

# **A *SWIFT* change after Lisbon?**

## **The European Parliament's salience in the media**

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### **Abstract**

The case of SWIFT (Society for Worldwide Interbank Financial Telecommunication) has generated a heated discussion between the European Parliament, the Council, and the Commission concerning the data exchange via bank transfers between the EU and the US. However, although the case had attracted opponents and critics from within the European Parliament in discussions about both security policy and citizen rights since the disclosure of the SWIFT service in 2006, the issue became most salient in the European quality press at the time when the European legislature rejected an interim agreement in February 2010. The paper investigates the variation of media coverage over time by drawing on a comprehensive content analysis of quality newspapers in six EU countries as well as on interviews with the respective correspondents in Brussels. It argues that the enactment of the Lisbon Treaty is responsible for the Parliament's greater visibility in the press – it gave the institution the power to veto the agreement. Yet, the study not only discovers variation over time but also across countries which is being related to the role of the national parliaments in the SWIFT debate suggesting some form of rivalry in the mediated public sphere exemplified by the German case. Despite being a single yet crucial case study, it has positive implications for the democratic deficit debate. Since the media hold the important function of transmitting news and information to Europe's citizens their reportage could potentially lead to more public awareness of the EU and its representative body in the post-Lisbon era.

Word Count: 9820

The European Parliament (EP) is nowadays a powerful institutional player at the European Union level. With the Lisbon Treaty having expanded once more the competences of the legislature and manifested its rights to scrutinise the European executive, the European Parliament's significance is comparable to that of the US Congress leaving its national counterparts behind in vibrant EU politics (Hix, 2009). Under the ordinary legislative procedure, the Council of Ministers and the Parliament decide co-equally in most social and economic policy areas and many more. At the same time, the EP has become more confident in controlling the European Commission by means of the investiture procedure exemplified in the election of the two recent Commissions under Barroso in 2004 and 2009. This increase in power implies that public awareness has also risen accordingly since some proposals to tackle the European democratic deficit comprise the strengthening of the European Parliament (Williams, 1991). That is to say, the more relevant and powerful the representative body at the EU level, supposedly the better do citizens understand and deliberate EU politics via the electoral connection. In fact, despite low turnout levels, the media reportage of European election campaigns has supposedly increased across the EU over time (de Vreese, Banducci, Semetko, & Boomgaarden, 2006). The paper, however, seeks to assess whether the European media follow the actual decision-making power of the European Parliament over the years – by devoting more attention to the legislative body in between electoral campaigns.

In order to answer this question, the paper conducts a study of a most-likely case, namely the SWIFT case, later called SWIFT agreement. SWIFT stands for the Society for Worldwide Interbank Financial Telecommunication which provides a worldwide financial messaging service from its headquarters in La Hulpe, just outside Brussels. After the terrorist attacks in 2001, the United States (US) Treasury gained access to the transfer data in order to receive information about international money transactions as part of their Terrorist Finance Tracking Programme (TFTP). European data also fall under the TFTP, but the data exchange only became public in June 2006. While data protectionists and the European Parliament immediately raised their concern about privacy, the European Union did not have a legal base to intervene or participate. When SWIFT moved its server from Virginia to Switzerland in 2010, the European governments expressed their interest in maintaining the data exchange to combat terrorism which consequently required an international agreement. Although

the EU and the US signed an interim accord on 30 November 2009, the Parliament, having gained the right to give its consent to international agreements with the Lisbon Treaty a day later (Art. 188 N) insisted to be consulted. The European Commission tried to act as a mediator, but the EP rejected the accord on 11 February 2010 on the grounds of civil rights and data protection which inevitably led to a compromise between the institutional actors involved. It was finally ratified by the EP on 8 July that year.

