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# Grounding the European Public Sphere

## Looking Beyond the Mass Media to Digitally Mediated Issue Publics

Lance Bennett

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**Lance Bennett**


### Abstract

The gold standard for discussing public spheres has long been established around mass media, with the prestige print press given a privileged place. Yet when it comes to a European public sphere, the mass media are also problematic, or at least incomplete, in several ways: relatively few EU-wide issues are replicated in the national media of EU countries, the discourses on those issues are dominated primarily by elites (with relatively few civil society voices included in the news), and public attention is seldom paid to EU issues beyond a select few (money, agriculture, political integration, scandals), creating a distant 'gallery public.' At the same time, many important political issues such as trade and economic justice, development policy, environment and climate change policy, human rights, and military interventions, among others, are being addressed more actively by networks of civil society actors both within and across EU national borders. These networks utilize the Internet and various interactive digital media to publicize their issues, engage active publics, and contest competing policy perspectives not only within specific issue networks, but across solidarity networks involving other policy issues, and with political targets at national and EU levels. This dimension of the EU public sphere has received relatively little attention from observers, and when it has been explored, it is often dismissed as less inclusive, and therefore less significant than the somewhat reified mass media model. This analysis compares networked, digitally mediated public issue spheres with the mass mediated model, points out ways in which the two types of public sphere are complementary, and also shows how networked issue spheres may be the sites of greater citizen and civil society engagement in keeping with more classical models of public spheres.

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**Contents**

1. Introduction 5

2. Theorizing Issue Publics in National and Transnational Contexts 6

*2.1 Who Are the Organizers of Issue Publics in Europe?* 7
*2.2 Rethinking the Nature of Mediated Public Spheres* 8

3. Analyzing Networked Issue Publics in Nations and the EU 10

4. Research Design 13

5. Methods 15

6. The Case of EU Fair Trade Advocacy Networks 16

*6.1 Determining Whether There is A Cross-national EU FT Network* 17
*6.2 Public Engagement in the EU Networkt* 18

7. The Case of National Level FT Networks in the UK 21

*7.1 Issue Framing in the UK Network* 23
*7.2 Does the UK FT Network Refer to the EU?* 23
*7.3 Evidence of Opportunities for Direct Citizen Engagement* 24

8. The Case of Germany 26

*8.1 Issue Framing* 27
*8.2 EU References* 29
*8.3 Citizen Engagement* 31

9. Does the EU Respond to This Bottom-Up Communication? 31

10. Conclusion: Two Different NGO Spheres 31

Literature 33

## 1. Introduction[1]

Much of the work on Europeanization of public spheres has understandably focused on national mass media systems. The core ideas running through much of the mass media paradigm are that the national press reaches large audiences, and that those media outlets may carry political claims made by actors in other nations or in Brussels to national publics. These "gallery publics," as Pfetsch and Heft (2011) refer to them, may attend to the selected transnational issues that seem likely to affect them, resulting in opinion formation and development of European identities. The criteria adopted by most scholars who embrace the national media perspective on public spheres include looking for issues:

- that involve some transnational impact (Is the issue European in the sense of being commonly framed?);
- that reach large mediated publics (Is the media reach inclusive?); and
- that involve some political conflict (Is it contested?).

These largely intuitive standards have been formalized by Habermas (2006) and employed by researchers studying the development of a European public sphere over time (e.g., Koopmans/Statham 2010), as well as assessing the emergence of a European political identity on the part of national publics (e.g., Risse 2010).

What emerges from these studies is a picture of an issue-driven European sphere in which a few issues (e.g., agriculture, monetary policy, sovereignty) or events (e.g., the rise of extremist parties) may reach different national media using similar frames at the same time. However, even in this somewhat limited media sphere scenario, the claims are made overwhelmingly by elites who are communicating to a largely passive audience who tend to engage only selectively in European politics. Moreover, this mass media sphere contains relatively little voice from civil society groups who may be closer to grassroots publics than are the political and economic elites who make the news. As Koopmans observes, the national media contain "extremely weak representation of civil society actors" (Koopmans 2010: 120).

Characterizations of this mass mediated sphere tend to focus on the lack of broad public engagement or much persistent citizen-level political conflict and contention. Indeed, Statham (2010: 295-296) concludes from a seven-nation study that the national press effectively *becomes* the public insofar as dominant news content primarily mirrors elite discourse back to elites themselves. Many contemporary observers have circled around Habermas' (2006) idea of a resulting "democratic deficit" in the European sphere by noting the overriding lack of an embedded democratic process. For example, Tarrow has conditioned the rise of European democracy to "the capacity of social movements, public interest groups, and other non state actors to make alliances with other combinations of national government actors, supranational institutions,

1 The author would like to acknowledge the support and collegiality of the KFG research college "The Transformative Power of Europe." The facilities and staff support made for a superb working environment, and the regular seminars with colleagues provided the perfect intellectual environment to hear and develop new ideas. The research assistance of Henrike Knappe was important to the development of this work. In addition, much of the general conception for this project is shared with Sabine Lang, University of Washington, and Alexandra Segerberg of Stockholm University. Threads of this project can be found in the jointly authored works cited here.

and with each other" (Tarrow 2001: 250). Risse has characterized an emerging European identity as something of an "identity lite," and has suggested a number of ways in which national politicians could "politicize European affairs through the Europeanization of national discourses." He stresses that introducing EU politics more systematically into national contexts could be done without framing the EU in adversarial terms likely to alienate national publics from meaningful European political participation and identification (Risse 2010: 250).

Given these limits, we (see Bennett et al. 2011b; Bennett/Segerberg forthcoming) propose supplementing the mass media perspective by looking for emerging public spheres where they may be more clearly organized around civil society actors. In particular, we note the existence of transnational issue advocacy networks that may have the capacity

- to engage often large publics directly in various causes;
- to bring those publics into contact with government institutions at various levels; and
- to coordinate actions across national boundaries.

Such networks appear to exist around a number of policy issues such as trade and development, environment and energy, human rights, war and peace, immigration and citizenship, and issues surrounding food safety and the genetic modification of organisms, among others. Public advocacy networks may not exist or may be less developed in other issue areas such as various science and technology policies, but we note that these issues also tend to receive scant mass media attention, and thus generate little engagement on the part of mass media "gallery publics." This paper introduces a method for mapping digitally mediated issue networks and assessing the degree to which they engage publics and policy processes. Since this approach departs from the mass media paradigm, I first outline the theoretical assumptions on which it is based, and note the different kind of communication processes that organize these issue advocacy networks.

## 2. Theorizing Issue Publics in National and Transnational Contexts

One of the challenges of conceptualizing a European public sphere is that the term itself suggests unity. Many recent definitions build on the concept of a *single* public sphere, constructing a transnational communicative space in which then the provision of connectivity falls squarely into the domain of Europeanized mass media (Gerhards 1993, 2000). Unity of a European public sphere in these accounts relies on mass media. Most subsequent researchers have relaxed the rather demanding European media criteria to include national media that provide translation for European issues into national political contexts. However, the unitary (or inclusive) mass media assumption travels into these national level studies as well.

In our view, emphasizing the unity of a European public sphere or even the unity of national mass media spheres tends to undertheorize the ideas of multiplicity of communication channels and the locations of contestation. For our purpose it might be instructive to revisit Nancy Fraser's critique of Habermas' "single public sphere" concept. Fraser (1992) argues that conceptualizing public life as harboring "multiple but

unequal publics" and thus focusing on the "contestatory interaction of different publics" (1992: 128) is more appropriate than a single public sphere paradigm for late modern societies experiencing individualization and institutional authority challenges.

Taking the idea of a diversity of publics as a departure point, we conceptualize a European public sphere as consisting of multiple issue publics in which actors across national borders communicate on matters of mutual concern. Beyond the press, these publics communicate through email lists, websites, online forums, and face-to-face protests and demonstrations. They promote campaigns and coordinate actions through Facebook and Twitter. They share stories about their activities by posting videos on Youtube and photos on Flickr or on NGO websites. They move together or apart on and off line, sometimes reaching consensus on common issues, and sometimes debating the best issue frame or political strategy.

Issue publics are scaled publics. They are more than the aggregate of national carriers of issues in that they tend to incorporate actors from the European down to the regional and local level. Issue publics tend to organize communication around new media, in effect not relying on the mass media as their "master forum" (Ferree et al. 2002: 10) anymore. They might utilize the mass media occasionally, but their master forum has switched from press releases to online discussions, from utilizing the press for staging events to social media as activation tools. Issue publics also can produce "thicker" engagement than mass mediated publics, communicating among themselves and with their constituents more frequently and directly.

