



# Chapter 1

## The news coverage of the 2004 European Parliamentary Election Campaign in 25 countries<sup>1</sup>

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### Abstract

This article analyzes the news coverage of the 2004 European Parliamentary (EP) elections in all 25 member states of the European Union (EU). It provides a unique pan-European overview of the campaign coverage based on an analysis of three national newspapers and two television newscasts in the two weeks leading up to the elections. On average, the elections were more visible in the new 10 member states than in the 15 old EU member states. The political personalities and institutional actors featured in news stories about the elections were generally national political actors and not EU actors. When it was evaluative, the news in the old EU-15 was generally negative towards the EU, while in the new countries a mixed pattern was found. The findings of the study are discussed in the light of the literature on the EU's legitimacy and communication deficit.

## **Introduction**

The 2004 EP elections were an unprecedented exercise in democracy with more than 455 million people in 25 countries having the opportunity to vote. The elections took place only weeks after the accession of 10 new member states to the European Union – the largest enlargement ever. Most voters in both the old EU-15 and the ten new member states experience politics primarily through the media. Most of what citizens know about the campaign stems from the media and this is particularly true in the case of low salience, second-order elections (Bennett and Entman, 2001; see also Eurobarometer 162). Empirical knowledge about the media's coverage of EP elections is a prerequisite for assessing the well-being of democratic processes in Europe and for informing the on-going discussion about the EU's democratic and communicative deficits.

Observations of the democratic process in the EU have been dominated by the 'democratic deficit.' This has been identified as being one of the major shortcomings of European integration and has been conceptualized in terms of institutional design and linkage institutions that focus on national rather than EU issues (Coultrap, 1999: 108; Kuper, 1998; Scharpf, 1999). The unelected nature of the Commission, the lack of European Parliamentary power in policymaking, and the dominance of national issues are reflected in a lack of popular support, legitimacy and engagement with the EU among EU citizens (e.g., Eichenberg and Dalton, 1993).

Analysis of the importance of the media in alleviating or contributing to the democratic deficit focuses on its ability to contribute towards a shared framework of reference and a European identity. Firstly, the lack of EU legitimacy is viewed as a communication deficit (Meyer, 1999; Anderson and McLeod, 2004). According to this view, EU institutions have been unsuccessful in shaping European identity and promoting the connection between citizens and EU institutions via the media (Anderson and

Weymouth, 1999; Anderson, 2004). While the EU and, specifically, the European Parliament, need to promote themselves, they are often confronted with media outlets that are either sceptical or uninterested (Anderson and McLeod, 2004; De Vreese, 2002; Meyer, 1999). Accordingly, negative news and a lack of news in general about the EU and the EP is thought to contribute to a lack of legitimacy and to detract from the formation of a European identity.

Secondly, the lack of a European public sphere has been referred to as the public communication deficit (Scharpf, 1999; Schlesinger, 1999). From this perspective, the development of European democracy depends on the existence of a European public sphere which entails a common public debate carried out through a common European news agenda (Schlesinger, 1995), ideally in a European media system (Grimm, 1995, 2004). Several scholars have formulated minimal criteria for a European public sphere. The criteria include corresponding media coverage in different countries with shared points of reference in which 'speakers and listeners recognize each other as legitimate participants in a common discourse that frames the particular issues as common European problems' (Risse and van de Steeg, 2003: 21). At the very least, in a European public sphere national media should report on the same topic using common sources, including EU sources and sources from other EU countries. Therefore, a discussion of European issues amongst a set of EU actors in the media is important to the development of a European public sphere or Europeanized national spheres which will sustain democracy in the European Union and develop it further.

In the research on media and the EU democratic and communication deficits, links have been established between media coverage of the EU and public perceptions of EU legitimacy, mass support and citizen engagement in elections. In particular, three aspects of EU media coverage tend to influence public perceptions and these are similar to those that have been identified as important in the EU public sphere. These three aspects of media coverage are

EU visibility (or quantity of coverage), the European nature of the coverage and its tone. Greater visibility of European campaigns is related to higher turnout in European Parliamentary Elections (Banducci and Semetko, 2003, 2004). Greater visibility of EU news is related to knowledge gains about the EU (De Vreese and Boomgaarden, 2005), and a greater visibility of pro-EU actors tends to positively influence support for EU membership (Banducci et al., 2002). Finally, negative news about the EU has been found to be related to negative public evaluations of the EU (Norris, 2000a).

Our intention in this study is not to report on how the media shape public perceptions, but to provide a detailed examination of media content across the 25 EU member states in order to better assess the possible role the media can play in enhancing EU democracy. Structured knowledge about the media's coverage of European elections is only now emerging and we have virtually no knowledge about the way in which news media in the new member states approach European political and economic topics. Studies of the European public sphere tend to focus on quality newspapers or magazines and tend to cover only a handful of countries (for example, Van de Steeg, 2002; Meyer, 2005; Peters et al., 2005; and Trenz, 2004), or not all member states (Kevin, 2003). Our study contributes to the debate on the democratic deficit, the media and EU public opinion by providing analysis of media content across print and television in all current member states. In this article, we report the findings of an unprecedented EU-wide study of the news media's coverage of the 2004 EP elections. We provide contextual information to understand the campaign as reported by television and newspapers in each country and we assess the developments in the media's coverage by comparing it with coverage of the 1999 EP election campaign in 15 EU countries.

Interest in the extent to which news media coverage contributes to the democratic deficit or to a European public sphere leads to three key foci for the study: First, we analyze the general news environment in Europe during

the campaign for the 2004 EP elections and we assess the visibility and amount of attention devoted to the elections by national news media. Contributing to a European public sphere, increased visibility of the elections in the news gives voters an indication of the salience or importance of the election. In addition, visible news coverage is expected to give voters information about candidates and party positions. Second, addressing both the public sphere and the democratic deficit, we investigate the extent to which national news media presented the elections as a national or European event. European parliamentary elections have been characterized as second order *national* elections (Reif and Schmitt, 1980). This implies two particular characteristics about the European parliamentary election campaigns: low campaign intensity and national, not European issues on the agenda. The content analysis of the news coverage allows us to assess the extent to which coverage of the campaign focuses on EU level versus national level actors. Greater emphasis on EU actors indicates a European public sphere while a greater emphasis on national actors contributes to the democratic deficit. Third, we assess the tone of news coverage of the EU. The invisibility of the EP in the news and the negative tone in coverage of the EU have been cited as contributing factors to the democratic deficit in terms of negative attitudes about the EU (Norris, 2000b) and low participation in EP elections (Norris, 2000a).

All of these aspects are addressed in a comparative fashion. In addition to cross-national comparisons, we distinguish between media, groups of countries, and elections. We compare the coverage of television and newspapers, public and private networks, and broadsheet and tabloid newspapers. Furthermore we contrast the coverage in the old EU-15 countries with the coverage in the ten new countries. Finally we look at over-time differences by investigating changes in coverage compared to the 1999 EP elections. We develop the importance of these comparisons below.

