoverishes public debate.

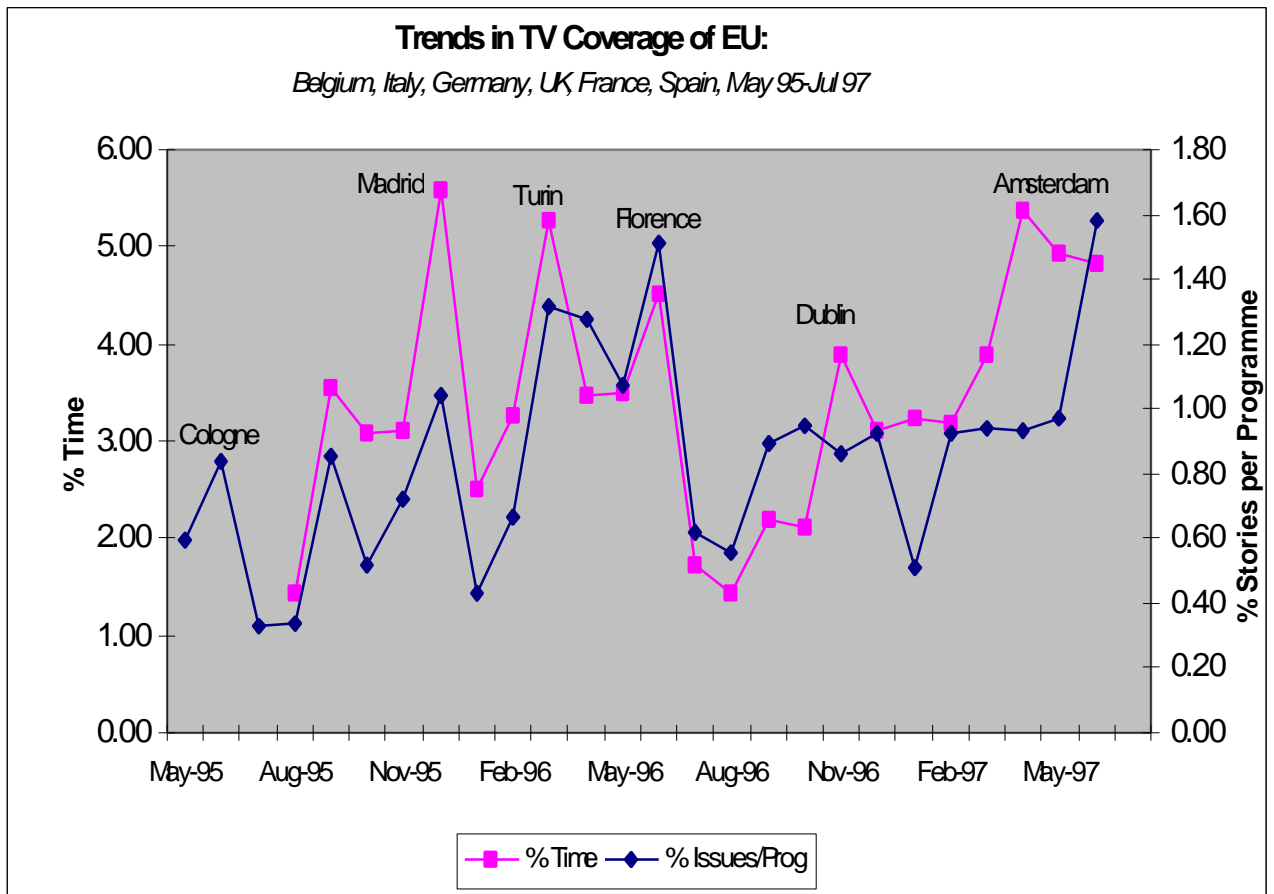
Lastly, and most importantly, in terms of *effects*, does news coverage influence public opinion? We established that *extensive and sustained negative coverage of the euro was significantly associated with levels of diffuse and specific public support for Europe.* At aggregate level, negative news about monetary union was associated with lower levels of public support for EU membership in general, and for the euro in particular.

If we can generalize further from this context, and if we can assume that the direction of influence runs from the news media to the public, this implies that where issues receive extensive coverage that is also predominately negative in direction, then the public does not remain immune from media messages. Negative news about the euro may plausibly have contributed towards public disaffection with Europe. The pattern that we have established here seems likely to hold in many other contexts, particularly those issues like conflict in Kosovo or the dangers of global warming where the public has little or no direct personal experience to counterbalance media messages.

This being said, there is an important qualification to our argument. *We still cannot establish the direction of causality of this relationship.* There is a significant association but that, in itself, does not demonstrate causality. One interpretation is that a critical press, with headlines constantly casting doubt on the viability and effects of a single European currency, has the capacity to influence public perceptions of the European Union and the desirability of monetary union. Alternatively, the press may take its cues from a broader political reality, shaped by the complex interactions of party