## *2.1 Who Are the Organizers of Issue Publics in Europe?*

One of the puzzles of a Europeanized public sphere is to understand its subject: Who are its actors, and for whom do they speak? Parties, historically the most prominent transmitters of political issues in national political contexts, face a number of structural constraints that make Europeanization of issues difficult. The lack of ideological coherence among parties of similar provenance on the EU level as well as the engrained – albeit somewhat changing – perception that the EU parliament is weak contribute to a persisting national focus of parties (Kriesi et al. 2010: 225).

Interest groups tend to be seen as the most "Europeanized type of political actor" (Kriesi et al. 2010: 225). Business and professional associations have successfully created European umbrella organizations that are present in Brussels and lobby for their constituents. Yet, from a public sphere perspective, there are questions as to how public their interventions really are.

This leaves us with a third actor that, we argue (following the work of Lang 2009), increasingly generates European issue publics: the nongovernmental sector and its Europeanized networks. NGOs have long established themselves at the national level, and they often have branches and affiliates in multiple nations. Moreover, they tend to network with each other to raise public awareness and involvement of their issues through campaigns, protests, and other public activities. In addition, these NGO networks have several incentives to form issue publics on the EU level:

- The EU is increasingly taking on rights and value-based issues that mirror the agenda of the NGO sector. Thus, organizing and sustaining transnational public voice is a viable mobilizing strategy for NGOs.
- With the Open Method of Coordination and with a shift of policy making from regulations to soft law, willingness of EU institutions to engage in consultations with NGO actors has increased. NGOs are seen as transmitters of soft law into civil society (Locher 2007; Warleigh 2003; Checkel 1999) and, arguably, NGO publics have become the Brussels-based stand-ins for European publics.
- NGOs are well positioned to utilize the new repertoires of web-based mobilization in order to organize across borders and to foster direct and interactive communication with and among constituents. Whereas investment and coordination costs are reasonably small, horizontal and vertical communication and networking capacity is relatively extensive.

In sum, NGOs and their networks might to some degree displace (or at least supplement) mass mediated communication in Europe by fostering direct connections between individuals and issue spheres, allowing for personalized engagement as well as enabling interactive communication. Reaching beyond political institutions and the media, we submit that NGOs (and Social Movement Organizations (SMOs), which often prove difficult to distinguish from some NGOs) may contribute substantially to the foundation of a Europeanized public sphere. The big question about these NGO networks is whether and under what conditions they actually engage publics, and when do they have the opposite effect of taking the place of publics and perhaps even dampening public engagement with issues (see Lang 2009), thus contributing to the democracy deficit in Brussels? A starting point is to determine how these networks are organized and how they may use digital technologies to communicate their issues to publics. This entails broadening conventional thinking about how the internet and social technologies can constitute stable communication spheres across which content travels and public engagement can be coordinated.

## *2.2 Rethinking the Nature of Mediated Public Spheres*

As noted above, the focus on national mass media spheres seems to have overshadowed other ways of thinking about mechanisms for popular engagement with the EU. There are a few exceptions such as the study by Koopmans and Zimmerman (2010) that looked at the Internet in its early days. However, they approached it as though it were merely a source for individual information searches, which is also the mode of analysis adopted by Gerhards and Schaefer (2009). The decision of these research teams to look at top search results was inevitably biased in favor of news organizations showing up in the results, resulting in the not very surprising conclusion that the internet, when conceived primarily as a source of individual searches, mainly reproduces the mass media sphere in the area of political issues and public affairs.

Koopmans and Zimmerman searched on the same seven issues that were featured in the large-scale collaborative study of mass media content and political claims in seven European countries as reported in Koopmans/Statham (2010).[2] They analyzed only the top ten hits in their searches (and just the top five in

2 As noted by Koopmans and Zimmerman, the search strings were: monetary politics and interest rate decisions; agriculture subsidies and BSE cows; immigration politics and deportation; troops deployment and troops peacekeeping; pension politics and pensions demographic; education politics and education equal opportunities politics; and EU reforms and EU enlargement.

a second round of coding). Not surprisingly, they found that fully 46 percent of the sites were mass media. Even though restricted to the top ten, they found 26 percent of the hits pointed to government and party sites, and fully 16 percent to NGO sites. Despite finding this number of NGOs operating information feeds near the top of searches, they claim that this was not a particularly significant result. No explanation is given for this conclusion. Moreover, they found that issue claims from NGOs represented eight percent of claims found in their Internet searches compared to only three percent in the mass media sample. Despite noting that this was a substantial increase, they ultimately dismissed this finding as well. Given the limit of only ten search results being analyzed (for seven issues across seven countries), these showings for NGOs might have been given a bit more attention. Similar procedures were also followed by Gerhards and Schaefer (2009) who looked at content from a somewhat wider net of the top 30 search results from US and German search engines on the topic of human genome research. Again, the result was dominated by predictable source patterns and claims concentrated among elite actors and mainstream media. For an important critique of such approaches see Rogers (2004), who argues that analyzing searches in these ways is not only biased in favor of the kinds of results found in these studies, but the general approach misses more important social networking organization and information flows that are difficult to document by attempting to manually trace hyperlink networks out from search results.

To their credit, Koopmans and Zimmerman (2010) did look at outlinks from different sites involved with three of the issues that proved important in the mass media public sphere studies: agriculture, immigration, and European integration. However, the method they used to derive their networks was rather artificial in that they took the "most important" organizations in each country for each issue in each of the organization categories found in their searches: news media, government-party, socio-economic interest organizations, and NGO-SMO, and they looked for interlinking among those organizations and with the EU and supranational organizations.[3] The result was a sample of 1,078 organizations representing the three issues in seven countries plus EU and supranational organizations. These organization websites were examined for their outlinks, which totaled more than 380,000. While it is understandable they could not reasonably follow all of these links, they arbitrarily decided to limit the analysis to only those links that linked to and from other organizations in their list of most important issue sector organizations in the various categories, a decision that reduced their link paths to a more manageable 18,000 or so. Even after they eliminated roughly 95 percent of their link data, the patterns of linking back to the top organizations in different categories still suggested substantial links to NGO and SMO actors. They found that the average site in their sample received 17 links from other sites, with party and government sites receiving an average of 24 links, media sites 17, and NGOs and SMOs receiving an average of ten (Koopmans/Zimmerman 2010). Despite NGOs and SMOs receiving roughly the same number of links as socioeconomic interest groups (10.5), their conclusion was that NGOs were not particularly important information sources for web surfers. The basis for this judgment is not clear. Given the various limitations of the methodology, and still finding substantial NGO linkages, their sweeping conclusions about the marginal importance of digital media spheres for social movement and advocacy networks seem to unduly underestimate the capacity of the Internet to activate and engage publics.

3 I was unable to find the criteria by which they determined what organizations were most important, particularly for the NGOs and SMOs picked in each issue sector (although the choices for parties, government, and media are likely to be fairly straightforward).

Beyond quibbling about whether the NGO glass is half empty or half full, the underlying study design seems premised on the idea that web networks are somehow created by and for information surfers, rather than forged from "in-the-world" network relationships among interacting organizations that reveal traces of their associations via intentional linking patterns among their websites. The arbitrary division of the sample into different categories of organization and arbitrarily chosen "most important" organizations is likely to tell us relatively little about the actual networks of organizational relationships that would be detected from a different method of establishing the starting points of the network analysis and by using a different network tracing method that enables natural (in-the-world) relationships to be detected among the 360,000 links that were discarded by their method.

The above work on the Internet and the EU public sphere reflects an intuitive but unfortunately incomplete idea about how the web works beyond the search practices of individual information seekers. To think about the Internet as simply a search target – a place where isolated individual citizens go to seek information – misses the networking technologies that enable potentially large numbers of people to do more than consume content as isolated individuals, but to interact, affiliate with organizations, produce and share content, exchange ideas, and organize action. Even examining link patterns among arbitrary search results suggests an abstracted notion of how networks form and how to assess the ways in which they might engage publics in their more natural configurations.