Methodologically, the paper relies on a quantitative content analysis of 455 broadsheet articles published between 1 June 2006 and 30 November 2010 in six EU countries – Ireland, the United Kingdom, France, the Netherlands, Germany, and Austria – as well as on qualitative interviews conducted with the respective correspondents in Brussels in June 2010.<sup>1</sup> Both multivariate regressions and the interviewee's reports serve to explain the news coverage of the EP with respect to its conduct in the SWIFT case. The paper finds that the respective reportage has increased significantly after the Lisbon Treaty. When the EP made use of its new powers to reject the agreement, the media expressed far more interest. Yet, the study not only discovers variation over time but also across countries. Explanations for this are related to the importance of the SWIFT debate in the national context: the more national parliaments are (capable to become) involved, the slightly lower the EP coverage suggesting a publicly perceived rivalry between the parliamentary institutions exemplified by the German case. Nevertheless, the regressions also reveal that EP debates themselves are a significant driver of the news about SWIFT. Despite being a highly salient issue, correspondents underline that the rise in media attention towards the EP and its members (MEPs) is not only linked to this particular decision but derives from the new competences with effect of the Lisbon Treaty providing an optimistic outlook for the media representations of the EP's influence in other policies. This has positive implications for the democratic deficit debate. Since the media hold the important function of transmitting news and information to Europe's citizens their reportage could potentially lead to more public awareness of the EU and its representative body.

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<sup>1</sup> The data is available through the author.

The paper proceeds by providing a brief overview of the research on EU news and their production in relation to the European Parliament before presenting the research design and operationalization of the variables. The third section analyses the findings followed by a brief conclusion summarising the main implications of the research conducted in this paper.

### **The European Parliament and EU news production**

The European Parliament's increase in both legislative and parliamentary powers over the last couple of decades has come along with a rising research interest of political scientists in this particular institution. The scholarly focus thus far has shed light onto the comprehension of its institutional development within the EU political system over time. Yet, the EU representative body has seldom been subject of communication research in the European context (but see Anderson & McLeod, 2004; Baisnée, 2003; Morgan, 1999). In fact, most media studies only indirectly deal with the EP by examining the phenomenon of European elections. These have various purposes including the investigation of variation in news coverage and content across country and over time (e.g. de Vreese, et al., 2006) as well as the analysis of possible effects on voting behaviour (e.g. de Vreese & Boomgaarden, 2006; Norris, 2000). In a wider context, a handful of studies have also sought to explain why and how some news about the EU, its actors and policy decisions are being published in a certain way and not in another (e.g. de Vreese, 2003; Kevin, 2003; Statham, 2006) putting the newsmakers on location at the core. These are helpful when investigating the determinants of news about the European Parliament. Correspondents are actually said to have socialised with the particular Brussels beat by "going native" with the European Union elites (Morgan, 1995). Yet, they still perform a role of transmitting news from the EU to the national audiences (cf. Baisnée, 2004) by producing news for national media that employs them and deliver these through "national prisms" (Preston & Horgan, 2006). In the following, the application of news values will be analysed expected to have an influence on the EP reportage over time. The second part of the section looks at possible explanations for cross-country variation.

Since news can be understood as a product or service for a consumer by a provider principally interested in profit, newsmakers are dependent on the demand competing with other news (cf. McManus, 1994). ‘If they do not cater well for that audience their very survival is at stake’ (Negrine, 1996: 101). That is to say, in the case of newspapers, journalists orientate themselves at the readers’ interest being controlled by the editor (in the home office) who acts as a gatekeeper between the news producer and the recipient (de Vreese, 2003). A reliable and established measure of the audience’s concern is the application of news values. While Galtung and Ruge (1965) classify *conflict* as the main news selection criterion for journalists, Shoemaker and Reese (1996: 111) compile a list of several applicable characteristics able to increase the consumer’s attention: *prominence/importance, human interest, conflict/controversy, the unusual, timeliness and proximity*.

Not all of which are relevant for the news coverage of the European Parliament. Notably, *importance* is the central news value when determining whether the extended institutional powers of the EP lead to greater media attention. Put differently, as the legislative powers of the EP grew in a wide range of policy areas over the years, especially since the introduction of the co-decision procedure with the Maastricht Treaty in 1993, this particular news value is expected to have become more relevant contributing positively to the selection of news about the EP. In the case of the SWIFT, given that the EP received the right to formally approve international agreements with the Lisbon Treaty, *importance* is expected to be a decisive factor that boosts the media coverage significantly after 1 December 2009. Before that date, the European Parliament’s legislative powers were restricted to fewer policy areas, which supposedly affected the overall perceived relevance of the institution itself. Morgan (1999) finds that in 1996 – i.e. before the Treaty of Amsterdam had been introduced and with it Co-decision II granting the European Parliament co-equal legislative powers shared with the Council (e.g. Tsebelis, 2002: 264) – the overall media attention paid to the EP was rather low in his country selection of the UK, Ireland and Belgium. A finding which is, however, still in line with those by Koopmans (2007) who states legislative and party actors at both national and EU level would generally be represented to a much lesser extent in the media than core state actors. This could be due to the news value of *prominence*, or what Luhmann (1996: 66) calls *personification*. It helps selling stories if the