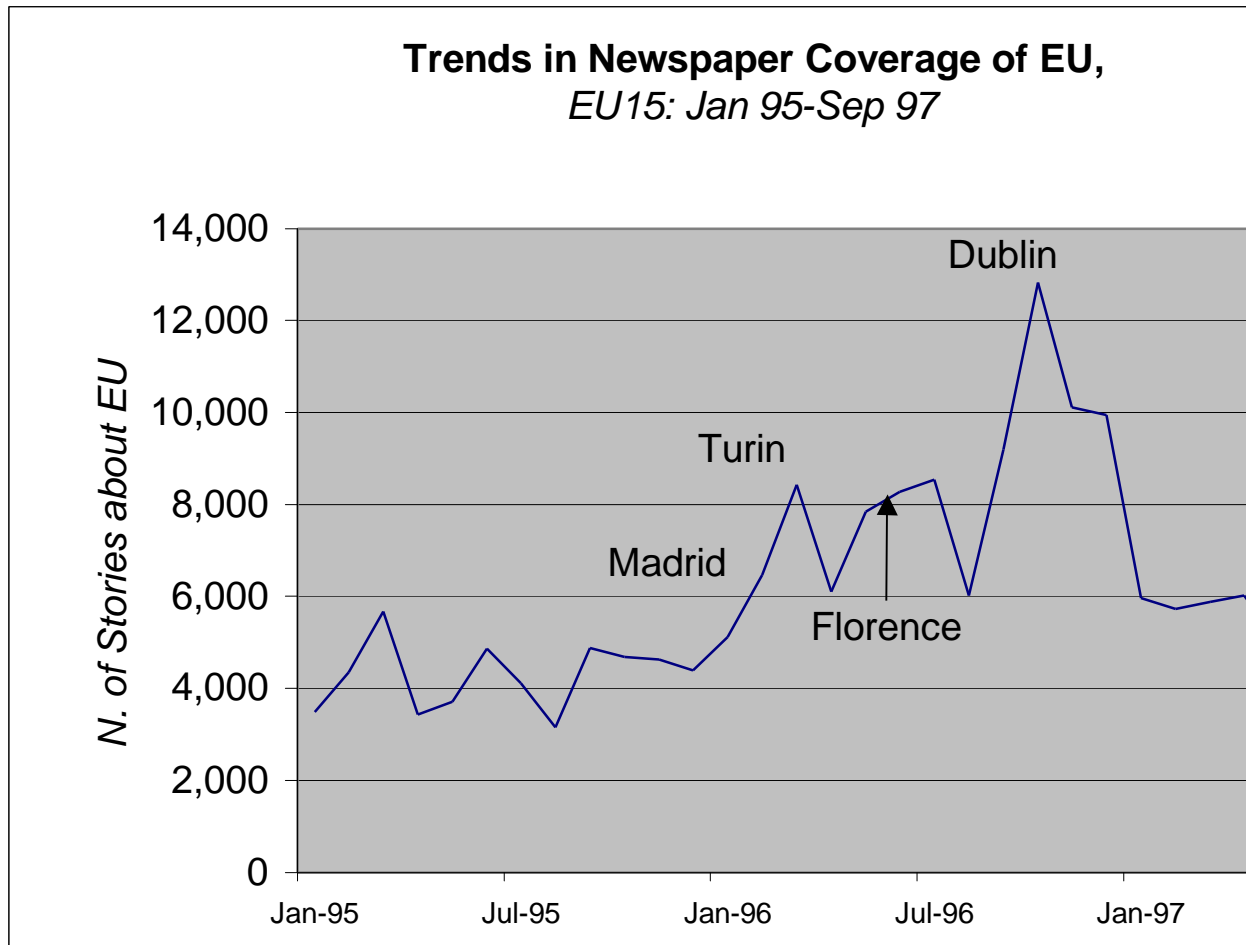
elites, interest groups, and political cultures. For example, the British press may have proved so strongly Eurosceptic in part because of the predominance of the anti-European faction within the governing Conservative party, as well as the strength of anti-European feeling among grassroots public opinion, which long predated the issue of monetary union. Aggregate level analysis is simply unable to settle the question of whether public opinion or media coverage lead, or follow, in a complex tango. The most plausible interpretation is probably a pattern of complex interactions, rather than any single causal direction. Journalists are part of a broader political culture and system, and not immune to its influences. And the political culture and system is, in turn, shaped and moulded by, among other things, the long-term pattern of media coverage. In order to test the videomalaise thesis further we can go on to see whether the results in this chapter are confirmed at individual level when we examine the effects of media exposure on citizens' political knowledge, political trust and civic engagement.

Figure 9.1



Note: The figures represent the proportion of news broadcasts about the European Union six countries (Italy, Belgium, Germany, France, UK, Spain) from May 1995 -Jul 97. The correlation between % time and % stories is .66.

Source: Calculated from *Monitoring Euromedia*, 1995-97, Brussels: European Commission.



Chapter from Pippa Norris "A Virtuous Circle: Political Communications in Post-Industrial Societies." (Press, Fall 2000)