As a secondary focus, the data reported will be a useful resource for researchers examining public opinion, elections, and media influences in the context of the European Union. The study reports characteristics of coverage across all member states in 1999 and 2004 using standardized measures across countries and years. Thus the results reported in this paper provide values on important contextual indicators. While the results and the analysis are largely descriptive, others can incorporate these measures into their own research on the European Union.

## **News and Information in European Parliamentary Elections**

This study of the news coverage of the 2004 EP elections takes place in the context of a highly competitive news and information environment in Europe. While in the 1980s television broadcasting in Europe consisted mainly of publicly funded monopolies, by 2004 all countries in the EU had a dual system of broadcasting, with public and private stations co-existing and competing (Brants and de Bens, 2000). During the past 20 years the newspaper market in Europe also changed, and by 2004 newspaper readership was in decline though still considerable in many European countries (Lauf, 2001). The structural developments in the news market are important because of the choices citizens have about how to find political news in the available outlets. Private television usually provides less ‘hard’ political news (Blumler, 1997; Pfetsch, 1996) and less news about issues of European integration (Peter and de Vreese, 2004).<sup>2</sup>

### **How visible is the EU on the news agenda?**

Coverage of European affairs tends to be cyclical in nature with coverage of the EU virtually absent from the news agenda and then peaking around important EU events before vanishing off the agenda again (De Vreese et al.,

2001; Norris, 2000a). This pattern of news coverage has also been found to apply to EU summits, which are pivotal moments for EU decision making and where news coverage of EU affairs is much more visible than during 'routine periods' (De Vreese and Boomgaarden, 2006; Peter and de Vreese, 2004; Semetko and Valkenburg, 2000). During other key events, such as national referendums on issues of European integration, EU news can take up a substantial part of the news agenda, especially in the final weeks of the campaign (De Vreese and Semetko, 2004). During routine periods, i.e., outside the referendum periods and when there are no major scheduled events such as European Council meetings, for example, EU politics is marginal in national news (Gerhards, 2000; Peter and de Vreese, 2004; Peter et al., 2003).

While some studies have focused on the Europeanization of the media in a single country (e.g., Koopmans and Pfetsch, 2003), or the coverage of particular cases by media across countries (e.g., De Vreese et al., 2001; Meyer, 2005; Risse and van de Steeg, 2003; Trenz and Münzing, 2003), our knowledge about the specific way in which EP elections are covered is quite limited. The 1979 campaign was virtually absent from the media agenda until the final weeks before the elections (Blumler, 1983; Siune, 1983). No systematic and comprehensive cross-national study of media coverage was carried out until the 1999 EP elections. In 1999, a research team at *The Amsterdam School of Communications Research* conducted an analysis of the most widely watched television news programs in the then 15 EU member states in the two weeks leading up to the 1999 European elections. The results showed that the average proportion of the program (based on time) given to the election in the main evening news programs for all EU member states was about 7 percent. Belgium, Britain, Germany, Ireland, the Netherlands and Spain devoted less than 5 percent of news time to the European elections. Austria, Denmark, Finland, France, Greece, Italy, and Sweden are somewhat above average, spending 8 to 13 percent of news time on these elections (De Vreese et al., 2006; Peter et al., 2004).

The visibility of EP elections matters. Information in the news about key democratic moments such as elections is a pre-requisite for enhancing public awareness and possible engagement in EU politics. Moreover, the EU, faced with challenges to its legitimacy and unclear structures for political accountability, is dependent upon media coverage to reach its citizens.

## **Representative democracy? The absence of EU representatives**

In addition to the visibility of the elections in the news, the presence of political personalities and actors at the EU level (such as candidates for the EP and members of EU institutions) in the news is a necessary condition for the functioning of political representation in a democracy (De Vreese, 2002). The visibility and identification of potential *representatives* is a prerequisite for a healthy democratic process. One of the features of the democratic deficit is that European parliamentary elections are contested by national parties that clash over national or domestic cleavages and not over European issues. The second order theory of EP elections (Reif and Schmitt, 1980) posits that EP elections take a secondary role to national politics and are largely contested on the basis of national rather than EU issues. Looking at actors in the news can therefore give us an assessment of whether the news covers *European* elections as being either a national or a European contest.

Several studies have investigated the visibility of actors in *national* election campaigns (e.g., Semetko and Schönbach, 1994; Semetko et al., 1991; Van Praag and Brants, 2000). However, we have only scant knowledge about the representation of the EU in the news. Analyses of the 1999 EP elections suggest that EU actors were much less visible than national actors (De Vreese et al., 2006), especially in countries that were long-standing members of the EU (Peter et al., 2004). With regard to this pattern and in the light of

the 2004 enlargement, it is relevant to assess whether EU actors were evident in the news in Europe.

## **How negative is the news about the EU?**

News is largely neutral and the number of explicit evaluations is generally limited, but when evaluations are present, they tend to be negative. This pattern is inherent in the news genre and has been demonstrated to also apply to political news (Kepplinger and Weissbecker, 1991). In the case of the EU, the pattern does not appear to differ much. Norris (2000a) in her re-analysis of the EU Commission's media monitor reports found that news about several EU policies as well as EU institutions tended to be tilted towards negative evaluations. In an analysis of the media coverage of the 1999 EP elections, Banducci and Semetko (2004) found that negative news about the EU matters for democratic participation but not necessarily in the way one would expect. More negative news about the EU tended to mobilize the electorate up to certain point. However, when negative news increased in volume an individual's probability of voting declined. Thus, evaluative media content is an important parameter for assessing the nature of public debates, because evaluative media content provides important cues for citizens' perception of the EU.

## **Comparing news media coverage across outlets, elections and countries**

Visibility, European focus and tone constitute the main dependent variables in the study. Based on an understanding of national media systems, reporting differences between different news outlets, the salience of European elections and the importance of the European parliament, we expect variation in these dependent variables across outlets and countries. First, we make

comparisons that relate to expected differences produced by the *outlet*. The type of media (print vs. television), the financing structure of the broadcasting outlet (public vs. private) and the nature of the newspaper (tabloid vs. broadsheet) have been shown to produce differences in the quality and style of news reporting. Newspapers generally have more political news than does television, given that they have far less constraints in terms of space and production costs. Public broadcasters tend to have more political and economic news (Pfetsch, 1996) and in particular more news about European integration than do private news companies (see Peter and de Vreese, 2004).