readership has a 'face' in mind to (re-)identify actors, e.g. from the national context, to be linked to actions and policy decisions. The fact that MEPs are less well-known in public is supposedly linked to the weak electoral connection to their voters (cf. Hix & Hagemann, 2009). Yet, Europe's legislators have become increasingly career-oriented (Scarrow, 1997). On a highly salient issue like SWIFT they are therefore expected to actively seek media attention assuming that their main goal is to become re-elected or considered for another office (cf. Downs, 1957). This phenomenon might also contribute to the variation in coverage across country, since MEPs are elected on a national basis.

Anderson and McLeod (2004), furthermore, find obstacles for media reporting in the Parliament's own instruments of public relations. MEPs, as well as the EP press directorates, and the regional offices would not provide sufficient support for the journalists to cover the European Parliament, their members and the affected decisions adequately. Baisnee (2003) derives a lack of interest per se in the EP by the EU press corps exemplified by the changing numbers of journalistic staff registered with the institution over time. While reportedly partly due to the diverging journalistic cultures originating in the home country, other reasons would largely lie in the character of the institution itself. The nature of plenary debates is not considered supportive for media attention. Although the European parliamentary parties have become increasingly cohesive along ideological lines (Hix, Noury, & Roland, 2007) allowing for sincere political battles as opposed to mere clashes between different nationalities, due to the absence of a common work language, legislative debates appear to be rather technical predominantly serving voting procedures while lacking heated discussions and lively engagement by the members of the European Parliament (Shephard & Scully, 2002). This diminishes the potential for political contestation to be a crucial factor for newsmakers to decide whether to report from the EP or not. Occasional muscle flexing as in the case of the Santer Commission which stepped down after a threat of a no-confidence vote by Parliament in March 1999, however, has made the news value of *conflict* applicable for several times in the past. The prospective for contestation has supposedly also increased with the extension of parliament's legislative rights, allowing for clashes between the EU institutions over policy decisions. Again, in the SWIFT case, the Parliament's decision to reject the agreement on financial data exchange in February 2010 caused conflict both at the

European level as well as in the EU relationship with the United States which in turn provided reasons to report more comprehensively about the EP's position.

For journalists and correspondents writing about foreign affairs, and European politics in particular, the news value *domesticity* becomes important – understood as relevance of news for a domestic context (cf. Gleissner & de Vreese, 2005; Hafez, 2007; Hannerz, 2004; Kevin, 2003) which is closely related to Shoemaker and Reese's criterion of *proximity*. Morgan's study (1999) of the EP media coverage finds variation in tone towards the EU institution in the media suggesting this particular news value to be a relevant condition. According to Morgan, possible explanations comprise differing historic developments in each country, divergent electoral systems and benefiting positions in the EU alongside public support for EU membership. Consequently, variation in the domestic political culture should be reflected in the news coverage about the EP. The salience of the SWIFT case supposedly varies per se across countries given that the issue is divisive between the improvement of security standards to fight international terrorism and civil liberties in terms of ensuring data protection. For instance, after the terrorist attacks in London in July 2005, British citizens are expected to be more lenient to improve security standards at the expense of some privacy rights. An alternative example is the national public outrage in 2009 when Google announced to introduce its 'Street View' in Germany by publishing photographs of streets and buildings on the internet. Hence, despite the increase in EP powers, some variation in the coverage can still be expected across country.

With respect to the EP's role, the paper proposes another explanation for such a variation. It derives from the fact that correspondents, when reporting about the EU, have to consider that their audience might only have little knowledge 'since most national political systems differ from the EU system, it is problematic for the journalists to cover issues adequately. Often they see themselves simply to approach a topic from the basics.' (Gleissner and de Vreese, 2005: 229). These 'basics' supposedly represent experiences in the national context with which EU citizens are more familiar – an assumption which builds on Schmidt (2006) who argues that national conceptions of democracy and political institutions would still prevail in the heads of citizens despite on-going Europeanization processes. Specifically, Goetze and Rittberger (2010: 51) propose that the EP derives its legitimacy from existing