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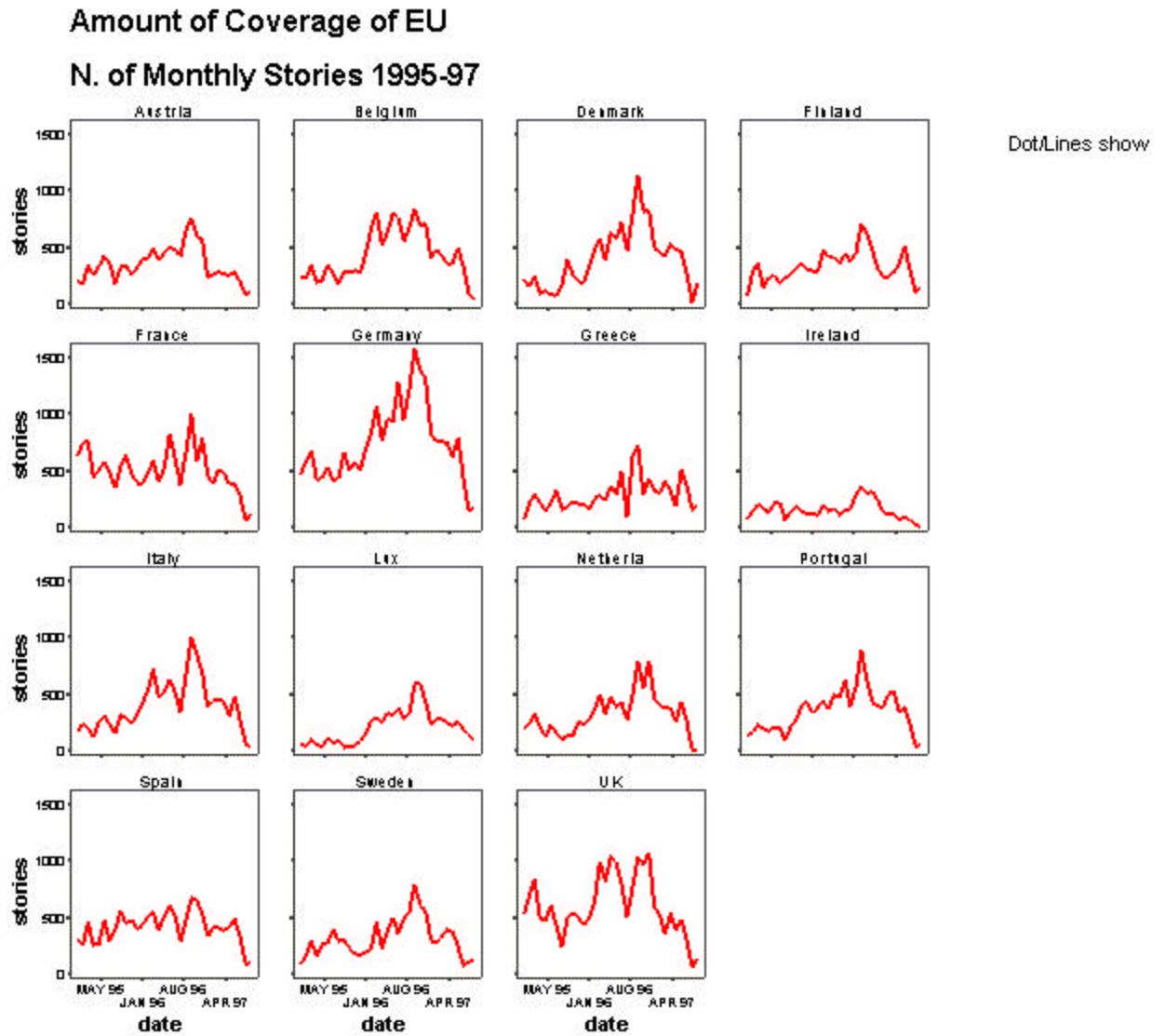
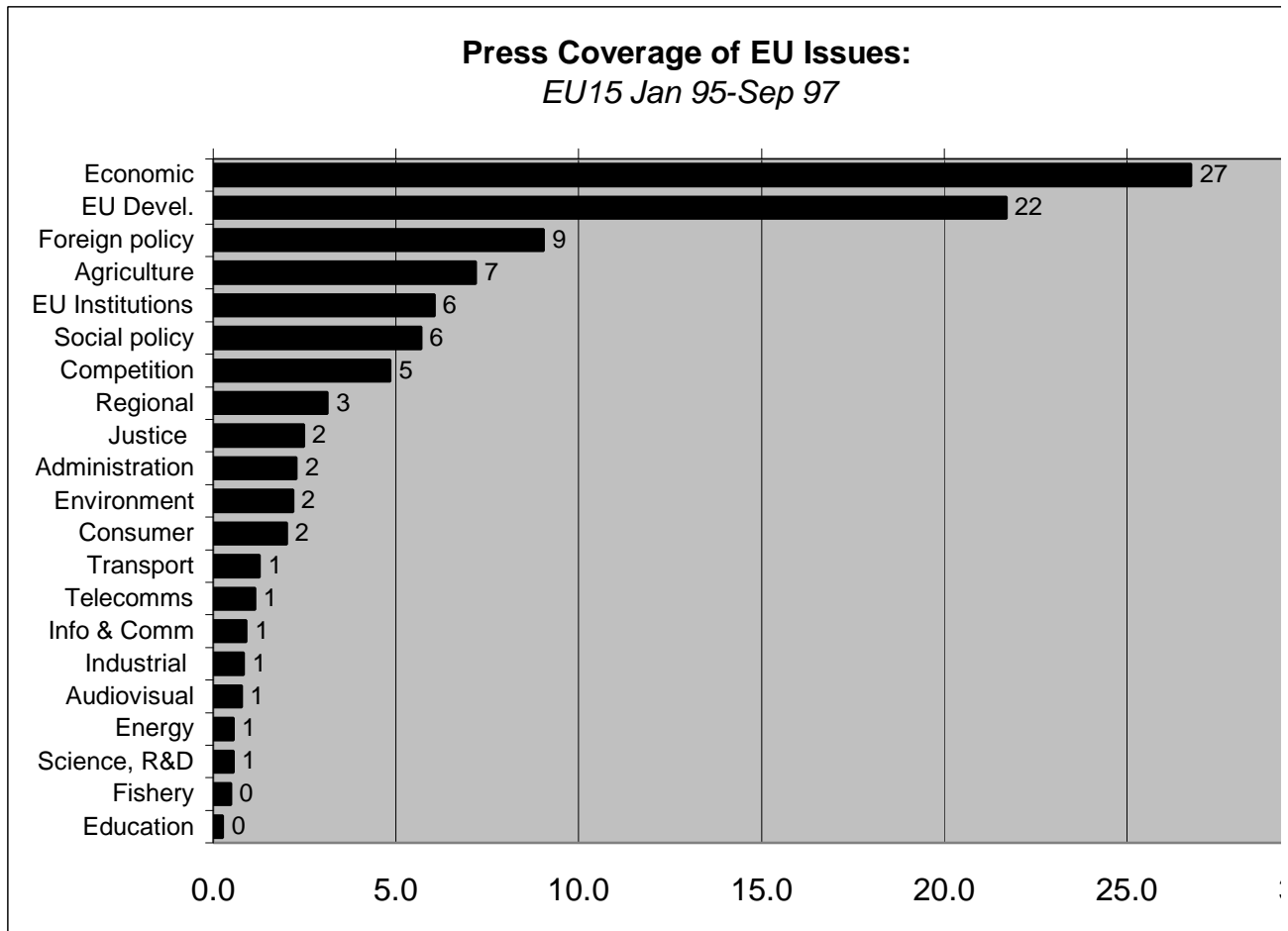