In short, there is important reason to broaden our understanding of the Internet in light of its capacity to distribute social technologies that create organizations and establish information flows among organizations and their publics. The web enables low cost flexible network affiliations among grassroots organizations and citizens, and makes possible relatively short path distances for information and action planning to travel horizontally within nations and across borders, and vertically between those networks and various levels of government. The central role of social technology and the Internet in the impressive popular uprisings in recent years throughout the Middle East, Spain, Greece, and the U.S. is one significant example. Theories of networked publics are rapidly challenging modern era notions of mass publics defined by group memberships and common media consumption (Granovetter 1973; Buchanan 2002; Bennett 2003; Benkler 2006; Bimber et al. 2005). The open question, of course, is whether these broad networking and public engagement capabilities are evident in the EU public sphere.

## 3. Analyzing Networked Issue Publics in Nations and the EU

As indicated earlier, I plan to investigate whether there are identifiable transnational civil society issue networks that aim to engage publics around cross-national norm and policy agendas in the EU. Even if (following Lang 2009, 2013) the NGO umbrella platforms funded by, and operating mostly in Brussels are only in limited contact with national publics, there may be bottom-up NGO and movement networks that

- exist in multiple nations,
- address similar issues using similar frames, and
- target the EU with various policy demands.

A second research question (that I can examine only in preliminary fashion here) is whether the EU is responsive to these publics – at least in terms of recognizing their agendas and discussing their issues. If we can establish the existence of multinational advocacy networks that both touch the ground in nations by displaying clear mechanisms for public engagement and share commonly framed communication with issue network centered around the EU, then there is reason to avoid blanket dismissal of the NGO sphere. I should note at the outset that this is a high standard to achieve. The so-called democracy deficit at the EU level is based in part on the perception that NGOs have little mandate and little inclination to engage publics as part of the lobbying and issue education process in Brussels. Our preliminary research suggests that this NGO pattern is largely true at the EU level, but that interesting patterns of public engagement do emerge at the national level for a number of issues (Bennett et al. 2011b). This raises an interesting interpretive question, as mass media public sphere research operates exclusively at the level of national media, given the absence of any significant EU level media system. It may be the case that the absence of either mass media or NGO-led publics at the encompassing EU level results mainly in the legitimacy and identification deficits associated with the EU democracy deficit.

One caveat is in order here: I expect that the degree to which advocacy and civil society networks satisfy these "networked issue sphere" criteria vary from issue to issue, network to network, and nation to nation. However, I want to consider the possibility that some of these issue networks are closer to ground (e.g., grounded in everyday life practices and political concerns) than the mass media sphere in the sense that they touch life spaces by engaging substantial numbers of people in more active relations to issues and policy advocacy. In this light, it is provocative to consider Rogers' (2004) challenge that digital communication networks linking numerous grassroots organizations may better reflect the values of politically engaged citizens than do comparatively passive and sparsely populated elite media spheres. And they may provide a better indicator of actual public interests than media frames and claims issued by elites.

At the outset I would like to anticipate an obvious question about the "reach" of these spheres: how many people are engaged in various digitally mediated information and action networks?[4] Unlike mass media audience sizes, digital network participation figures are almost impossible to attain directly. Data are hard to gather on such things as: web traffic volume across large networks, the size and frequency of email list use among networked organizations, the numbers of people subsequently sharing this information with friends over personal networks, the numbers using social technologies to create and access information in so-called "epistemic communities," and the often rapid scaling of participation in events such as protests and forums, just to mention a few of the multiple indicators of audience size. In fact, thinking about a digitally networked public as "an audience" is probably a misguided notion. There are various ways to assess public engagement, ranging from posted memberships of NGOs, which often number in the millions internationally. More importantly, in an era where changing civic affiliation patterns lead younger generations away from formal memberships, NGOs are showing signs of joining with other organizations in loose multi-issue networks that engage individuals through social media, enabling people to share information and coordinate action with their own social networks, multiplying the reach of these networks well beyond membership numbers (Bennett/Segerberg forthcoming).

4 I am grateful for the discussions with Juan Diez Medrano on this topic.

In an effort to open up the intellectual space needed to present this analysis, I would only ask that intuitive dismissals based on presumptions about the limited "reach" of digitally mediated issue networks be weighed against the conclusions from the above mass media research which shows that the large national reach of the mass media is far from commensurate with the actual impact in terms of issue attention or capacity to engage publics. It seems that no matter how many people the mass media can potentially reach, majorities of those publics are generally not attentive to the EU issues that are presented to them in sporadic news stories as framed by elites. While reach may be large, impact and engagement seem small, with the exception of the few issues (monetary policy, political integration, agriculture, and scandals) on which scholars focus their analyses.

Thus, I cannot make claims about absolute reach of different networks (although indicators from several early case studies suggest that it is large). I can, however, assess:

- whether some transnational communication infrastructure exists,
- whether common issues are addressed in those networks,
- whether EU officials and institutions are addressed and linked in these networks, and
- whether there are mechanisms for public access, interaction, and bottom-up communication and action.

Our ongoing work on transnational issue advocacy networks suggests that there are some large and stable networks of NGOs and civil society groups that address a wide range of issues such as environment, trade, human rights, corporate responsibility, labor standards, and development policy, among many others (Bennett 2003; Bennett et al. 2011a, 2011b; Bennett/Segerberg forthcoming). Organizational actors within these networks often target and seek communication with national and transnational governments, and mobilize citizens in the process. Many of these networks and their issues receive uneven coverage in the mass media, but this does not mean they do not exist or that they are unimportant as public spheres (this said, preliminary media analysis suggests that large-scale issue networks with high public engagement capacity are surprisingly successful in getting their issues covered in the press).

To supplement – and in some cases supplant – communication through conventional media channels, these networks often employ digital communication technologies such as: websites (organized not only as search targets but in networks of affiliated organizations connected by selective in-and-out-linking to other sites); email lists; information feeds; blogs; issue forums; event calendars; downloadable activist took kits; social technologies (Twitter feeds, Facebook networks, Youtube channels); and targeted communication campaigns often linking individual citizens to government officials at different levels. These digital media technologies have the potential (which may not always be realized) to constitute more grounded public spheres than conventional mass media spheres because of their capacities to transmit information, enable public input, organize actions, and create fluid organizational structures among often large numbers of national and transnational organizations. These grounded networks can provide communication and action channels to challenge policy framing at different governance levels – from local to transnational.

## 4. Research Design

Relationships, public communication, and engagement strategies across organizations in networks can be better established through the use of web crawling tools such as the IssueCrawler,[5] which makes it possible to set various network membership parameters (e.g., more or less constrained linking patterns) and generate networks of varying scale (e.g., number of iterations of out-linking). The resulting networks can be analyzed for properties such as: the closeness of member organizations (path distances among nodes in a network); centralization of networks around particular organizations; brokerage (degree to which organizations stand between other actors in the network); patterned similarities of network structures in different nations; stability over time; and lateral linkages across issues that may broaden the topical reach and public mobilization capacities of networks. In addition, other analytical tools can be employed for drilling into large numbers of websites and searching for the density of references to issue framing (e.g., trade justice), or for references to various objects associated with those issues (e.g., European Union). This so-called "content scraping" enables assessment of issue framing and political targeting contained in those web networks via automated coding of large volumes of sites and pages.[6] These analyses can of course be performed in different languages. Moreover, a substantial number of sites offer multi-language translations reflecting their roles as hubs in transnational networks.

In identifying and analyzing different cases it is important to avoid sweeping generalizations about a vibrant public sphere of digital networks hidden in the shadow of mass media. Several caveats are in order. First, I expect that the degree to which these networks satisfy the "networked issue sphere" criteria outlined above and detailed below will vary across policy issue areas. I also expect (and preliminary data confirms) that there will be some differences in the form, density, and scale of public engagement across the national networks that emerge to address common (transnational) issues such as trade and development policy, environment, energy, and other issues that motivate both public interest and NGO network formation. Finally, it seems clear that some important NGO networks do not touch ground or engage local publics at all, creating what Lang (2009, 2013) has called NGOs as "proxy publics." This pattern of NGOs without publics seems particularly characteristic of networks we have traced out from the EU civil society platform organizations, which often consist of hierarchical associations of EU platform organizations and national professional NGO members that display relatively little capacity to engage publics. This would seem to corroborate the democracy deficit concerns about EU efforts to cultivate a civil society. At the same time, vibrant issue networks seem to be thriving at national levels, engaging publics around common policy agendas and conflicts with institutional political targets (Bennett 2011b).

Where to begin looking for networked issue publics? Since there is considerable concern about NGOs that live only in Brussels I propose to explore the EU sponsored civil society platforms and to compare them with more independent transnational networks that may have greater bottom-up communication and mobilization capacity.