practices with parliamentarism at the national level since ‘a high degree of legitimacy of existing practices and procedures makes it increasingly difficult to conceive of alternative modes of democratically legitimizing the EU ‘off the beaten track’.’ Given that parliamentary systems vary across the EU, it can be assumed that the expectations towards the European Parliament differ as well which is reflected accordingly in the news coverage. That is to say that in the case of SWIFT, the European Parliament, once powerful after Lisbon, should receive more attention in countries where the national parliament is also an influential legislator measured by the strength vis-à-vis the executive since the reader is familiar with the level of parliamentary influence when salient political decisions are being taken. In countries where the executive is a powerful agenda setter facing rather weak parliaments, such as in Ireland, the UK and in France, the coverage about the EP’s involvement in the SWIFT negotiations is therefore expected to be significantly lower than in the remaining member states which are characterised by stronger legislatures (cf. Tsebelis, 2002).

In sum, while the European Parliament’s overall media coverage is assumed to have increased in the case of SWIFT over time due to the application of news values, especially those of importance and conflict, country variation might be explained by the respective national interest in the SWIFT debate and role of the national parliament in the domestic decision-making context.

### **Research design and operationalization**

The research conducted for this paper is part of a larger PhD project examining the determinants of media representations of the European Parliament. Table 1 provides an overview of the data considered for this study. Quality newspapers serve as a reliable source of news about the EP since their journalists act as opinion leaders in their national context and thus might perceive it as their duty to report frequently about the EP which provides a sufficient supply of news for analysis (cf. Bijmans & Altides, 2007; d’Haenens, 2005). At the same time, cross-media fluctuation is largely being controlled for.

[Table 1 about here]

The core dataset comprises 288 articles published in three different types of broadsheets (left-oriented, right-oriented and business focussed) in six EU countries – Ireland, the United Kingdom, France, the Netherlands, Germany and Austria – between 1 June 2006 and 30 November 2010. These articles all refer to both SWIFT and the European Parliament comprising news, comments, and interviews in national editions.<sup>2</sup> Items from newswires have been excluded.<sup>3</sup> Additionally, the second part of the data comprises 167 articles which mention SWIFT in relation to other European and/or national actors, but not to the EP. This means that the total selection represents all articles published on SWIFT in the respective newspaper selection. Thus, the main dependent variable – percentage of words dealing with the EP within each news item – ranges from 0 to 100 (see Table 2).

Table 1 already demonstrates the large variation across country with the German broadsheets, led by the Handelsblatt, contributing the largest amount of relevant articles for the analysis (137 plus 73). The Irish, followed by the British and Dutch newspapers, publish the least amount of articles in this respect. The next table provides the descriptive statistics for the dependent variable for each country considering the total case selection. Accordingly, the Irish articles internally focus the least on the EP, closely followed by the German broadsheet news, while the internal share in the French press is largest with an average of approximately 30%.

[Table 2 about here]

The prospective regression analysis does not rely on Ordinary Least Square (OLS) models but uses Tobit models instead. That way one can account for biased variation caused by the large proportion of zero observations (167) in the otherwise continuous dependent variable. The standard errors are being adjusted by newspaper, describing 17 clusters as the Sunday Business Post is missing in the sample. The Tobit coefficients can be interpreted in a similar way as those of OLS models. Yet, the latter ones are also provided in appendix producing similar results and a sufficiently large R squared.

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<sup>2</sup> For the Financial Times only articles published for the London edition have been considered, despite the large amount of relevant articles published for a European, US or Asian audience.

<sup>3</sup> Note that the Sunday Business Post has been considered, but it did not publish any article on SWIFT and the EP during that period. Its online archives and those of the Irish Examiner are currently under re-construction. A thorough follow-up search of articles published on SWIFT only before September 2007 has yet to be conducted.

The set of independent variables, which orientate themselves at publication dates, country, or newspaper, first and foremost includes a dummy variable for the Lisbon Treaty. Another time dummy measures whether the EP has debated the SWIFT issue on a given day of publication or the day before. Both these variables measure *importance*. Since the dates of the article publications hardly match with the sitting days of national parliaments debating the same issue – which is an interesting finding on its own but rather relevant for an investigation of media attention devoted to national parliaments – a continuous variable has been included that summarises the sitting days per country ranging from 0 in the case of Ireland to 22 for the German Bundestag (see Appendix). The baseline model comprises the political affiliation of the broadsheets included in this study, their circulation numbers and page size. Further controlling variables are the dummy describing whether a country held the EU Presidency at a given date conditioning a more EU-attentive national media and continuous variables of public opinion, namely trust in the national parliament, and support for EU membership building on Morgan’s (1999) assumptions. The latter has been considered elsewhere as well, without producing a significant effect on the amount of EU coverage in television news (Peter & de Vreese, 2004).<sup>4</sup> The respective descriptive statistics and correlations can be found in the appendix.