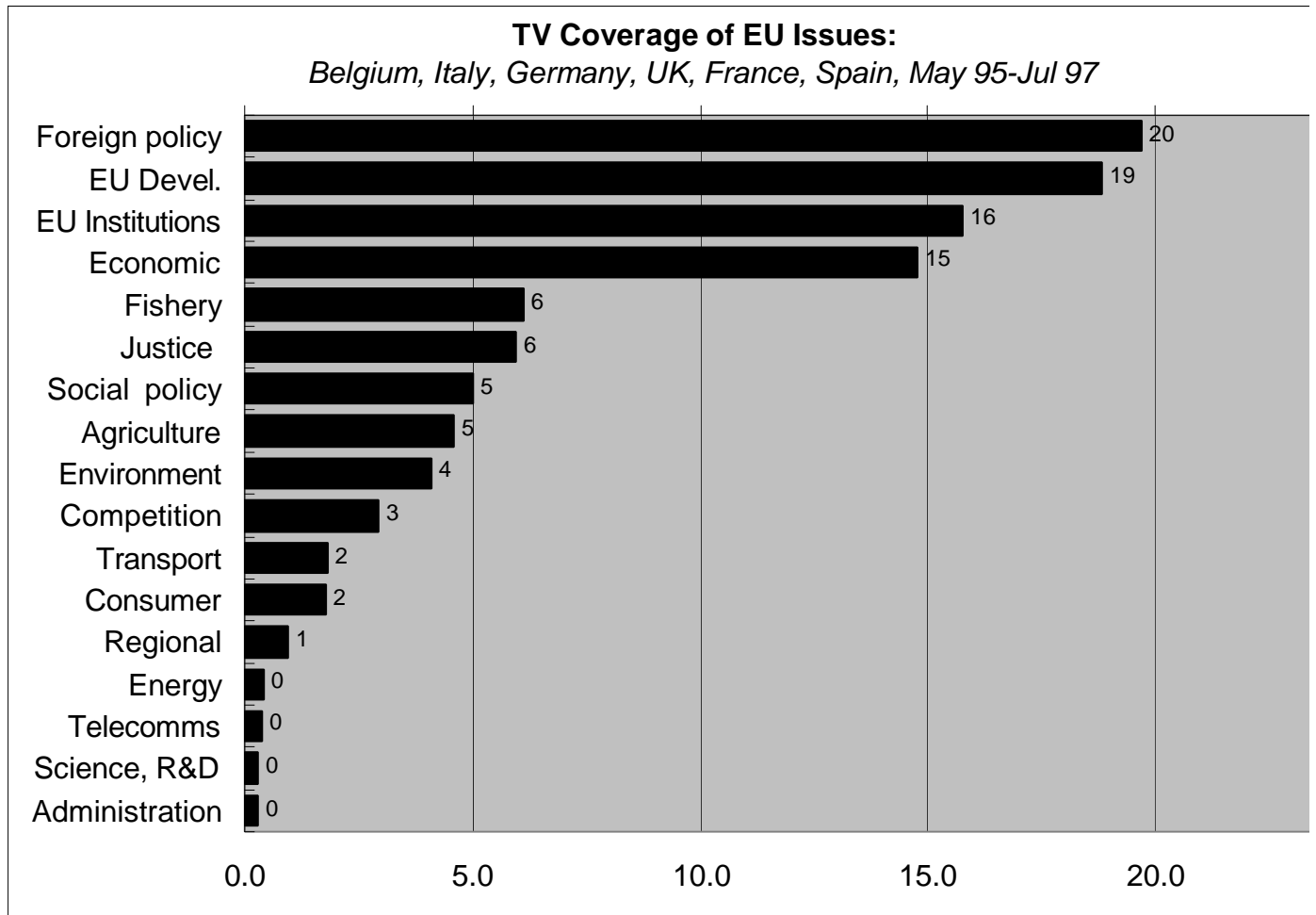
Figure 9.4



Source: Calculated from *Monitoring Euromedia*, 1995-97, Brussels: European Commission.