5 See: http://www.issuecrawler.net/, based at Amsterdam University and developed by Richard Rogers.

6 I am indebted to Richard Rogers for making available to me a beta version of his website issue scraper.

Given the scope of these analyses, the first stage of the investigation will be limited to a comparison of two cases:

- A bottom-up network of national and transnational NGOs promoting new international trade norms centering around the concept of "fair trade," and more broadly aimed at promoting trade norms and policies that do not exploit developing nations. This national level advocacy network will be referred to as a NAN.
- NGO networks emerging from the top-down initiative by the EU to create civil society networks to promote public dialogue with the EU in policy areas affecting the environment, women, young people, development assistance, human rights, and democratic civil societies. This fair trade advocacy network centering around the EU and other international organizations will be referred to as the EUAN.

These networks will be examined to determine the extent to which they:

- have organizational presences and network formations in multiple EU nations;
- display interlinking across nations, creating a supranational or transnational organizational network;
- use similar frames of reference to discuss issues;
- address the EU in their communications and policy initiatives;
- engage citizens in communication with EU targets.[7]

In addition, the analysis will look for ways in which these networks may bridge different issue areas (e.g., trade, development, environment) creating greater reach and more generalized political discussion beyond specific issue publics.[8] The analysis will also look for evidence of how advocacy networks contribute to EU policy debates with more conventional tactics such as lobbying, public relations initiatives (e.g., press releases), and protest tactics aimed at getting messages to EU officials into news coverage. While these observations will necessarily remain tangential to the network analyses, they are important to keep in mind to avoid the implication that digital networks somehow imply purely virtual organization or action.

7 The ways in which organizations may use web technologies to enable direct citizen communication and engagement include: offering information (news) feeds directly to individuals; providing on-and-offline forums for communication and opinion expression among publics; opening channels for direct expression of sentiments to EU officials; mobilization of protests to express opinion and make news; and supporting grassroots networks of direct participation – e.g., creating norms and tool kits for establishing fair trade towns; participating in national, European, and world social forums etc.

8 For example, an analysis by Bennett and Segerberg (2009) of the G20 protests in London in March and again in September 2009 offers preliminary evidence of coalition formation among trade, development, and environmental advocacy networks. This suggests that digitally mediated networks enable flexible adjustments in the framing of discourses, raising the possibility of broadening of topical spheres beyond single issues.

## 5. Methods

The methodological foundation of this project involves the derivation of descriptively valid networks of actors – that is, network relationships that reflect intentional linking (and thus, recognition) among various organizations. This sort of network derivation must be based on conservative criteria that do not overstate the size, scale, density, or the degree of common communication framing among the members.

There are various ways to render networks using web crawling tools. For example, one can admit a site to a network simply because it receives a link from any starting point in a crawl. This "snowball" method is a relatively weak criterion that is similar to the link-back method used by Koopmans and Zimmermann discussed above. It is not clear what meaning or structure constrains linking to the top ten search results. Had they been able to map the snowball network produced by all 380,000 outlinks from those top ten sites, they would likely have pictured enormous networks of dubious coherence and significance. Another method is to admit actors (or organizations) to networks only when they link to each other. This "interactor" method is somewhat more constrained in that there needs to be some mutual relationship among nodes. However, this sort of network can result in fragmented networks dominated by a few popular or influential actors that may overshadow other structures that reflect more demanding criteria for inclusion. For example, a more conservative method for detecting the existence of relatively constrained networks is the so-called co-link method in which new nodes are admitted to the network only if they receive links from more than one of the starting points for the crawl. A network for an exclusive club may require all existing members to agree to admit new members. However, this consensus rule would dampen the flexibility that is one of the defining qualities of civic web networks. A reasonable balance for inclusion is to require that two organizational starting points must link to a new node in order for that mode to be admitted to the network. If the "reach" of the network is to be explored beyond one link out, then new nodes added on the first iteration join the list of starting points for successive iterations, and so on. These parameters of network inclusion are discussed and illustrated in more detail in Rogers (2004) and in the online scenarios for using the IssueCrawler.[9]

The selection of starting points is clearly an important methodological issue. In my previous work on comparative fair trade networks, for example, different starting point selection methods have been compared. Google searches on "fair trade US" or "fair trade UK" have produced a cross section of NGOs, fair trade businesses, and consumer coops from which networks have been generated that include most of the known players at the national level. However, for purposes of systematic cross-national comparison (that also avoids guessing about key language search terms in different nations), a more reliable method is to start with the core link lists from the national fair trade labeling organizations which have been certified as the national gatekeepers of fair trade standards and labeling by the Fair Trade Labeling Organization, International (FLO), the leading international fair trade organization.[10] More details about starting points and interpretation of the resulting networks are contained in the analyses below.

9 For more details see: http://www.govcom.org/scenarios_use.html.

10 For more information about the FLO see: http://www.fairtrade.net/.

## 6. The Case of EU Fair Trade Advocacy Networks

Fair trade (FT) is a normative market system in which producers are paid a fair price for their products so that they can live decent lives that include development of local communities in terms of health standards, education, and stable futures. Needless to say, this system is at odds with prevailing free market standards embodied by international trading regimes such as the World Trade Organization (WTO), and in many cases the EU. As a result, it represents an interesting case of a social movement that is attempting both to create an alternative market system by educating consumers and businesses, while seeking opportunities to change trade norms and policies in national and transnational political institutions.[11]

At its core, the fair trade system involves certification that products purchased by consumers (generally in more developed countries) were actually priced and produced under a transparent set of fair trade standards. National labeling initiatives licensed by FLO grant the labels indicating this trusted certification.[12] In addition, various coalitions of organizations and activists promote the system with strategies that include varying mixes of consumer information and business campaigns to grow markets, and political advocacy strategies to shape government policies (Wilkinson 2007). These points are reflected in the following excerpts from the FLO website:

> *"Fairtrade's vision is a world in which all producers can enjoy secure and sustainable livelihoods, fulfill their potential and decide on their future.*
> *We believe that trade can be a fundamental driver of poverty reduction and greater sustainable development, but only if it is managed for that purpose, with greater equity and transparency than is currently the norm […].*
> *Our mission is to connect consumers and producers via a label which promotes fairer trading conditions, through which producers who are disadvantaged by conventional trade can combat poverty, strengthen their position and take more control over their lives." (International Fair Trade Labeling Organization 2009)*[13]

> *"One of FLO's tasks is to make the case for trade justice in debates on trade and development. We do this in partnership with other international Fair Trade organizations, such as WFTO, NEWS and EFTA.*
> *Together we run the Fairtrade Advocacy Office in Brussels. This office co-ordinates the advocacy activities of the international Fair Trade movement in Europe and worldwide." (International Fair Trade Labeling Organization 2009)*[14]

The research question is this: Do the various national and transnational FLO networks operate more in Lang's (2009, 2013) term as "proxy publics" with little mobilization of public engagement in trade policy

11 For more detailed discussions of the relationship between the "market" and the "movement" aspects of FT and analyses of the different balances in different national networks, see Bennett et al. 2011a.

12 There are other smaller and more scattered fair trade systems operating outside of FLO sanctioning, but FLO networks represent the best cases for cross national comparisons of public sphere qualities.

13 http://www.fairtrade.net/our_vision.html, 10 November 2009.

14 http://www.fairtrade.net/what_we_do.html, 10 November 2009.

advocacy issues (in this case at the EU level), or more as open public spheres that touch the ground in multiple nations with:

- common issue frames;
- reference to the EU as a policy target; and
- opportunities for publics to become informed and engaged in fair trade advocacy?

The first step in this analysis is to see whether a transnational EU network emerges from outlinks from the FLO site, and whether that network touches ground in different EU nations (then we will examine two different national networks for the public sphere properties outlined above).

### *6.1 Determining Whether There is A Cross-national EU FT Network*

Since our initial question is whether FT networks travel across EU national borders,[15] I started the network crawl with FLO links to the fair trade labeling organizations in France, Sweden, Norway, Spain, Germany, Italy, Belgium, The Netherlands, Austria, Finland, Denmark, and two of the international advocacy partners identified by the FLO: the European Fair Trade Association and the World Fair Trade Association (these were included as starting points to see if the network contains relationships among these other organizations beyond the obvious hierarchical "interactor" links between the national affiliates and the FLO).[16] In order to see if the network touches ground in different EU nations, and contains connections across them, I set the number of outreach iterations at two (directing the crawler to interrogate websites two links – or clicks – out from the starting points, adding nodes that received co-links from the first iteration to the starting points for the second iteration). In order to make sure that linkages representing different kinds of relationships were detected (e.g., relationships based on fair trade in general or based on more specific terms such as coffee, sugar, bananas, soccer balls, or fair trade towns), I set the crawler to drill three levels deep into each site to search for outlinks (with the homepage counting as the first page level). The resulting EU core network is shown in Figure 1.