We also expect political considerations to produce variation in media coverage across *countries* and across election *years*. There has been an increase in the powers of the European Parliament since the 1999 election (Kreppel, 2002; Hix et al., 2003). As the policy making power of the institution increases, the salience of elections for members of the European Parliament should increase. The view of EP elections as being second order is based on the perception that these elections are not salient because nothing is at stake (Reif and Schmitt, 1980). However, with the increased importance of the European Parliament, stakes were higher in the 2004 election. The differences in the amount of attention paid to the elections by the news media should reflect this increased importance.

The addition of ten new member states in May 2004 may have also increased the salience of the elections. The novelty factor suggests that interest in the elections should be greater in the new member states. Given the novelty of the event (Peter et al., 2004), we expect the visibility of the EP elections to be higher in the new member states than in the old EU-15. Finally, given the second-order perspective on media coverage of European elections (De Vreese et al., 2006) we expect non-EU actors to dominate news about the elections in general. However, given greater experience with EU politics and greater familiarity with EU actors, these individuals may be more prominent

in the older member states with there being greater focus on domestic actors in the new member states.

In summary, given the extant knowledge of national media systems, styles of news coverage and the status of the European parliament discussed above, we have the following expectations regarding coverage of the EP campaigns:

First, with respect to visibility in the news, we, given the growing importance of the European Parliament in EU decision making and the recent enlargement, expect the visibility of the EP elections in 2004 to be higher than it was in 1999. We expect the visibility of the 2004 EP elections to be higher in the new countries than in the old countries, given the novelty of the event, and we also expect the visibility of the EP elections to be higher on public broadcast news and in broadsheet newspapers than on private television news and in tabloid papers.

Second, characterization of EP elections as second order *national* elections leads us to expect that news about the EP elections is dominated by *domestic* political actors. However, we expect that quality newspapers and public broadcasting, when compared to other outlets, will give more prominence to EU actors with quality newspapers giving the greatest prominence.

Third, news about the EP elections is mostly neutral and, if evaluative, negative in tone. Based on previous research (De Vreese et al., 2006) we expect news, when evaluative, to be negative towards the EU. We have no *a priori* expectations about differences in tone of the news across years, new and old member states or the type of outlets.

## **Content Analysis of News Media Coverage during the EP Campaign Period: Research design and method**

To study the news coverage of the 2004 EP elections, a media content analysis was carried out in all 25 member states of the EU.<sup>3</sup> We include in our study two television news programs and three national newspapers from each country. We focus on national television and newspapers as these media are consistently listed as the most important sources of information about the EU for citizens in Europe (Eurobarometer 54-62) and because television and newspapers were the two most widely cited sources in which citizens were exposed to information about the 2004 elections (Eurobarometer 162). In each country we include the main national evening news broadcasts of the most widely watched public and private television station. We also include two 'quality' - i.e. broadsheet - newspapers and one tabloid newspaper from each country. These media outlets were selected to provide a comprehensive idea about the news coverage in each country. For reasons of comparability between media and with the 1999 elections we focus on the final two weeks of coverage.

For television, our sample consists of 49 television networks and the newspaper sample consists of 74 different newspapers.<sup>4</sup> An overview of missing days (due to technical problems) is provided in the Appendix. For television, we coded the entire news program of each station. Given that the length of news programs in Europe varies (from 15-60 minutes) and given that the number of news stories per program differs too, we base all analyses on length of the individual news story as a proportion of the total length of each news program. Our unit of coding and of analysis is the individual news story, defined as a change of topic, typically introduced by the anchor person. In total 9,339 television news stories were analyzed. For newspapers, we also used the individual news story as the unit of analysis. We coded all stories on

the front page of the newspaper as well as a random page inside the main section of the newspaper and all news stories about the EP elections throughout the newspaper. In the analyses presented here, we use the analysis of the front pages as the base, for reasons of comparability with the study from 1999. The *n* for this analysis is 8,280.

### ***Coding procedure***

Under supervision and in close cooperation with the principal investigators, coding was conducted by trained and supervised coders. Coder trainers were trained with the codebook for the study developed by the principal investigators. Individual coders were recruited based on their language capabilities. They completed initial training and only when their coding was of sufficient quality (assessed by coder tests that were matched with master codes completed by the coder trainer team), did actual coding commence. Given the challenges in cross-national content analysis (see Peter and Lauf, 2002), coders were monitored and intra- and intercoder-reliability tests were conducted. The results of these tests were satisfactory (80-100% agreement).

### ***Measures***

Our first measure used here is *visibility of the EP elections*. Each news story was coded for *topic*. A range of codes that enables us to identify when a story was about the elections and what the specific topics of these stories were was assigned to news about European elections. To tap the *domestic versus European* nature of the story, we relied on the coding of actors in the news. An actor is defined as a person (e.g., MEP candidate), groups of persons (e.g., political party), institution (e.g., national parliament) or other organization (e.g., Red Cross) that is featured in the story. Up to 20 actors per news story were coded. Coders first identified the main actor (in terms of importance) and then other actors in order of appearance. Actors have been classified as EU actors, domestic political actors or other actors. EU actors include EP candidates as well as the EU president and EU commission members. Domestic political actors are members of the government,

spokespersons for government agencies or members of opposition parties. This includes all members of national parliaments. The category of other actors includes journalists, celebrities, ordinary citizens and other actors that do not fall into the EU or domestic political actor categories.<sup>5</sup> For each election story, a maximum of 20 actors could be coded and across all news stories a total of 19,851 actors were coded. Coders also noted whether the tone of coverage towards the actor was neutral, negative or positive. For *tone of the news* we rely on explicit evaluations of the European Union, its institutions and/or its policies. News was coded for being either neutral (i.e., no evaluation present), negative or positive, predominantly negative or positive or mixed.

### *Data analysis*

In our analyses of the general news environment, the visibility of the elections and the tone of the news, we use the individual news story as the unit of analysis. In the analysis of the presence of different actors in the news, we rely on the coding of actors which is the unit of analysis.

