

Applying network ethnography to the study of the European communications gap

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Research question

What is wrong with the communication of European politics? What are the difficulties politicians find in 'selling Europe', and what the roadblocks civil society agents encounter when trying to make their voices heard in the European Union (EU)? A 'network ethnography' (ethnographic fieldwork informed by social network analysis) of the EU-related public sphere actors in the European region of the Yorkshire (UK) aims to find the answers.

EU's communications gap

European Union institutions decide 70% of the laws that have a direct influence in the everyday lives of Europeans. However, only 50% of EU citizens know that the European Parliament is an elected body.

This puzzling contradiction between the enormous output of the EU and the little input it receives from its citizens has been partly attributed to a 'communications gap'.

This research project hypothesises that the communication deficit is the consequence of a 'malfunctioning public sphere' in which EU politics are not linked to regional concerns. This would be one of the main reasons why the EU is rationally ignored by the public.

By studying the interaction among European political actors at a regional level, the closest at which the EU could be more graspable to the citizen, this research project will reveal where the communications gap can be found and the cultural reasons behind it.

The Yorkshire and Humberside euro-region is selected as the empirical arena for this study for three reasons: 1) Because of its socio-geographic composition, with a mix of urban and rural population, 2) Because of its political spread, with representatives that cover a broad range of the political spectrum from right to left, and 3) Because of the relevance of an anti-EU sentiment. The first and second reasons enhance the comparative potential of research results. The third reason is likely to make EU politics extraordinarily salient.

Network Ethnography

Network ethnography can be defined as "the process of using ethnographic field methods on cases and field sites selected using social network analysis." (Howard, 2002: 561).

The nature of the problem under study and the characteristics of the observed 'community' justify the selection of network ethnography as the research method.

First, the problem (the communications gap) has been much debated but remains ill-defined. No policy treatments can work without a good diagnose, hence the need for an exploratory, ethnographic research.

Second, the community of actors under study (the Yorkshire political players engaged in EU politics) is geographically dispersed but thematically connected, hence the usefulness of network analysis.

Research procedures, step by step

Research will proceed on three steps. First, a network analysis of the actors engaged in news stories that relate EU politics with the Yorkshire region will reveal the members of the Yorkshire community of EU political players. Second, a relational survey among these players will show how they relate to each other. Third, ethnographic interviews and observations with the most interesting cases (central, peripheral, transitive actors) shall help to theorise about why they hold those positions in the network.

Step 1

Yorkshire's National Newspaper
YORKSHIRE POST
Farmer is banned from French beaches on D-Day for British beef

2006. Battered by a... all... remain in place in Britain... with the beef sold on the... France, involving the... beef is exported to other... which is banned in other... The... with... that... to gradually... (WZB).

Step 2

EP - Dyadic relationships - Source: Quarterly Reports last updated 2007/1/16

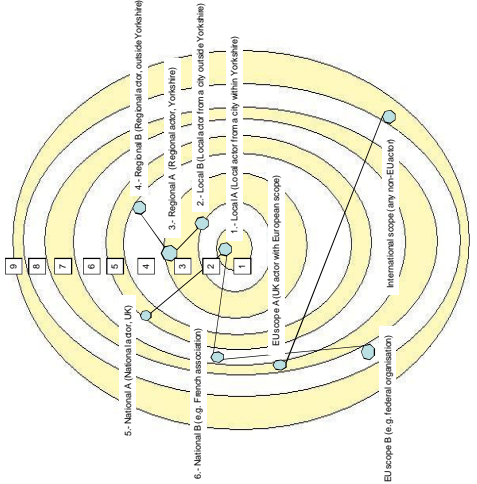
NUMBER	QUARTER	MEMBER	MEMBER	MEMBER	MEMBER	MEMBER
1	2	3	4	5	6	7
1	2001	Business in Europe	University of Leeds	Leeds Business Zone	University of Hull	University of Hull
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Step 3



Richard Corbett (MEP) protesting with factory employees

Multi-level public sphere



This figure, adapted from Koopmans and Erbe (2003) shows the multi-level character of the European public sphere, with the Yorkshire regions as the main point of reference. The 'community' studied is the set of actors who form the political communication system on EU issues in the Yorkshire region. These players represent different roles (politicians, journalists, business lobbyists, civic leaders) and belong to different levels (local, regional, national, European, international).

Significance

This research will look for the causes and solutions for the European communications gap by studying how the network of political players in the Yorkshire embraces European issues in their communicative practice. This network ethnography is in tune with the networked feature of European governance, and promises to yield in-depth knowledge on a much debated, but largely unknown, phenomenon.

References

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