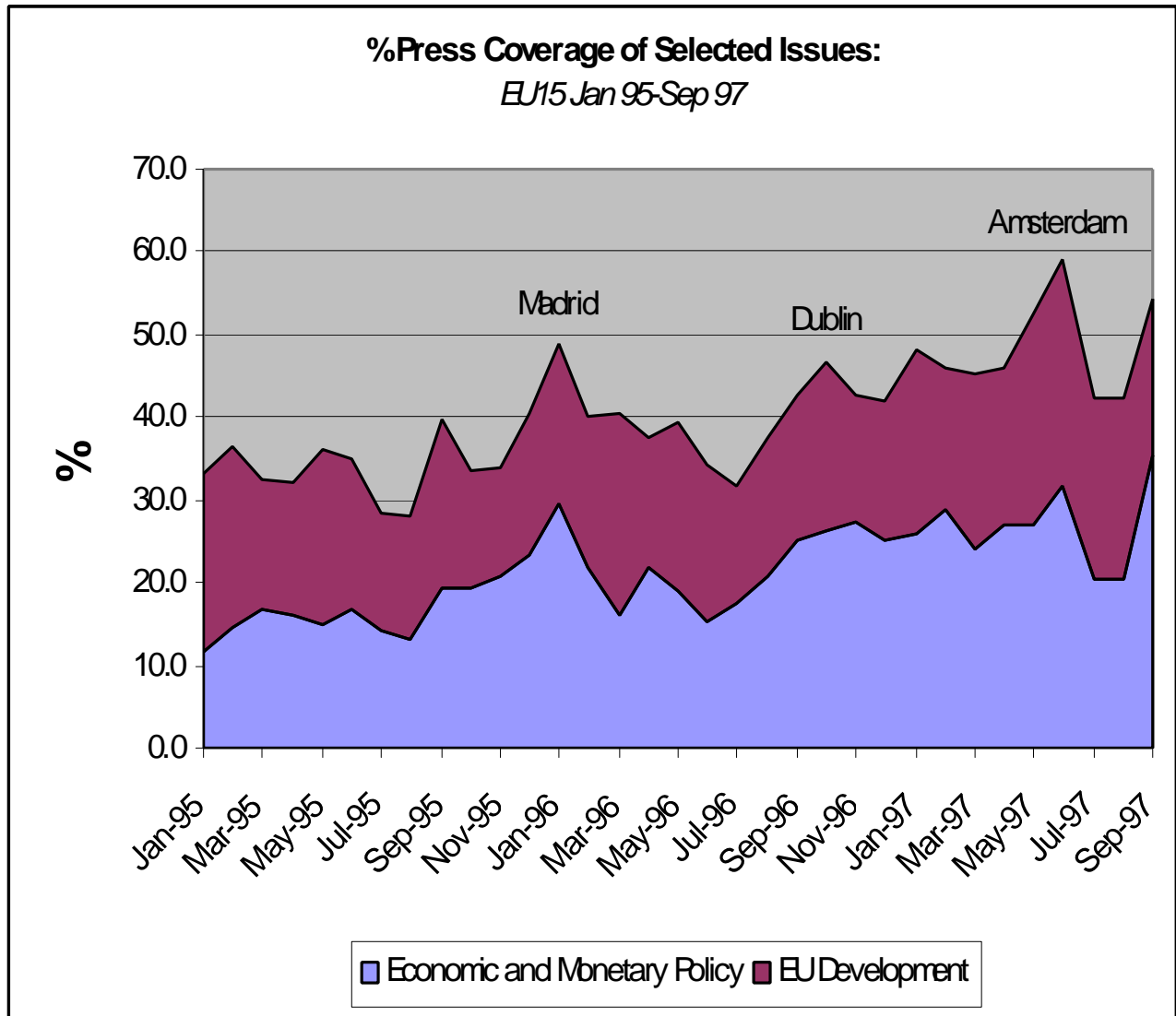
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Figure 9.5



Source: Calculated from *Monitoring Euromedia*, 1995-97, Brussels: European Commission.

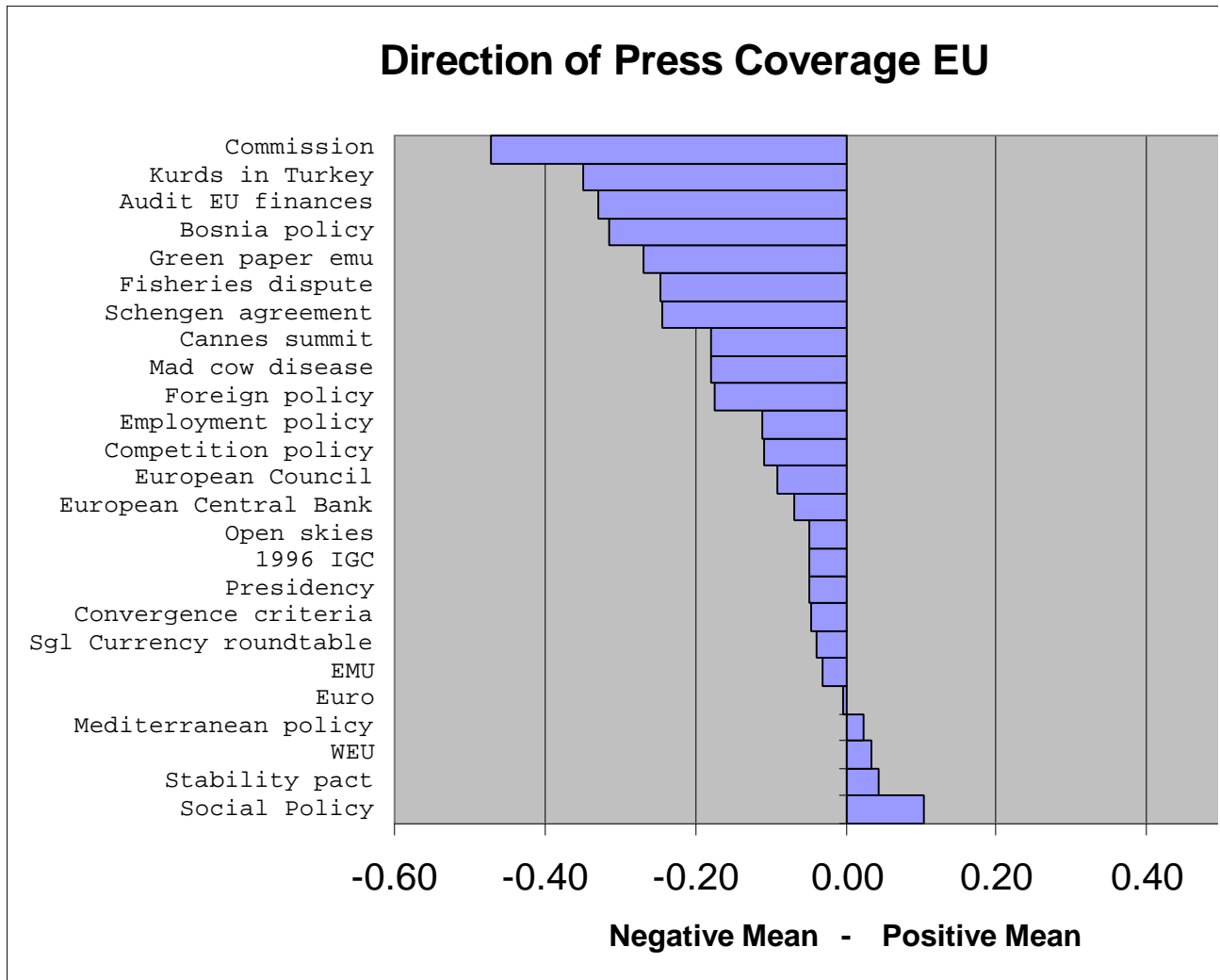
Figure 9.6



Chapter from Pippa Norris "A Virtuous Circle: Political Communications in Post-Industrial Societies." (Press, Fall 2000)

Source: Calculated from *Monitoring Euromedia*, 1995-97, Brussels: European Commission.