## **Results**

### *More news about the elections*

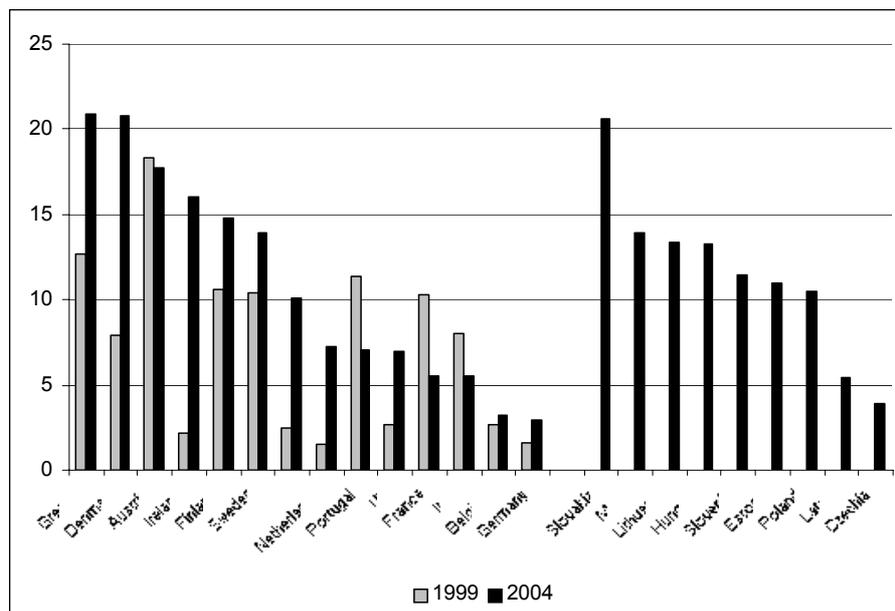
We first turn to the *visibility* of the 2004 EP elections in national news media. Looking at television news, we found that EU news took up 9.8 percent of the news, on average, in the two weeks leading up to Election Day. The average visibility of EU news in 2004 was higher in the new member states (10.4 percent) than in the old member states (9.2 percent). Of the news about the EU, 80 percent was devoted specifically to the EP elections on average.

Figure 1 displays the visibility of news about the EP election and of other EU related issues in television newscasts during the 1999 and 2004 EP election campaigns.<sup>6</sup> The 15 old EU countries are displayed on the left hand side and

the new member states that took part in the EP elections for the first time in 2004 are shown on the right hand side. The EU-wide average of 9.8 percent contains significant cross-national variation. In Greece, for example, the elections took up 21 percent of the news, while in Germany the elections took up only three percent of the news. The elections were most visible in Greece, Denmark, Slovakia, Austria, and Ireland, and took up more than 15 percent of the news in these countries. The elections were least visible in Germany, Belgium and the Czech Republic, with less than five percent of the news devoted to the elections.

On average, we found an increase of the news devoted to the EP elections from 6.6 percent in 1999 to 9.2 percent in 2004 in the old member states, and ten of the 15 old member states showed an increase in visibility. Six countries from the new member states showed more than ten percent EU news.

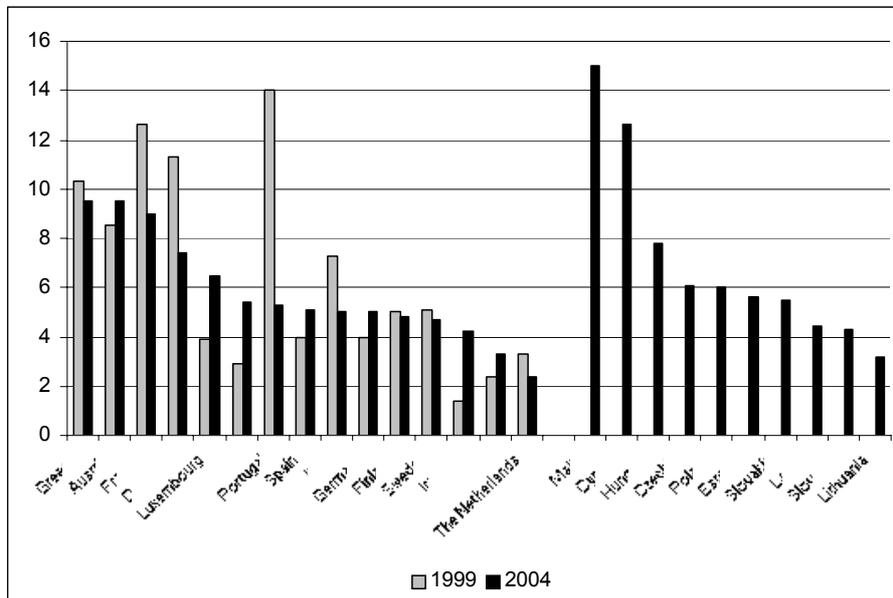
**Figure 1: Visibility of EU news in television newscasts 1999 and 2004**



Note: Values are length-based percentages within the countries and election periods. All stories in television newscasts were included. Values display the proportion of news stories about the EP election and about other EU news. 1999 n=4781; 2004 n=9339.

Turning to national newspapers, Figure 2 shows the visibility of EU news on newspaper front-pages, with the results for the new member states again displayed on the right hand side and the comparison between 1999 and 2004 for the old member states on the left hand side. The picture shown here is slightly more differentiated than that for television. Overall 5.9 percent of front-page stories were devoted to EU news in all 25 member states. EU news was most visible in Malta, Cyprus, Greece and Austria. The smallest proportion of EU news on newspaper front-pages was found in the Netherlands, Belgium, and Lithuania with less than four percent.

**Figure 2: Visibility of EU news on newspaper front-pages 1999 and 2004**



Note: Values are story-based percentages within the countries and election periods. All stories on newspaper front-pages were included. Values display the proportion of news stories about the EP election and about other EU news. 1999 n=2224; 2004 n=8280.

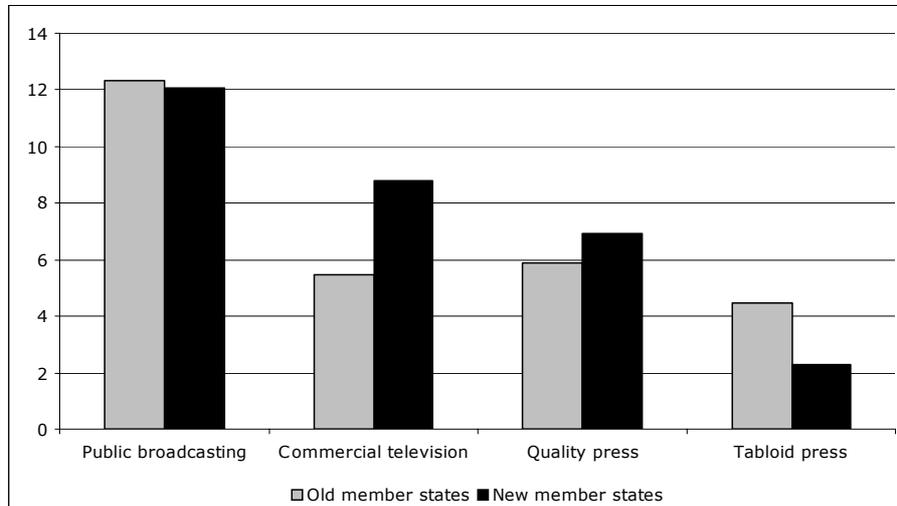
Whereas in 1999 there were 6.2 percent of front-page stories about EU news in the 15 old member states, this slightly decreased to 5.6 percent in 2004. The four countries with the highest amount of news in 1999 (Portugal, France, Denmark, and Greece) all showed a decrease in visibility. The three countries with the lowest visibilities in 1999 displayed an increase in 2004.