The interviews with the correspondents serve to further explain the findings from the statistical analysis increasing both the validity and reliability of the results. While the focus here is on the European Parliament, previous studies provide important information about the general work experience of correspondents in Brussels. Relevant here are the ones examining the restraints the journalists on location receive during the news production process (cf. de Vreese, 2003; Gavin, 2001; Kevin, 2003; Morgan, 1995) which particularly concern their relationship to the editor and access to sources. Table 1 includes the number of respondents per newspaper.<sup>5</sup> In total, 17 reporters have been questioned in either German or English in the form of semi-structured interviews lasting in between 25 and 70 minutes. Most of the interviewees

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<sup>4</sup> Note that the inclusion of country dummies lead to multicollinearity. All models have been run omitting countries one by one and the main independent variables remain significant except for the German exclusion, which will be explained below. The results can be obtained from the author. The appendix also shows that the number of correspondents correlates highly and significantly so with some main independent variables. Controlling for time does not make sense given that some days have several observations, while for several months there have been no observations at all.

<sup>5</sup> For the purpose of anonymity, in the remainder of the paper the correspondents are being referred to as IRE-1, IRE-2, UK-1, etc. The order does not result from the table.

were men (15), and only two female. Importantly, this quasi-fieldwork has been conducted in June 2010, i.e. before the European Parliament officially ratified the agreement on 8 July, when the three institutions were still debating, mostly informally, the new terms and conditions. Correspondents were highly attentive to the on-goings at that time being an ‘over-informed social group which is aware of every single (political) fact that happens in the EU political world’ (Baisnée, 2002: 110). The qualitative results therefore exhibit a degree of uncertainty regarding the outcome of the institutional battle and, rather than reflecting purely retrospectively on the issue, feature active experiences and topical attitudes.

## **Findings**

Following up the previous work of correspondent’s professional experience, the journalists interviewed for this study mostly claim that they are rather autonomous in Brussels. Especially the ones writing for the large broadsheets are granted a lot of space, in some cases given ‘special pages’ (NL-2) by their editor back home for their ‘daily reportage’ from the EU (GER-3). Yet, the editors are sometimes hard to convince as some ‘often think the Parliament is a sort of talking shop’ (GER-2). Austrian and Irish newspapers would be more restricted to space, and for the British interviewees, the editor has a more central role, especially since ‘the sense is that a lot of people in the UK are hostile to Europe, just not interested’ (UK-3). This could be an explanation why the British sample is rather small in this study – yet does not explain why the Austrians, which are also known for being rather hostile towards the EU, distribute more news on the EP in relation to SWIFT (see Table 1).

Regarding access to sources and information and contrary to some allegations (e.g. Anderson & McLeod, 2004), correspondents state the European Parliaments and its members would be very accessible nowadays. In fact, ‘their communications has improved out of all recognition’ as observed by an Irish correspondent who has followed the parliamentary business in Brussels and Strasbourg for a long time (IRE-1). MEPs would be, furthermore, ‘extremely interested’ (GER-3) to become cited in the national press, which can be explained by rational choice theory for the purpose of reputation and re-election. Additionally, ‘they [the Parliament’s administration] have

improved their website a lot, and the press people are very responsive' (UK-3). Given that their work is public and becomes important for the media by providing 'a platform for debate and influence' (GER-4), this might be not surprising. Gleissner and de Vreese (2005) have previously ascertained that the EP would be very transparent, as opposed to the meetings of the Council allowing 'no transparency', or the Commission which is 'very technical' in its communication (FRA-1). These are positive conditions for media reportage about the European Parliament. It remains to be seen, however, whether accessibility alone renders the institution a newsworthy institution; especially when in Brussels the European Parliament would 'compete' (IRE-2) with all other kinds of actors, institutions and events going on at the same time.