Figure 9.7

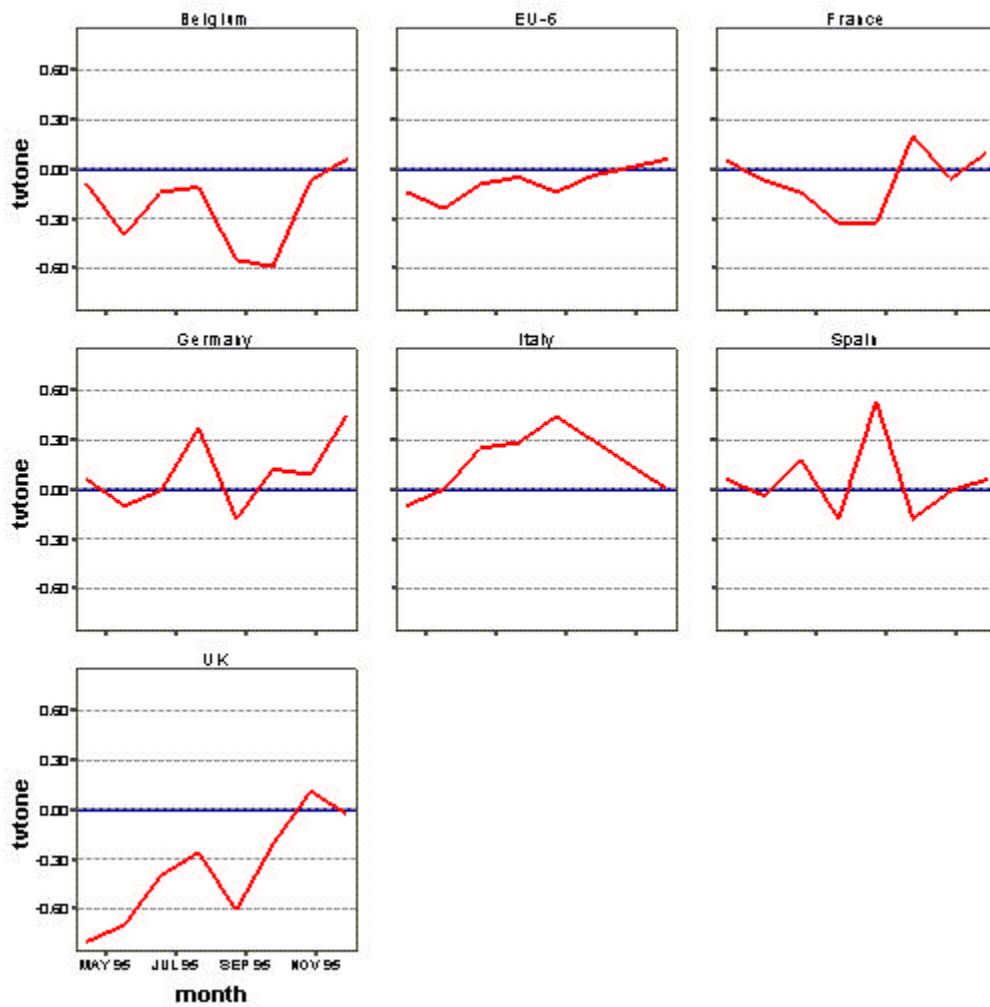


Source: Calculated from *Monitoring Euromedia*, 1995-97, Brussels: European Commission.

Chapter from Pippa Norris "A Virtuous Circle: Political Communications in Post-Industrial Societies." (Press, Fall 2000)

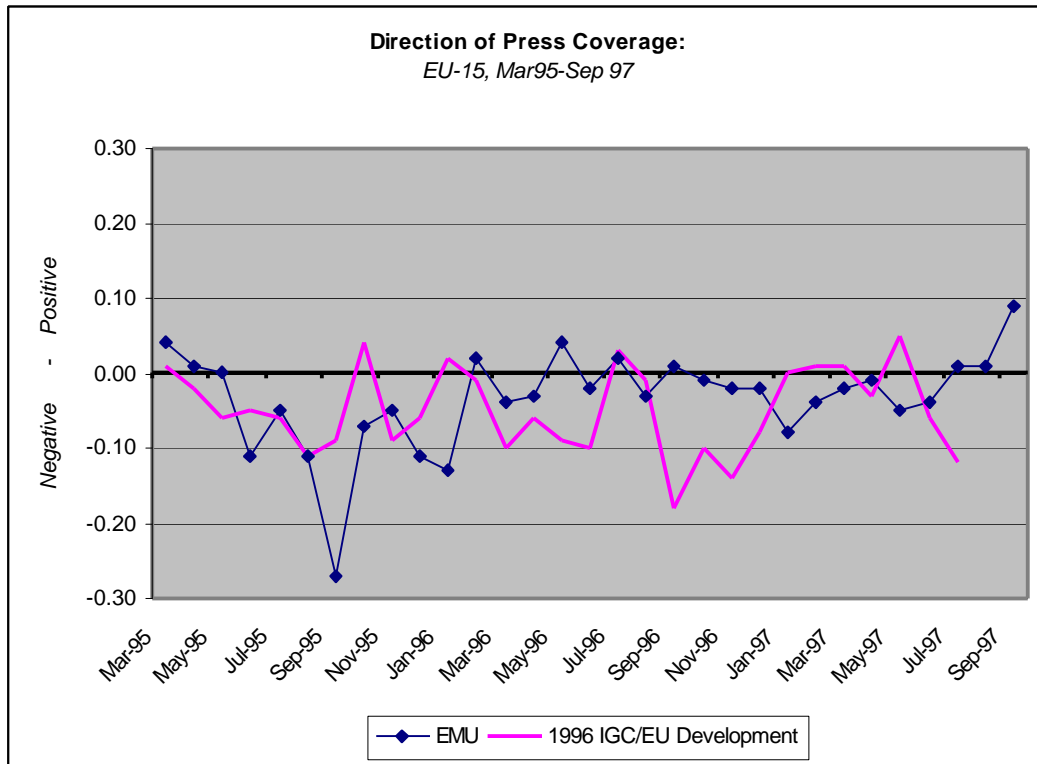
Chapter from Pippa Norris "A Virtuous Circle: Political Communications in Post-Industrial Societies." (Press, Fall 2000)