What seems clear from Figure 1 is that the fair trade network touches a number of European nations with fairly dense cross-national ties. This map provides prima facie evidence of a European fair trade network that touches ground in a number of EU nations and is not overly centralized around just the FLO system itself. There are surely many more nodes in this network that exist beyond two links out (possibly entering more dense national territories, or connecting to solidarity networks organized around other issues such as environment or labor rights). And there are surely many network connections that cannot be

15 Thereby creating a communication and organizational infrastructure that is genuinely more transnational than the national press systems studied to date in EU public sphere research.

16 The starting points were: http://www.eftafairtrade.org; http://www.fairtrade-maerket.dk; http://www.fairtrade.at; http://www.fairtrade.ie; http://www.fairtrade.org.uk; http://www.fairtradeitalia.it; http://www.maxhavelaar.be/language; http://www.maxhavelaar.nl; http://www.maxhavelaar.no; http://www.maxhavelaarfrance.org; http://www.rattvisemarkt.se; http://www.reilukauppa.fi; http://www.sellocomerciojusto.org/es; http://www.transfair.org; http://www.wfto.com.

detected from a web crawl, including: personal or business relationships, the connections that fair trade labels on products establish with consumers, email chains that establish fine grained individual networks, local meetings in churches, and so on. In short, the map in Figure 1 is not intended to represent a complete network. It is a rough indicator or diagnostic tool for inferring some high level qualities of networks that exist on the ground. From this picture, we can establish that the European fair trade network:

- touches ground in a number of EU nations (which are generally clustered in the upper right sector of the map cluster);[17]
- contains a number of important coordinating nodes or "hubs" such as the World Fair Trade Organization, European Fair Trade Association, and FLO (fairtrade.net in the upper center of the network); and
- reflects varying degrees of national level development, with the UK showing the most densely populated national cluster toward the lower left part of the map (again, bearing in mind that far more of these networks likely exist on the ground and off the map).

### *6.2 Public Engagement in the EU Network*

What becomes immediately apparent about this network upon closer inspection is that it consists of a mix of transnational trade NGOs that are primarily professional lobbying and standards setting organizations, along with national fair trade labeling organizations that coordinate both markets and public activities within nations. Subsequent analyses show that the transnational NGOs – particularly those stemming from the EU economic development platform – have relatively little public engagement capacity beyond what the national networks bring to them (Bennett et al. 2011b). They are largely professional policy organizations that have chosen to spend their resources in advocacy and implementation rather than mobilizing publics. The exceptions are those national organizations (mainly the fair trade labeling organizations for different nations) that provide important coordination for churches and development NGOs that in turn engage people around fair trade as a good way to build awareness of injustices in the neo-liberal global trade regime. Thus, the closer we get to ground level national networks (NAN), the more digital media mechanisms we observe aimed at engaging publics in various ways (Bennett et al. 2011b).

17 This cluster includes Germany, where the labeling organization uses www.transfair.org as its domain rather than www.transfair.de.

*Figure 1: EU Fair Trade Network – Core Organizations*

*Nodes sizes reflect relative numbers of in- and outlinks per site. Crawl reach set to two iterations (two outlinks from starting points) based on outlinks found three pages deep in the sites. Organization domains are indicated by colors in legend.*

As noted above, these maps are rather like satellite photos: useful as general detection and diagnostic tools, but often lacking in resolution and fine-grained detail. As an illustration of this, let us see what happens if I drill into just one of the sites in the network: the fair trade town site (located by a blue above WFTO in the center left of the map). We discover that this single node unfolds into a network of over 700 fair trade towns (FTT), with the European clustering shown in Figure 2. These towns are joined on and offline in sharing information about events and successful citizen campaigns in settings ranging from small German towns to Copenhagen. The network also carries reports on the status of ongoing campaigns in places such

as London. The criteria for becoming recognized as a FTT[18] clearly suggest that public spheres involving fair trade images, discourses, and practices exist on the ground in these places. It is also clear that nations in the EU provide an important focus of local level advocacy for developing trade justice norms, policies, and practices. Figure 2 also reveals that most of these towns are located in Europe, and over 400 are in the UK, suggesting that the UK fair trade sphere is highly developed.

*Figure 2: Locations of Fair Trade Towns in Europe in 2009*

*Source: International Fair Trade Towns (http://www.fairtradetowns.org/about/).*

This range from transnational and very local network development makes the UK an interesting case for assessing the degree to which the FT sphere involves communication with the EU and mobilization of citizens in that communication. I have also chosen Germany as a second comparative case to assess the extent of common issue framing, citizen involvement, and reference to the EU in the FT sphere (time and space prohibit examining all the European national spheres in similar detail).

18 According to the association of fair trade towns website, the requirements for bearing that designation include:

1. Local council passes a resolution supporting Fairtrade, and agrees to serve Fairtrade products (for example, in meetings, offices and canteens);
2. range of Fairtrade products are available locally (targets vary from country to country);
3. Schools, workplaces, places of worship and community organisations support Fairtrade and use Fairtrade products whenever possible;
4. Media coverage and events raise awareness and understanding of Fairtrade across the community;
5. A Fairtrade steering group representing different sectors is formed to co-ordinate action around the goals and develop them over the years (see http://www.fairtradetowns.org/about/the-five-goals/).

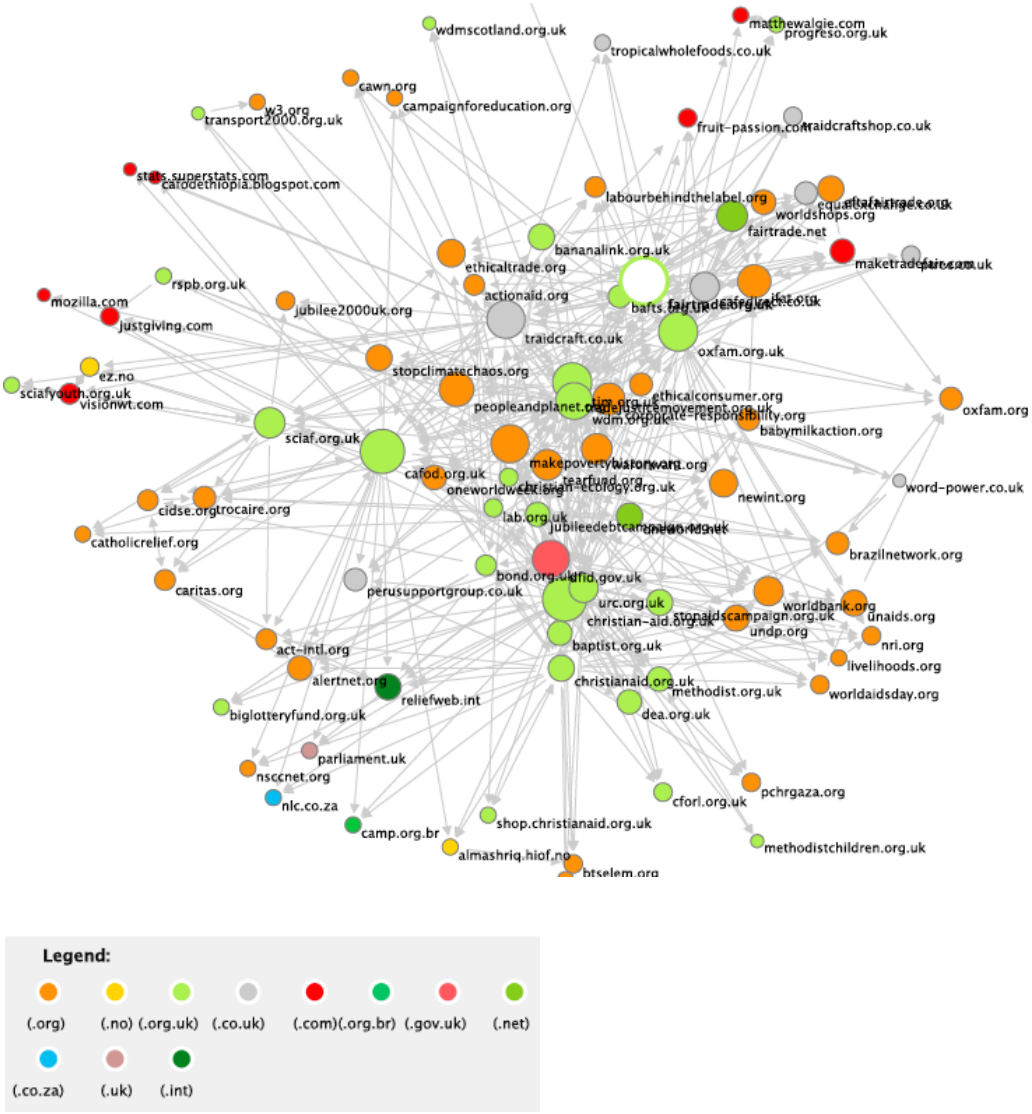
## 7. The Case of National Level FT Networks in the UK