Portugal showed the sharpest decrease, from 14 to 5.3 percent and the UK the highest increase from 2.9 to 5.4 percent of front-page stories devoted to EU news.

Comparing the visibility in the old versus the new member states in 2004, we again see a higher overall visibility on newspaper front-pages in the ten new member states. Whereas in the old member states the overall proportion of EU news stories was 5.6 percent, it amounted to 6.1 percent in the new member states. However, the pattern is less clear compared to television news. Of the ten new countries, the two states with the highest visibility in newspapers are the two smallest member states Malta and Cyprus.

Looking at the visibility of EU news in 2004 in public broadcasting and private television news, as well as in broadsheet versus tabloid newspapers, we find support for our second expectation.

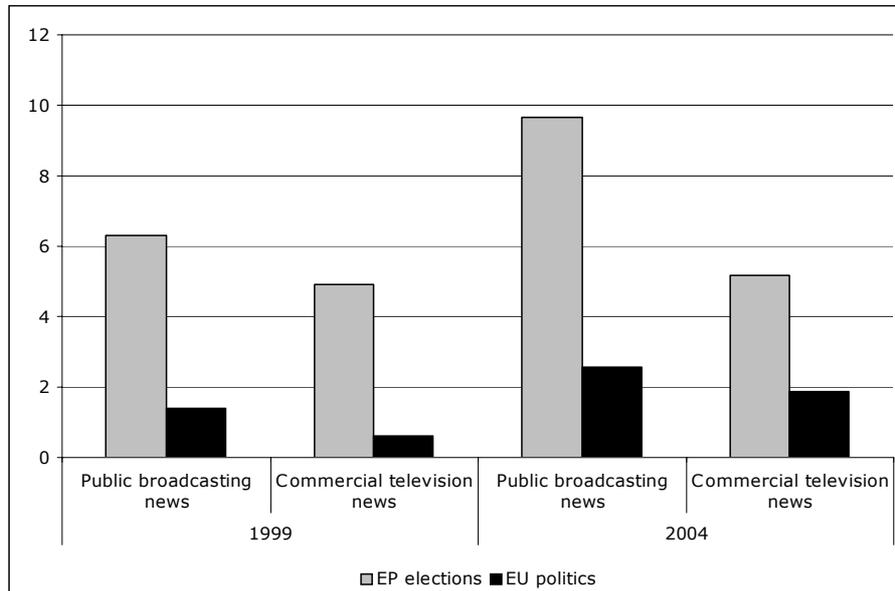
**Figure 3: Visibility of EU news in television newscasts and on newspaper front-pages in 2004**



Note: Values are length-based percentages within the categories and election periods. All stories in television newscasts and on newspaper front-pages were included. Values display the proportion of news stories about the EP election and about other EU news. Television newscasts n=9339; newspaper front-pages n=8280.

Figure 3 shows that the EP elections were consistently more visible on public broadcasting news programs than on private television news. The elections were also covered more extensively on the front pages of the broadsheet press than on the tabloid press. Moreover, Figure 3 shows that in commercial television news and in the broadsheet press the new member states gave more room to the elections than the outlets in the old member states. Looking specifically at television news about the elections (which was 79.5 percent of all EU news in 2004 and 84.8 percent in 1999) and comparing the visibility in public broadcasting news and private television news in 1999 and 2004, we find that public broadcasters devoted more time to the elections than do their private counterparts (see Figure 4). This pattern was found in 1999 (with 6.3 percent of public news and 4.9 percent of private news devoted to the elections) and again in 2004 (with 9.5 percent of public news and 4.9 percent of private news devoted to the elections). While the share of EP news on private news remained largely the same in 1999 and 2004, public broadcasters increased the visibility of the elections.

**Figure 4: Visibility of EP election and other EU news 1999 and 2004**



NOTE: Values are length-based percentages within the categories and election periods. All stories in television newscasts were included. Values display the proportion of news stories

about the EP election (blue bars) and about other EU news (red bars). 1999 n=4781; 2004 n=9339.

In conclusion, media attention for the 2004 EP elections rose compared to the 1999 elections. This increase in visibility was driven primarily by the new member states which devoted a higher share of the news (both on television and in newspapers) to the elections than did the old countries. The average overall increase was in particular driven by newspapers in Malta and Cyprus and by public broadcasting television news.

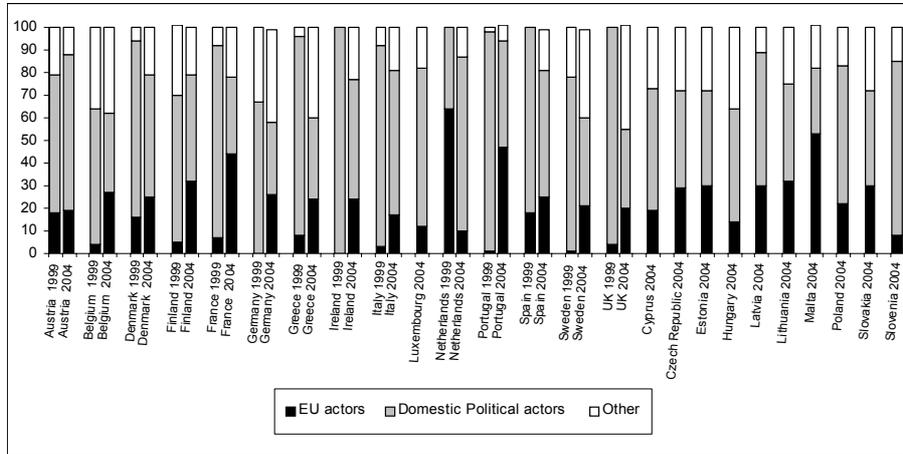
As a final note with respect to the visibility of the elections, we will briefly discuss the general news and information environment in the EU during the campaign. In terms of the time spent on issues in the news, in 2004 the EP elections came further down the list than news about domestic and social policies, sports, and economy/business, but ahead of domestic party politics, and crime. Compared to 1999, the news agenda in 2004 was less dominated by international conflicts, which, because of the Kosovo conflict, were very high on the news agenda in 1999. In 2004 the Iraq conflict did not attract a similar level of attention.<sup>7</sup>

#### *European elections: slowly expanding the domestic battlegrounds*

Figure 5 shows the proportion of actors featured in stories about the EP election across the 25 EU member states. A comparison is also made with the actors featured in the coverage of the 1999 EP election. Clearly, in both election years domestic political actors dominated the coverage of the EP elections. In 1999, four countries (Germany, Ireland, Portugal and Sweden) had either no EU actors in EP election stories or did not exceed 1%. The Netherlands was the only country where EU actors were more frequently featured than domestic actors in EP election news but in 1999 there were only two stories on national television news about the elections. This indicates that the second order nature of EP elections was reflected in the news coverage, possibly detracting from the European public sphere.