Tone of TV Coverage of EU Monthly Stories 1995



Chapter from Pippa Norris "A Virtuous Circle: Political Communications in Post-Industrial Societies." (Press, Fall 2000)

Figure 9.9



Source: Calculated from *Monitoring Euromedia, 1995-97*, Brussels: European Commission.

Chapter from Pippa Norris "A Virtuous Circle: Political Communications in Post-Industrial Societies." (Press, Fall 2000)

Table 9.1: Bivariate Correlation between Tone of Press Coverage and Public Support for t

<i>Public Support for the EU</i>	<i>Tone Press EMU</i>			<i>Tone Press IGC/EU Development</i>		
	<i>R</i>	<i>Sig.</i>	<i>N.</i>	<i>R</i>	<i>Sig</i>	<i>N.</i>
Support for euro	.387	***	132	.160		132
EU Membership	.362	***	167	.071		180
EU Benefit	.103		165	.051		180

Note: Correlation between public support and the tone of press coverage. The observ 'country-month'. See text for details.

Source: Calculated from *Monitoring Euromedia*, 1995-97, Brussels: European Commission.

Chapter from Pippa Norris "A Virtuous Circle: Political Communications in Post-Industrial Societies." (Press, Fall 2000)

Table 9.2 Models Predicting Specific and Diffuse Support for the EU

	Predictors of support for the euro	Sig.	Predictors of support for EU Membership	Sig.	Predictor of Support for EU Benefit
Constant	48.0		51.3		
Tone of press coverage of euro	.24	**	.17	**	
Austria			.07	*	
Belgium	.30	**	.13	**	
Germany	-.09	*	.27	**	
Denmark	-.08	*	-.04		
Greece	.41	**	.09	*	
France	.41	**			
Finland	-.07				
Ireland	.65	**	.61	**	
Netherlands					
Portugal	.15	**	.37	**	
Sweden	.10	**	.02		
UK	-.19	**	-.38	**	
R2	.82		.79		

Note: The figures represent standardized beta coefficients predicting aggregate EU support in ordinary least squared regressions models. The dependent variables are the mean national support for the euro, EU membership and EU benefit, as described in the text. Countries are dummy variables. Sig. P.**>.01 *>.05. The Luxembourg dummy variable is excluded as a predictor. There are 180 observational units in total (nation-months).

¹ These conditions are similar to those specified in seminal accounts of the role of party cues in issue voting. See, for example, the discussion in Philip Converse. 1964. 'The Nature of Belief Systems in Mass Publics.' In *Ideology and Discontent* edited by David Apter Free Press: New York; also Chapter 13 in David Butler and Donald Stokes. 1974. *Political Change in Britain*. London: Macmillan.

² John R. Zaller. 1992. *The Nature and Origins of Mass Opinion*. New York: Cambridge University Press. Chapter 9.

³ Cees van der Eijk and Mark Franklin. 1997. *Choosing Europe*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press; Francis Jacobs, Richard Corbett and Michael Shackleton. 1992. *The European Parliament*. 2nd edition. Harlow: Longman; Robert Keohane and Stanley Hoffman (eds). 1991. *The New European Community: Decision-making and Institutional Change*. Boulder, Co: Westview Press; Michael Marsh and Pippa Norris. Eds. 1997. 'Political Representation in the European Parliament.' Special Issue of the *European Journal of Political Research*. 32(2); Hermann Schmitt and Jacques Thomassen. 1999. Eds. *Political Representation and Legitimacy in the European Union*. Oxford: Oxford University Press; Richard S. Katz and Bernhard Wessels. Eds. 1999. *The European Parliament, the National Parliaments and European Integration*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

⁴ The only study linking coverage in the news media with attitudes towards European integration is Russell Dalton and R. Duval. 1986. 'The Political Environment and Foreign Policy Opinions: British Attitudes towards European Integration, 1972-79.' *British Journal of Political Science*. 16: 113-34. In addition for the role of the news media in European Elections see Jay G. Blumler. ed. 1983. *Communicating to Voters*. London: Sage.

⁵ Anne Stevens quoted in 'UK turnout: Apathy or Ignorance?' BBC News at <http://news.bbc.co.uk>. 14 June 1999.

⁶ Peter J. Anderson and Anthony Weymouth. 1999. *Insulting the Public? The British Press and the European Union*. London: Longman. See also David Morgan. 'Brussels Media and European Union News.' *European Journal of Communication*. 10(3):321-344.

⁷ See the discussions in Benjamin Page and Robert Y. Shapiro. 1992. *The Rational Public: Fifty Years of Trends in Americans' Policy Preferences*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press; also William G. Meyer. 1992. *The Changing American Mind*. Ann Arbor, MI: The University of Michigan Press.

⁸ 'Results of Continuous Tracking Surveys of European Opinion'. *Europinion* #13 European Commission: Brussels November 1997. <http://europa.eu.int>.

⁹ I am most grateful in particular to Anna Melich and Agnes Hubert, as well as to the work of the European Commission's DG10 for Information, Communication, Culture and Audiovisual-Unit Public Opinion Monitoring (X.A.2) for release of this dataset, without which this book would not have been possible.