Following a protocol established for deriving starting points to crawl national fair trade networks (Bennett et al. 2011a), this analysis is based on a crawl of the UK network starting with the 14 founding members listed on the website of the UK fair trade labeling organization licensed by the FLO, the Fairtrade Foundation (www.fairtrade.org.uk).[19] This crawl was done in 2006. I have followed this network over the years, and found it to be quite stable, revealing similar organizational membership and link structure in crawls conducted in 2009, 2010, and 2011. The advantage of using this earlier crawl is that we have done detailed coding of individual sites, which enables me to present a fine-grained look at the public sphere qualities. This analysis will be supplemented with an automated content analysis of the same sites three years later to determine issue framing and EU references.

Since the goal in this case was to derive a national network, the crawler was instructed to go only one link out from these starting points; going a second iteration out quickly introduced many international organizations into the network. Even after limiting the crawl reach to one iteration, some international organizations entered the map (the reality is that the web does not know national boundaries the way national media do, and this is clearly a transnational advocacy network). I also decided to focus on the main national network partners by limiting the crawler to following links just two pages deep into each site (to avoid the dense clustering of local nodes such as FT towns, churches, and other organizations that would exceed the mapping tool capacity and distract focus from the key national level organizations that may offer linkages between the EU and individual citizens). The result is the network shown in Figure 3 with many large nodes indicating relatively equal sharing of inlinking (prestige or authority) and outlinking (influence or brokering). The core organizations include a number of prominent international aid and development organizations and campaigns such as: Oxfam; CAFOD (overseas development agency for the Catholic Church UK); People and Planet; the Make Poverty History Campaign; The Trade Justice Movement, and of course, the Fairtrade Foundation, the UK fair trade labeling organization licensed by FLO.

19 The UK starting points were: http://peopleandplanet.org/;
http://www.bananalink.org.uk/index.php?option=com_frontpage&Itemid=1 ;
http://www.cafod.org.uk/about_cafod/links;
http://www.christian-aid.org.uk/campaign/index.htm;
http://www.fairtrade.org.uk/resources_links.htm;
http://www.mrdf.org.uk/pages/links.php;
http://www.nicaraguasc.org.uk/partners/index.htm;
http://www.oxfam.org.uk/what_we_do/fairtrade/ft_links.htm?searchterm=links;
http://www.sciaf.org.uk/about_us/useful_links;
http://www.shared-interest.com/links.htm;
http://www.traidcraft.co.uk/template2.asp?pageID=1652&fromID=1275;
http://www.urc.org.uk/links/links_index.htm;
http://www.wdm.org.uk/resources/links/index.htm;
http://www.womens-institute.org.uk/members/index.shtml.

*Figure 3: UK Fair Trade Network – Core Organizations*




*Nodes sized by relative numbers of in- and outlinks per site. Crawl set to one iteration (one outlink from starting points), based on links found two pages deep in the sites. Organizations and other URL designations indicated by colors in legend.*

In our original project, we (Bennett et al. 2011a) coded the top 47 organizations in the network that focused most exclusively on FT issues in the UK, and eliminated those linking to and from the international (non-UK) network and those with only marginal focus on FT matters (solidarity organizations, such as labor rights, aids awareness, and others that can be located around the edges of the network). The following key findings emerged from the core UK FT network.[20] In subsequent analyses, we identified over 30 public engagement mechanisms such as blogs, video postings, social networks such as Twitter, protest alerts, and citizen workshops. The national level networks clearly aimed at engaging publics using impressive outlays of digital media, marking a sharp contrast to the top down NGO networks linked from the EU civil society

20 See Bennett et al. 2011a for a discussion of methods and more detailed analysis of findings.

platforms (see Bennett et al. 2011b). Subsequent developments in this project include fine grained inventories of digitally mediated public engagement mechanisms ranging from information pages and newsletters to blogs, video postings, organizing tool kits, campaign and protest involvement, and spaces to share local activities and accomplishments (Bennett et al. 2011b; 2011c).

## *7.1 Issue Framing in the UK Network*

The term "fair trade" is in the DNA of the core network. It appears on nearly every page of every site, on the logos and trademarks that appear on products, and in appeals to citizens to get involved both as consumers and policy activists. More broadly, a Google search on "fair trade – UK" produced 2,240,000 hits (not all of which, I have examined of course!) including most of the major organizations in the UK FT network in the top 100 hits (10 November 2009). Indeed, the fair trade concept has become so standardized that it often appears in other parts of the transnational network (e.g., in German sites) using the English framing as "fair trade" and in the anglicized frame "Fairer Handel" (about which more in the next section).

It is also interesting that a family of related frames appear in the UK network emphasizing the ideas of Trade Justice, Make Poverty History, and End Poverty Now.[21] These three long-running campaigns in the UK join fair trade networks with development and relief organization in joint policy initiatives aimed at various levels of government. These broad coalition campaigns indicate the capacity of digital networks to flexibly join multiple issues together across different NGO sectors. Indeed, many of the same players involved in the Fair Trade, End Poverty Now, Trade Justice, and Make Poverty History campaigns forged links to environmental organizations under the even broader frame of Put People First[22] to protest against G20 economic policies that failed to improve lives of ordinary people in both developed and developing nations. This ongoing campaign also advocates that economic recovery programs from the global financial crisis should not be at the expense of the environment (Bennett/Segerberg 2009).

## *7.2 Does the UK FT Network Refer to the EU?*

An automated content analysis of the websites of UK FT network organizations is currently being designed and will be reported in later publications. Our earlier coding of the top FT sites showed that 32 percent of these sites invited citizens to learn about international and primarily EU FT policies and (see below) to communicate their views directly to EU and other international officials. Here are some other indicators of the prominence of the EU in the communication flows in the UK FT network:

21 For further information on these campaigns see: http://www.tjm.org.uk/, http://www.makepovertyhistory.org/ and http://www.endpovertynow.co.uk.

22 For further information see: http://www.putpeoplefirst.org.uk/.

- a search of the most central gatekeeping site in the network (The Fairtrade Foundation, which is the FLO-sanctioned certification organization) found fully 140 site pages addressing European Union fair trade activities and campaign actions to promote FT on the EU policy agenda;
- the Make Poverty History campaign contains 29 pages on the site directed at EU policy initiatives;
- the Trade Justice Campaign and related movement over the entire period of study (2006-2009) has focused on EU initiatives, as indicated in the examples below of citizen mobilization.

### *7.3 Evidence of Opportunities for Direct Citizen Engagement*

There are many indicators that the UK FT network is importantly focused on citizen engagement, and that a good deal of that citizen mobilization is aimed at communication between the grassroots and the EU. For example, in our content analysis of the top 47 UK FT sites, we found that features enabling citizens to take action of sending personal messages to political targets were focused almost evenly on national (36 percent of the sites) and EU and other international targets (32 percent of the sites). The main citizen engagement opportunities involved contacting Members of the European Parliament (MEPs), Commissioners, and even the President of the European Council, who at the time of the study was German Chancellor Angela Merkel.[23]

As an overall measure of opportunities for direct online citizen involvement in the UK FT network, we found that fully 40 percent of the sites in our coding sample offered some means for citizens to communicate with government and each other through message sending, forums, blogs, event calendar postings, and other communication features (Bennett et al. 2011a).[24] Figure 4 illustrates a direct communication opportunity from the Trade Justice Movement (TJM) campaign site in 2006, and Figure 5 illustrates a direct citizen communication opportunity from the campaign in 2009. Most of the central sites in the FT network are either direct sponsors of the TJM campaign or link to the campaign site.

23 By comparison, our comparative study of the US FT network showed that only eight percent of sites directed citizen communication and action toward government beyond the local level.