When we examine the main political actors, there are some changes evident in 2004. While the coverage is still focused on domestic actors, there was an overall increase in the proportion of EU actors. In several countries, the proportion of EU actors reached or exceeded the proportion of domestic political actors (Malta, Portugal and France). Similar patterns are evident when looking at the other actors in the news stories. Across the member states, countries that show a higher proportion of main protagonists that are EU actors also show a high proportion of other actors that are from the EU. Therefore, while we see that EP election news coverage still predominantly features domestic political actors, there has been an increase since 1999 in attention paid to EU actors. During the 1999 election, 83 percent of actors in EU election stories were national political actors in all member states while in 2004 a comparatively lower proportion (50 percent for main actors and 48 percent for other actors) were national political actors. However, these figures for domestic political actors are still higher than those for EU actors.

**Figure 5: Actors in the news (EU actors, domestic actors, and other actors)**



Note: The figure compares all actors in the news in 1999 with main protagonists in 2004.

We might expect that the new member states would focus more on domestic political actors. This tendency to be less European-focused in news coverage

may stem from the fact that the press in these countries is less familiar with covering EU issues and therefore has a greater reliance on domestic sources. Also, EU actors in these countries may be more difficult to identify. However, Peter et al. (2004) show that there tend to be more EU representatives in news in countries that hold EP elections for the first or second time than in countries that have held multiple elections. From the analysis of 2004 news coverage, we see little difference between old and new member states in terms of the focus placed on domestic and EU actors. In new member states, 27 percent of main actors and 21 percent of other actors in news stories were EU actors. In the old member states, the focus on EU actors was similar: 25 percent of main actors and 21 percent of other actors were at the EU level.

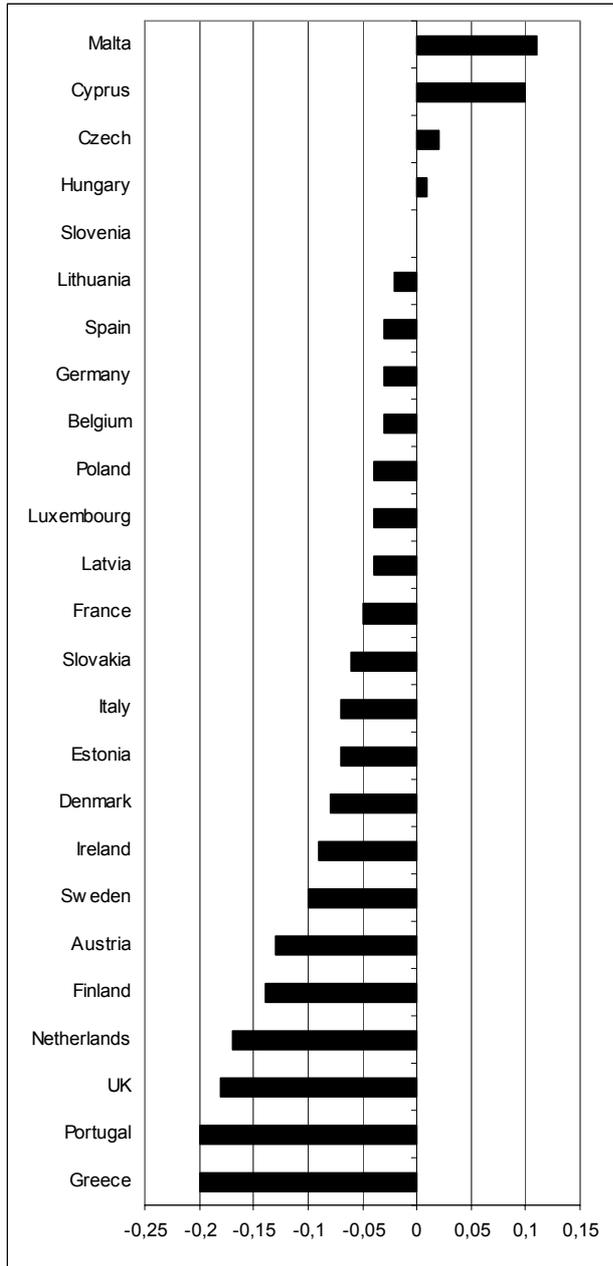
There were also only small differences by outlet and medium. Newspapers tend to show greater numbers of EU and domestic political actors while TV features a greater number of non-political actors. In television news stories about the election, 22 percent of main actors and 19 percent of other actors were EU political actors. In print, 26 percent of main actors in stories about the EU election were from the EU level and 21 percent of other actors were EU level actors. The differences between commercial and public service broadcasters are even smaller. They tend to feature similar proportions of EU and domestic political actors, with 20 percent of actors in commercial news stories and 18 percent in public television news stories being EU level actors. Given that public broadcasting has an educational mission, we expected that public television news would tend to have a greater EU focus but this does not appear to be the case.

*With only a little malice: more positive news in the new countries*

Turning to the tone of the news about the EU, we find that most news about the EP elections that made specific reference to the EU was neutral. About 84 percent of the news mentioning the EU or its institutions did so in a neutral way without making explicit positive or negative evaluations.

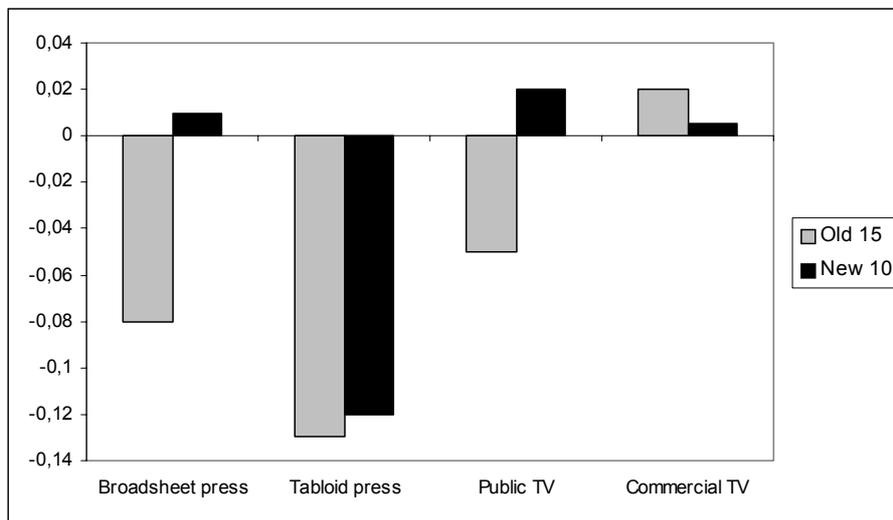
Looking at the 16 percent of the news that did contain explicit evaluative content, we created a mean score ranging from minus one (signifying consistent negative evaluations) to plus one (signifying consistent positive evaluations).