¹⁰ A full chronology of events can be found in the monthly Bulletin of the European Union available at europa.eu.int/abc/doc.

¹¹ It should be noted that multiple codings were used for story topics.

¹² In addition it can be noted, for comparison, that US network news devoted on average about four minutes per news program to all types of international news during roughly the same period. Pippa Norris. 1995. 'News of the World.' In *Politics and the Press*, edited by Pippa Norris. Boulder, CO: Lynne Reinner.

¹³ David Morgan. 1998. *The European Parliament, Mass Media and the Search for Power and Influence*. Report to the European Commission, DGX, Brussels.

¹⁴ *Eurobarometer 50*, Spring 1998. Brussels: European Commission.

¹⁵ The measures of the proportion of stories and the proportion of time correlated fairly closely together ($R=.66$), increasing confidence in the reliability of these measures.

¹⁶ Although it should be acknowledged that this pattern could have been produced by the selections of newspapers used in the content analysis; for example *Monitoring Euromedia* coded far more British than Irish papers.

¹⁷ This may under-estimate total coverage of the BSE crisis, which could be classified under 'agriculture' (when it related to the financial problems facing farmers), 'health' (when stories discussed the risks to the human food chain), or even 'consumer affairs' (when stories related to the retail consequences of the crisis, for example for butchers).

¹⁸ Unfortunately, we lack any systematic indicator of the priority given to policy issues by the Commission or Parliament that could be compared with this news agenda. Previous studies have commonly analyzed the government's budget to gauge domestic policy priorities, such as the growth of per capita spending on welfare services among leftwing and rightwing regimes. Many of the most important issues facing the EU, however, are those of competition, regulation and governance, without direct spending implications for the EU budget. Agriculture and fisheries, for instance, absorbs about two-thirds of all Community expenditure but this does not imply that these issues were the most important or controversial matters under debate in the period under comparison. The most difficult agricultural issue in the period under review concerned how the Community should respond to the health risks associated with Bovine Spongiform Encephalopathy (BSE or Mad Cow

disease), an issue which was only in part a matter of financial compensation for farmers. Another independent indicator of policy priorities can be derived from content analysis of the election manifestoes of the party or parties in government. See, for example, Hans-Dieter Klingemann, Richard I. Hofferbert and Ian Budge. 1994. *Parties, Policies and Democracy*. Boulder, Westview Press. But at the Community level these documents are only applicable in the broadest sense to party groups within the European Parliament, not to the decisions of the European Council or the Commission.

¹⁹ There is an enormous literature on this topic. For general background see, for example, Andrew Duff, John Pinder, and Roy Pryce. 1994. *Maastricht and Beyond*. London: Routledge; Michael J. Baun. 1996. *An Imperfect Union: The Maastricht Treaty and the New Politics of European Integration*. Boulder, CO: Westview Press; Kenneth Dyson. 1994. *Elusive Union: The Process of Economic and Monetary Union in Europe*. London: Longman; Barry Eichengreen and Jeffrey Frieden. Eds. 1994. *The Political Economy of European Monetary Unification*. Boulder, CO: Westview.

²⁰ For more detailed discussions of the concepts of balance and bias see Jorgen Westerstahl. 1983. 'Objective News Reporting.' *Communication Research* 10 (3): 403-424; Denis McQuail. 1992. *Media Performance*. London: Sage; Pippa Norris, John Curtice, David Sanders, Margaret Scammell and Holli Semetko. 1999. *On Message*. London: Sage.

²¹ A Nexis-Lexis search of non-US newspapers disclosed 130 stories since 1994 referring to the 'straight bananas' story, a claim that seems to have entered the popular culture in September 1994 when the European Commission's proposed banning 'abnormally curved' bananas. See *The Daily Mirror* 21 September 1994.

²² For a discussion of the concept and measurement of political support see Pippa Norris. 1999. *Critical Citizens: Global Support for Democratic Governance*. Oxford: Oxford University Press; see also Oskar Niedermayer and Bettina Westle. 1995. 'A Typology of Orientations.' In *Public Opinion and Internationalized Governance*. Edited by Oskar Niedermayer and Richard Sinnott. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

²³ The items ask: (*Membership*) "Generally speaking do you think that (your country's) membership in the European Community is a good thing, a bad thing, or neither good nor bad?" (*Benefit*) "Taking everything into consideration, would you say that (your country) has on balance benefited or not from being a member of the European Community?"

²⁴ The unfortunate wording of this item is less than ideal; in particular people may feel that the euro *has* to be introduced, as an inevitable step given their country's membership, without necessarily feeling that this *should* occur.

²⁵ Martin Slater. 1982. 'Political Elites, Popular Indifference and Community Building.' *Journal of Commonwealth Studies* 21(1): 69-87.

²⁶ Mark Franklin and Cees van der Eijk. 1996. *Choosing Europe? The European Electorate and National Politics in the Face of Union*. Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press. Chapter 19; Jean Blondel, Richard Sinnott and Palle Svensson. 1997. 'Representation and Voter Participation.' *European Journal of Political Research*. 32(2):273-282.

²⁷ The most comprehensive analysis of public opinion towards the EU from the early 1970s until the early 1990s is provided in Oskar Niedermayer and Richard Sinnott. 1995. *Public Opinion and Internationalized Governance*. Oxford: Oxford University Press. For a discussion see also Svein S. Anderson and Kjell A. Eliassen. Eds. 1996. *The European Union: How Democratic is it?* London: Sage; Jack Hayward. Ed. 1995. *The Crisis of Representation in Europe*. London: Frank Cass.

²⁸ Jacques Thomassen and Hermann Schmitt. 1999. 'Introduction.' In *Political Representation and Legitimacy in the European Union*. Edited by Hermann Schmitt and Jacques Thomassen. Oxford: Oxford University Press.