The remainder of the section firstly describes the amount of coverage the EP received when it dealt with SWIFT over time. These findings are nourished by the comments of the correspondents. Subsequently, the variation in reportage across country is being examined producing rather unexpected results which are being elaborated.

#### *Power as a determinant of EP media attention*

The SWIFT issue became the SWIFT agreement only on 30 November 2009 when the European governments decided to sign a deal with the US over the data exchange of personal information provided via bank transfers. This was one day before the Lisbon Treaty came into force, granting the EP with more comprehensive rights, such as the consent to international agreements. The European Parliament, by raising privacy concerns, debated the matter already in June 2006 when it became public that US authorities had had access to the data via the SWIFT server. At that time it did not even have co-decision rights in the field of Freedom, Security and Justice. Yet, it immediately tabled a resolution on 6 July 2006 called 'Interception of bank transfer data from the SWIFT system by the US secret services' followed by a second one on 14 February 2007 criticising both the Passenger Name Record (PNR) and SWIFT.<sup>6</sup> In

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<sup>6</sup> The PNR is closely related to the latter issue as it concerns the provision of personal data of airline passengers to US authorities.

both these resolutions, the EP explicitly demanded the respect of data protection rights.

In the following months, it got rather quiet around the SWIFT case, and the Parliament's statements did not seem to have any public effects. The media coverage in that regard was almost non-existent, despite the fact that the EP issued eight other resolutions which also mentioned SWIFT, though primarily dealt with other concerns. One of them was on the role of the European Central Bank requesting the institution to act as an overseer of the data exchange under SWIFT on 12 July 2007. Figure 1 demonstrates the media coverage of the EP's engagement with SWIFT. There was no reportage in 2008 at all. As seen in the picture, the Parliament issued another resolution on 17 September 2009 dedicated to SWIFT only, reiterating its calls for the consideration of EU citizens' data protection in the preparation of an international agreement. But it was not until the official enactment of the Lisbon Treaty, that the Parliament received more media attention.

[Figure 1 about here]

As the picture shows, in December 2009, the press started debating the stance of the EP in the negotiations. 'We saw it coming late December', states one correspondent referring to the No-vote of the Parliament in February 2010, since it eventually has got 'powers since the 1st of December [2009]' (FRA-1). That month also demonstrates the most significant peak of the media coverage. In fact, most of the other interviewees did not regard the rejection as imminent. 'We did write a bit [about the Parliament's position on SWIFT], commented on that [...] we actually thought the item would go through' (GER-3). In 2009 still, it was also not clear that the EP received the possibility to vote on the issue so soon which was due to enter into force on 1 February 2010. Hence, 'it was on news value surprise' (UK-1) and newsworthy because 'the European Parliament for the very first time and deliberately overrode an international agreement and the European Commission' (GER-1) on 11 February 2010. That is to say, that the powers of the EP at this point were actually highly decisive news factors. It was the first noteworthy decision the Parliament has taken since the expansion of its legislative rights with the Lisbon Treaty. In fact, 'it could have been anything, but they [the parliamentarians] are using it to show that you have to listen to them' (UK-2). And indeed, the correspondents interviewed here notice that

there has been a change affecting the decision-making of the European Parliament stating that ‘before it was largely a talking shop’ (IRE-1). But Lisbon would have been the ‘turning point’ (UK-3).

Clearly, this shows that the news value of *importance* applies here, as far as the SWIFT issue is concerned. In fact, it has become particularly interesting for the journalists as ‘the EP is also getting involved in international affairs for the first time’ (UK-1). Put differently, when the Parliament did not have any powers in this area which combines international security concerns with data protection, the media attention it received was rather meagre as exemplified in Figure 1. ‘The ordinary day-to-day business of legislation, of passing legislation, is significantly more procedural, process-oriented – [generating] no dramatic stories, [especially] when there is something else going on.’ (IRE-2) However, when the MEPs attained the competences by the Lisbon Treaty to influence the outcome by rejecting the interim agreement and requesting amendments to be made in order to approve it, the Parliament finally became important, i.e. newsworthy, enough as an institution to be reported comprehensively in the European quality press: ‘it matters more so it gets more coverage’ (UK-2). In that sense, its newsworthiness would comply with the general rules of thumb:

*‘It’s the same like everywhere in the world. If the Parliament is involved in the decisions, and if that is of general interest, or if makes itself visible by being particularly stupid, then it gets reported’* (GER-5)