**Figure 6: Tone of news (explicit evaluations EU, ranging from -1 to +1) by country**



We look at the tone of the news in each of the member states individually in order to assess the average tone of information available to citizens in each country. Figure 6 represents the average tone in each country. The most negative news was found in Greece and Portugal (-.20), the UK (-.18) and the Netherlands (-.17), while the most positive news was found in the Czech Republic (+.02), Cyprus (+.10), and Malta (+.11). Figure 6, moreover, shows that nine of the ten countries with the most negatively slanted news were all from the old EU-15. Conversely, seven of the ten countries with the least negative or even positive news were from the new countries.

**Figure 7: Tone of news (explicit evaluations EU, ranging from -1 to +1) by medium type**



Comparing the different media types in the old and new countries yields noteworthy differences. As Figure 7 shows, the average tone in the broadsheet press was negative in the old EU-15 (-.08) but positive (+.01) in the new countries. For the tabloids, the papers in the all countries were negative; -.12 for the tabloids in the new countries and -.13 for the tabloids in the old countries. Looking at public broadcasting news, we found that news in the new countries was, on average, slightly positive (+.02) while, on average it was negative (-.05) in the old countries. There were no differences

in tone between private television news in the old and new countries, with all stations being marginally positive.

### **Discussion**

Our study of the news media coverage of the 2004 European Parliamentary elections in all 25-member countries of the European Union provides unprecedented insights into the first elections in the enlarged EU. The study includes three national newspapers and the most widely watched main evening private and public television news in each country in the final two weeks leading up to the elections.

From a standpoint of democratic citizenship, a campaign has the potential to inform and mobilize voters to take part in the process of electing representatives. The media play a crucial role in this process. The EU also relies on the media to indirectly strengthen its legitimacy by increasing citizens' awareness of its activities and policies. In 1999, doubt was raised as to whether the media fulfilled this role (De Vreese et al., 2006). In 1999 the picture painted of the news coverage of the European elections was gloomy from the perspective of the coverage of the campaign in the most popular media outlets in some countries. The European elections were given relatively low priority in the news, they rarely made the opening of the news bulletins, the coverage was domestic in nature, with most stories taking place in the home country and addressing issues with implications for the home country. Few representatives of EU institutions made it into the news and those EU actors that did were rarely quoted.

In 2004, according to our expectations based on the increased importance of the EP and the novelty of the event in several countries, the overall *visibility* of the elections increased. Specifically we found that the visibility of the EP elections was higher in the 10 new EU member states than in the old member states. On television news, the elections in the old EU-15 increased in

visibility compared to the previous EP election in 1999. This was not true for newspapers though, where the visibility increased in some and decreased in other old EU-15 member states. Public television news and broadsheet papers covered the elections more elaborately in terms of quantity of coverage than did private television news and tabloids in both old and new member countries.

When comparing visibility in the old member states between 1999 and 2004 a few interesting individual country developments emerge. We found large changes in visibility in Ireland, Portugal, and Denmark, though there were very different patterns in these countries. Visibility in Ireland went up drastically both on television and in newspapers. The same pattern was observed for Spanish, British, German, and Belgian news outlets' interestingly these are all countries in which visibility was quite low in 1999. In Portugal, by contrast, we saw visibility sharply declining, especially in newspapers but also on television news. A decrease in visibility in all news outlets was also seen in France and Italy. These countries were all in the high to mid-range of visibility in 1999. Other countries show a mixed picture with visibility going up on television and down in newspapers in most cases. This was particularly the case in Denmark where visibility on television more than doubled, whereas it decreased more than one third in newspapers. Finland, Sweden, Netherlands, and Greece also showed this pattern, though it was less pronounced. Among the 'new' member states Malta stood out as the country with the highest visibility in newspapers and the second highest on television. Visibility was especially low in both areas in Latvia..

We expected differences in the visibility of EU election news between types of news outlets. Specifically, we expected a higher visibility on public broadcasting news than on commercial news. We also expected news to be more visible in the quality press than in tabloid papers. The results showed that in the old member states public broadcasting had about twice as much EU news as did commercial television news. In the new member states the

general picture is the same, but differences were less pronounced. In line with expectations, there was more EU news in broadsheet newspapers than in tabloids. Contrary to the situation in television, the differences between the quality press and tabloid newspapers are less pronounced in the old member states and more so in the new ones. Furthermore, we expected the visibility of EU news to be higher in 2004 than in 1999 on the one hand, and to be higher in the new member states than in the old countries on the other hand. Whereas the former was clearly the case, the pattern for the latter was less conclusive. We showed that on television, no matter whether public broadcasting or commercial news, the visibility of both EP election and other EU news was considerably higher in 2004. Further, we saw that there was hardly any difference in visibility between old and new member states in public broadcasting news and the quality press.

With respect to the *domestic focus* of the news, our study dovetails into previous research (e.g., De Vreese et al., 2006) in finding that news coverage was more domestically focused than EU-focused. The actors featured in news stories about the elections were generally domestic or national political actors and not EU actors. However, though the coverage is still focused on domestic actors, there was an overall increase in the proportion of EU actors in 2004. In some countries (e.g., Malta, Portugal and France), the proportion of EU actors reached or even exceeded the proportion of domestic political actors. Moreover, countries that show a higher proportion of main protagonists who are EU actors also show a high proportion of other actors from the EU. Therefore, while we see that EP election news coverage still predominantly features domestic political actors, there has been an increase in attention paid to EU actors. Only in the Netherlands were there less EU actors featured in the campaign coverage in 2004. Almost no change was found in Austria and Spain. Portugal, for instance, sticks out, since here the visibility of EU actors increased from less than two percent in 1999 to almost 50 percent in 2004.

Our expectation that national actors would dominate the coverage of the EP election was therefore met. Looking at the results, a very consistent picture was found when comparisons were made between countries, type of medium and type of outlet. Domestic political actors dominated the news, and this was even more noticeable among the main actors. This pattern was basically the same for the old and new member states. The difference in visibility between EU and domestic actors was slightly less distinctive in print news and on commercial television.

According to expectations about the increased importance of the EP we found that the visibility of EU actors had risen in most old member countries compared to 1999. Contrary to expectations based on previous research (Peter et al., 2004), we did not find a higher level of EU actors in new member states. Our findings add to extant knowledge insofar as it is not a general rule that news in first-time election countries will include more EU actors, though news in countries that have experienced several EP elections seems to include fewer EU actors.

Our analysis of the *tone* of the news coverage corroborates extant research, showing that most news is neutral, but when it was evaluative, the news in the old EU-15 was generally negative towards the EU, while in the ‘new’ countries a mixed pattern was found with the broadsheet press and television news being, on average, positive and tabloid papers, on average, being negative. These findings conform to our expectations. However, we found noteworthy variation within this general pattern. The tabloid press was the most negative, while the quality press and public television was positive in the new member states, but negative in the old. Commercial television news was on average positive, though slightly more so in the new countries.