24 By comparison, just 25 percent of the sites in the US network sample had such features.

*Figure 4: Trade Justice Movement Campaign 2006 – Email Angela Merkel – EU President*

**TRADE JUSTICE ACTION EVENT**

Many thanks to everyone who took part in **Thursday 19 April's Trade Justice Action** outside the German Embassy. You helped lobby every single EU embassy in just one day!

If you took part in this amazing day, please **click here** to find out how yo can upload your pictures onto a special Flickr site.

See what happened **here**.

**TAKE ACTION**

**Email German Chancellor Angela Merkel**
The EU is putting pressure on poor countries to accept trade agreements that are unfair. Germany presently holds the EU Presidency. Go to one of our member websites below to send a message to German Chancellor Angela Merkel. Tell her to use her influence to stop these unfair trade agreements.
**Oxfam: Email Merkel Christian Aid: Email Merkel CAFOD: Email Merkel**
**ActionAid: Email Merkel**

**Email Alistair Darling, the new UK Secretary of State for Trade & Industry**
Call on him to stop the EU's Economic Partnership Agreements (EPAs) with its former colonies going ahead.

*Source: TJM website, http://www.tjm.org.uk/, November 2006.*

*Figure 5: Example of direct citizen engagement opportunities with the EU from the 2009 Trade Justice Movement campaign enabling citizens to contact the EU Trade Commissioner and MEPs*

*Source: Source: TJM website http://www.tjm.org.uk/, November 2009.*

## 8. The Case of Germany

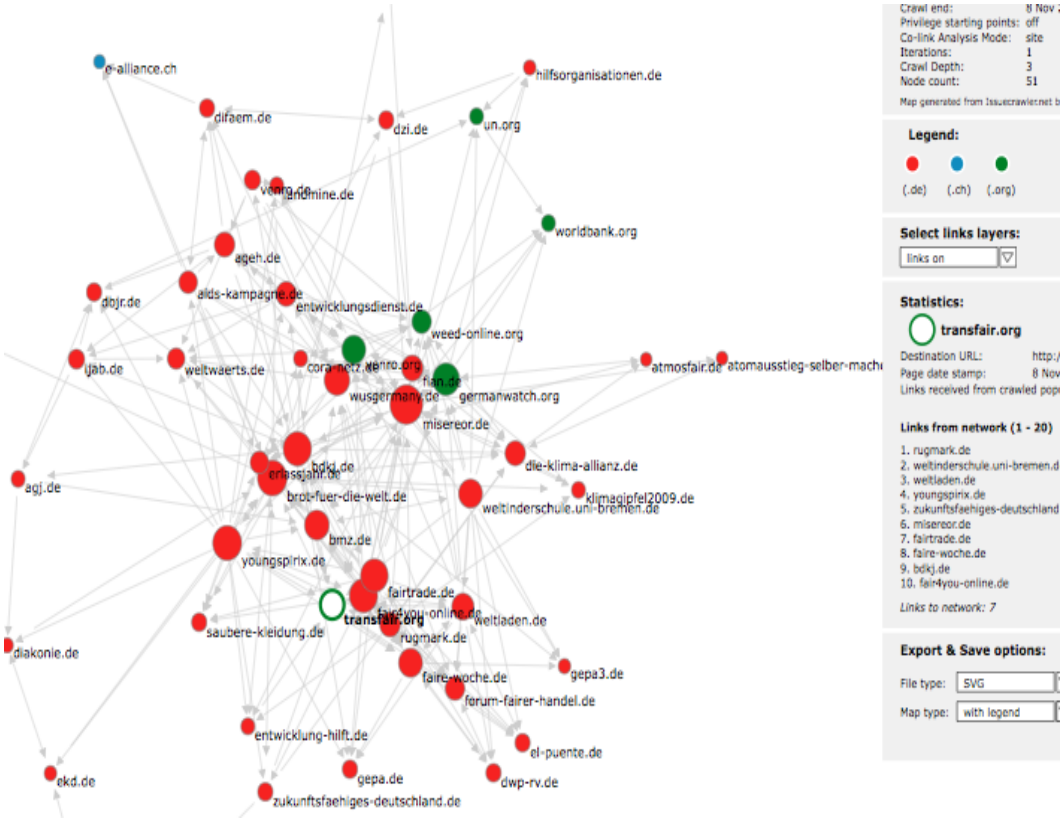
Following a similar protocol to the one that generated the UK network, I conducted a crawl of the German FT network. The starting points were the member list from transfair.org, the German labeling organization licensed by FLO.[25] As with the UK crawl, I limited the reach to one link out from the starting points. However, since it was likely that the German network would not be as dense as the one in the UK (indeed, no other national net is as dense), I adjusted the crawler to drill one page deeper into the German sites in search of outlinks.[26]

25 TransFair is supported by 36 member organizations from the fields of development, church, social workers, consumers, cooperatives, education and environment. http://www.transfair.org/kontakt-links/adressen/mitglieder.html (8 November 2009).

26 I also generated another map with expanded parameter settings (going two iterations out and drilling three pages deep for outlinks). This network quickly reached beyond German organizations to include EU, WTO, IMF, and various UN agencies, among other international organizations. This suggests that the German network both touches ground and links to major international organizations.

The network displayed in Figure 6 is, as expected, smaller and less dense than the one found in the UK, but it touches ground in ways that indicate opportunities for direct citizen involvement through churches and consumer organizations (such as GEPA).[27] Similar organizations are also present in the UK network, but not as prominent as the cluster of large development and relief NGOs.

*Figure 6: German Fair Trade Network – Core Organizations*




*Nodes sized by relative numbers of in and out links per site. Crawl set to one iteration (one outlink from starting points), based on links found three pages deep in the sites. Organizations and other URL designations indicated by colors in legend.*

## *8.1 Issue Framing*

The adaptation of the English term "fairer Handel" is clearly the leading common frame in the German FT sphere. A Google search for the phrase "fairer Handel de" produced 1,660,000 returns, with the top hits containing most of the organizations in the above network. Not only does "fairer Handel" correspond to the framing used in the UK, but the search volume is remarkably similar as well (given the large number of returns, it is impossible at this point to determine where the search trails off into irrelevant sites).

Moreover, the term "fair trade" has traveled so well across the transnational network that a search for

27 For further information please see http://www.gepa.de/p/.

"fair trade Germany de" produced 1,230,000 results, with many sites in the top returns using the English framing directly. For example the large business and consumer activist organization GEPA calls itself "The Fair Trade Company" as shown in Figure 7. In another example, Oxfam introduced its "Make Trade Fair" campaign in Germany in 2006 using the English framing with a series of events featuring the actress Heike Makatsch, as shown in Figure 8.

*Figure 7: The Fair Trade Company (and consumer activist organization) GEPA uses the English framing in its publicity*

*Source: GEPA Website http://www.gepa.de/p/index.php/mID/1/lan/de*

*Figure 8: Oxfam German Campaign Site Featuring Actress Heike Makatsch and the English Framing of the "Make Trade Fair" Campaign*

*Source: Oxfam Germany Website http://www.oxfam.de/a_631_aktuell.asp?id=74*

At this point, the question of frame bridging to other issue areas and campaigns is still under investigation. A small number of sites (78) have been found to use the translation of the UK frame "trade justice," which roughly translates into the German "Gerechtigkeit im Handel." There also appear to be other frame bridges in the German network to "bio" organizations and environmental sustainability networks. The nature and framing of these network clusters is still under investigation.

## *8.2 EU References*

It is clear that references to the EU are common in the German FT network, although probably not as dense as in the UK. Using an automated content analysis tool (called an issue scraper),[28] I entered the organization URLs from the national organizations in the German FT network in Figure 6 into the scraper, and instructed it to search for all pages in those sites with references to "Europäische Union." Up to 100 pages per site were returned to me, resulting in the frequencies of EU pages per site in the network shown in Figure 9.

Other indicators of EU focus in the German FT sphere include:

28 This tool was made available to me for this research by Richard Rogers, who is gratefully acknowledged for his help.

- a Google search for "EU faire Handelspolitik" produced 41,300 results (which have not yet been examined to see where the relevance trails off);
- an automated content analysis of the sites found in the top 100 Google results for "fairer Handel de" produced the frequencies of pages with references to the terms "Europäische Union," "European Union," and "EU" shown in Figure 10 (the scraper was set to return a limit of up to 100 pages per site, for a total of 300 maximum page references).