Our study provides empirical evidence in a largely theoretical debate about the EU’s legitimacy and its communicative deficit. The benchmarks provided here, focusing on visibility of elections, the representation of Europe, and the

evaluative nature of the coverage are important to assess the role played by the media. From the viewpoint of the European Parliament there seems to be reason for a bit of optimism. In terms of visibility and share of EU actors, the trend between 1999 and 2004 is one of increase. The results for the new member states also give quite a positive outlook. Visibility, both of EU news and EU actors, was relatively high. Furthermore, the tone towards the EU was considerably more positive it was in the new member states. However, if these findings have to be ascribed mainly to the novelty of the elections in these new countries, then caution with respect to optimism is warranted.

In addition to these normative reflections, future research needs to also investigate the specific *effects* the campaign had in European elections. It has previously been demonstrated that television is particularly capable of contributing to turnout in European elections (Schönbach and Lauf, 2002), especially among citizens with lower levels of political interest and awareness, who may be ‘trapped’ by having to watch election news on television. Based on the 1999 European parliamentary election, and most previous campaigns, where there was little in the way of coverage of the campaign on main evening television news, uninterested citizens had few opportunities to accidentally come across interesting news about the elections that might boost their interest and awareness (Schönbach and Lauf, 2002).

In relation to the 1999 elections, Banducci and Semetko (2003, 2004) found that the visibility of the EP campaign on television news influenced individuals’ likelihood of voting in the EP election. Greater visibility on the TV news broadcasts that respondents reported watching increased the probability of voting. Contrary to expectations, negative coverage of the EU did not demobilize the electorate. These questions still have to be addressed for the 2004 elections in the enlarged Europe, but with this study we can assess the coverage of the elections in a more accurate and detailed way than previously.

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> This paper has since been published as de Vreese, C. H., Banducci, S., Semetko, H. A. & Boomgaarden, H. A. (2006). The news coverage of the 2004 European Parliamentary election campaign in 25 countries. *European Union Politics*, 7 (4), 477-504

<sup>2</sup> It should be acknowledged that the scope of differences between public and private channels and their importance is contested (see Brants, 1998; Blumler, 1997).

<sup>3</sup> The study was funded by research grants from the Dutch National Science Foundation [NWO], The Halle Foundation, the EU CIVICACTIVE Research Program, Emory University, and The Amsterdam School of Communications Research/ University of Amsterdam to the principal investigators, Susan Banducci, Claes H. de Vreese and Holli A. Semetko.

<sup>4</sup> Television: in Belgium two French and two Flemish stations were included; in Finland and Germany four newscasts; in Spain and Poland three newscasts; in Austria, Greece, and Ireland one newscast). We had to exclude Cyprus (for technical reasons) and Luxembourg (for linguistic reasons). Newspapers: in Belgium, three French and three Flemish newspapers were included; in Luxembourg, Malta, Lithuania, and Cyprus, only two newspapers were included because of availability.

<sup>5</sup> It should be noted that a difference in coding during the 2004 study necessitates classifying actors into main protagonists (those actors that were the primary focus of the news story) and other actors (actors that were mentioned in the news story but were not the main focus).

<sup>6</sup> The numbers that function as the base for Figure 1 (and all subsequent Figures) are available in the form of a documented appendix from the authors.

<sup>7</sup> These brief observations are based on a detailed analysis of the general news environment during the campaign period. The results of this analysis which indicate how much attention different topics received in the news in 1999 and in 2004 is available from the authors upon request

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## Appendix:

### Outlets and missing days

Country	Outlet	Missing
Austria	ORF, Kronen Zeitung, Der Standard, Die Presse	None
Belgium/Flemish	Het Journaal (VRT), VTM Nieuws, Het laatste nieuws, de Morgen	None
Belgium/French	JT Meteo, Le Journal, La Dernière Heure, La Libre, La Soir	None
Czech	TV Ceska, TV Nova, Mlada Fronta, Pravo, Blesk	None
Cyprus	No television, NP: Cyprus Mail, Politis	None
Denmark	TV-Avisen (DRTV1), TV2 Nyhederne, JyllandsPosten, Politiken, EkstraBladet	TV-Avisen June 1 / TV2 Nyhederne June 5
Estonia	ETV, Kanal 2, Postimees, SL Ohtuleht, Eesti Paevaleht	Kanal 2 June 3, 12
Finland	Yle, MTV3, Ruutu4, Helsingin Sanomat, Aamulehti, Hufvudstadsbladet	Yle June 1 / MTV3 June 4, 6, 7 / Ruutu4 June 1,2
France	LaJournal (TF1), Le Journal (F2), Le Monde, Liberation, Le Figaro	F2 June 5
Germany	ARD Tagesschau, ZDF Heute, RTL Aktuell, Sat1, Bild, FAZ, SZ	None
Greece	ET1 news, Ta Nea, Kathimerine, Eleftheortypia	ET1 June 10, 13
Hungary	MTV, TV2, Magyar Nemzet, Nepszabadsag, Blikk	Magyar June 1
Ireland	RTE1, Irish Independent, Irish Times, The Star	None
Italy	TG1, TG5, Il corriere della sera, La Repubblica, Il Giornale	TG5 June 1 / La Repubblica June 6 / Il Giornale June 7
Latvia	Lat TV, LATvija Televizija, Diena, Rigas Bals, Neatkariga	LatTV, Latvia Televizija June 11
Lithuania	LRTV, TV3, Lietuvos rytas, Respublika	LRTV June 10 / TV3 June 4-7, 11
Luxembourg	No television, Luxemburger Wort, Tagesblatt	LW June 2, 3 / Tagesblatt June 1, 3
Malta	TVM, Super1, The Times, Malta Independent	Super 1 June 2
Netherlands	NOS Journaal, RTL nieuws, De Telegraaf, NRC, de Volkskrant	None
Poland	TVPSA, POLSAT, Rzeczpospolita, Gazeta Wyborcza, Super Express	None
Portugal	RTP1, SIC, Public, Correio de Manha,	RTP1 June 1
Slovenia	RTV, POPTV, Slovenske Novice, Delo, Dnevnik	None
Slovakia	STV1, Markiza, Novy Cas, Daily Pravda, Sme/Praca	None
Spain	TVE, Antenna3, Tele5, El Pais, ABC, El Mundo	TVE June 1, 2, 6, 8, 9
Sweden	Rapport TV2, Nyheterne (TV4), Aftonbladet, Dagens Nyheter, Goteborgsposten	TV4 June 4-13, GP June 12
UK	BBC1, ITV, The Sun, Daily Telegraph, The Guardian	None