*Figure 9: Number of pages per site in the German FT Network Containing References to the "Europäische Union".*

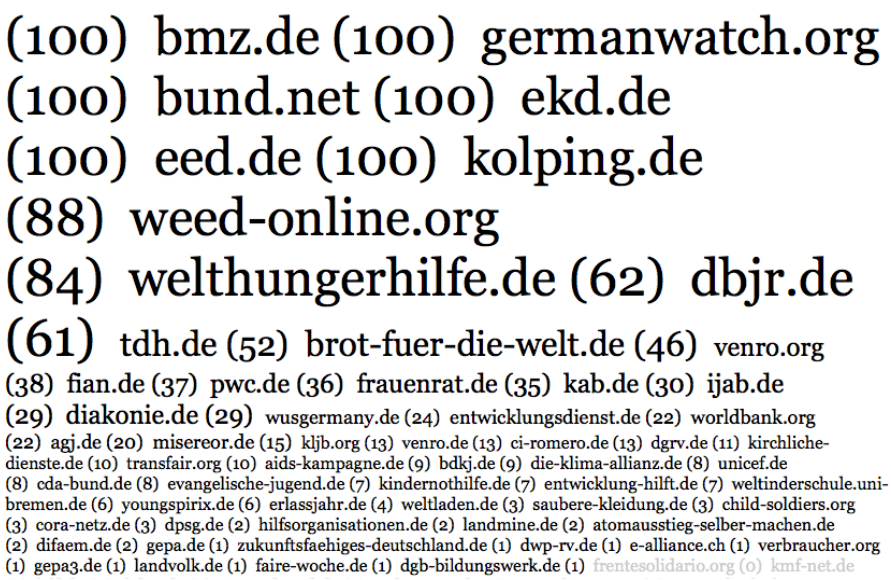
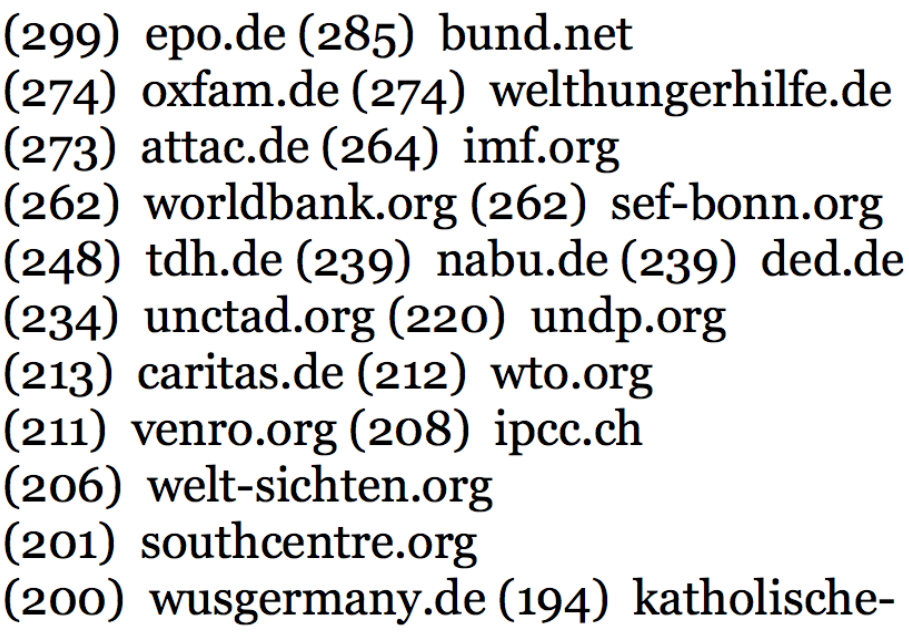



Figure 10: Results of an Automated Content Analysis of Top 100 Returns in a Google Search for "Fairer Handel de".



### *8.3 Citizen Engagement*

This analysis is still in progress. Preliminary findings point toward face to face engagement occurring primarily through churches, social movement organizations (e.g., Attac), and consumer activist organizations sponsored by network members such as GEPA. For example, the GEPA site lists some 6,000 consumer action groups (see Figure 7). A Google search for "GEPA Aktionsgruppen de" produced 21,000 hits, which still need to be examined. A subsequent methodological development has enabled a fine-grained engagement inventory of each site in both national and transnational issue advocacy networks, measuring a battery of information and action mechanisms. The preliminary results for Germany and the UK indicate that the NANs offer far more engagement opportunities for citizens than the EUANs. The interesting exception is the German environmental advocacy network (not shown here), which is less engagement oriented than its British counterpart and differs little from the generally low engagement orientations of NGOs belonging to the German EU level environmental network. In an analysis presented in another paper, we attribute this to the rise of the Green party, which motivated greater professionalization of the environmental movement away from continuous public engagement and toward policy advocacy, using the voting mechanism as the primary means of public engagement (Bennett et al. 2011c).

## 9. Does the EU Respond to This Bottom-Up Communication?

A preliminary search has discovered a number of documents, declarations, conferences, and other indicators, showing that both MEPs and various Directorate-Generals of the EU Commission have begun to recognize the norms of fair trade and to consider incorporating these norms in trading policies. For example, searching the EU portal[29] for "fair trade" produces over 12,000 documents. These documents span more than a decade and contain many references to definitions and policy goals defined with clear reference to organizations in the EUAN network shown in Figure 1. Space prohibits summarizing this evidence, but it seems a promising next step toward a process tracing analysis.

## 10. Conclusion: Two Different NGO Spheres

There appear to be very different kinds and levels of EU NGO advocacy network organized as very different types of public spheres. One pattern is impressively bottom-up, as illustrated by fair trade networks. I suspect that there are other such networks consisting of environment, relief, international development, human rights, and other issue spheres. The other NGO public sphere pattern is clearly that of more top-down networks funded from Brussels and through foundations (e.g., Soros) and link to some civil society infrastructures on the ground in nations, but they are not particularly oriented to promoting citizen engagement, as found in the studies by Lang (2009, 2013). These networks serve in Lang's terms as "proxy publics" and seem to qualify as "Teilöffentlichkeiten" dominated by experts and professional policy advocates, without

29 http://europa.eu.

a clear priority for broad public engagement. This pattern interestingly resembles the elite-driven press sphere studied by so many of the scholars discussed earlier in this paper, and summarized by Koopmans and Statham (2010) as the press, itself, becoming the public. An obvious next question is to understand how these very different EU network spheres mobilize resources, with what measurable effects on policy and on public engagement.

I hope that this preliminary analysis helps in thinking about the following issues, among others:

- ways to analyze the Internet (beyond searching it) for insights about the qualities of public sphere organizational networks;
- developing a more complex picture of NGO and civil society policy advocacy networks that go beyond the sweeping generalizations that currently seem to be made in the literature (e.g., they are all top down, co-opted by Brussels, or just not significant as public sphere players);
- the uses of digital network analysis to point toward fruitful approaches to finer grained studies of citizen involvement at ground level, and policy impact at various governmental levels;
- identifying network linkages that constitute chains of information flow and action coordination both vertically (from localities through national organizations and governments, to transnational organizations and governments) and horizontally through cross-national networks that carry common issue framing and coordination of citizen action. This possibility for horizontal – i.e., truly European – public spheres has been arbitrarily limited by the dominant research on national media systems.

To the extent that these national networks that we looked up actually engage publics, we may bring politics into various contested EU issue spheres. As Tarrow has noted, the status of EU democratic legitimacy depends importantly on the creation of pathways through which grassroots interests can become part of EU political processes:

> *"Democracy, if it evolves at the European level will grow out of the capacity of social movements, public interest groups, and other non-state actors, to make alliances with combinations of national government actors, supranational institutions, and with each other in Europe's increasingly composite polity." (Tarrow 2001: 250-251)*

Because the conventional media are overwhelmingly elite driven, as established in most research, including the studies in the Koopman and Statham project (2010), there is little likelihood that the press sphere is the best pathway for EU politics to engage publics in direct or meaningful ways. All of this leaves social movements, NGO advocacy networks, and other grassroots interests either to wither in media obscurity or to resort to inside political relations that may produce policy victories in the absence of much public awareness or involvement. Or so the currently dominant public sphere story goes. The continuing fixation on the mainstream media is puzzling in light of the thin findings about the media sphere, with its limited coverage of EU issues and its small impact on public opinion. It is as though nearly everyone has decided that a public sphere can only be found in the mass media, and that is where we must look even if we continue to find few effects. The rise of online issue networks that satisfy the conditions of national and transnational communication about contested policy areas – while engaging often large publics directly with the politics of those issues – offers another way to think about the emergence of EU publics and related spheres of communication and action.

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