That is to say, the while the change after Lisbon might have been swift causing a sudden rise in media reportage, the attention the EP receives is not only tied to its powers per se, but issue-dependent. ‘The topic is always decisive [for news reporting].’ (AT-1) The case of SWIFT itself is loaded with highly salient news values as it ‘is about privacy and direct consequences’ (NL-2). In that sense, the issue would be an ‘easy story to report as it relates to everybody, everybody understands’ (IRE-1). That is where the news factor of *proximity* comes into play. The other highly relevant factor, which is here closely linked to *importance*, is that of *conflict*. But contestation is here not interpreted in terms of party political battles, as a French correspondent explains:

*'SWIFT is a civil liberty problem, but wouldn't have been vetoed without the Conservatives. They felt: We are the liberal Europeans together with the other groups. In a normal parliament that would be red against blue or whatever, but on such a fundamental issue, they tend to stick together. It has a different dynamic, which makes it interesting. SWIFT was a total surprise for the Council and the Commission.'* (FRA-1)

That is to say that the institutional contestation gave the issue a different light when 'Parliament [was] flexing its new muscles' (IRE-2). As one correspondent puts it: 'Just the fact the EP takes a decision, doesn't mean I write about it [...] I get interested when the institutional balance between the Council and the EP is changing' (NL-2). In the eyes of the experts in Brussels, the European Parliament with the rejection of the SWIFT agreement demonstrated to the Council that *'we have arrived and you have to deal with us'* (IRE-1). For a German correspondent it was furthermore a struggle 'against the Commission and the Americans' (GER-2). Many therefore claim the visit by Joe Biden, the US Vice President, would have been interesting. He came to Strasbourg on 6 May 2010 to lobby the Parliament to accept the agreement at the next vote in favour of combating terrorism. However, the actual press coverage does not often refer to this event. Furthermore, sometimes, institutional battles are also subject to criticism when the European Parliament rebels as a whole against the Council:

*'I find that ridiculous and it has nothing to do with the voter mandate [...] Some decisions are not necessarily better when taken against the will of the Council [...] You and I as citizens have the right that decisions are being taken according to objective criteria and not whether the Parliament wants to prove its strength and feels treated on its toes.'* (GER-5)

Yet, another respondent claims that it would be a 'good thing, if it [the Parliament] is acting like a political institution – in the past, it was more like a decision-making machine' (NL-2). Hence, at the time of the interview, everyone was looking edgily forward to the second vote on 8 July 2010 and not certain about how the outcome would look like. Figure 1 shows another increase in press coverage just before that. Having been questioned exactly at this point in time, correspondents have expressed

mixed feelings when evaluating the EP's behaviour on SWIFT. The critics do not have a positive word to say about the legislative body in that affair. One states:

*'I hope for every EU parliamentarian who voted against it, that there will never be a terrorist attack which can be traced back to that [decision]. Everyone wanted the data exchange, but the EP has delayed it.'* (AT-1)

Put bluntly, if there is no data exchange in the future, 'then there is no added value of the Parliament' (GER-5). However, another one is disappointed about the EP's position for different reasons:

*It got strengthened by the Lisbon Treaty but it is not yet comparable to the Bundestag or the lower house in London or the like. It will give in in the end. Frankly, the parliamentarians always prance tremendously before the press. But if you look at the outcome at the end, there is nothing much left of it. [...] Just in this very moment, the negotiations going on in the background aim at the approval [of the agreement]. There is a new proposal, which takes some of [the EP's] objections into account. But the EP lets itself get under pressure and there will be an arrangement today or on Monday.* (GER-1)

Indeed, the institutions have reached a compromise and the EP approved the SWIFT agreement by 484 to 109 on 8 July 2010. One condition was the creation of an own European tracking system mirroring the TFTP in order to avoid that large bulks of data are being sent to the US in the long run. Attention has faded since. The issue has hardly been debated in public – at least until the end of November 2010 as shown in Figure 1. Meanwhile, 'the main problem persists, in that it has to stand up to the Council' (GER-2). Other obstacles become especially apparent at times of economic recession which deeply affects the print media. 'The less journalists you have here, the lower the reportage' (GER-3). That is also partly why the seat in Strasbourg would be

*'A tremendous waste of time, and money and effort. And it adds to the impression that the 'so-called Parliament' is a bit of a joke. If it is serious about reform, they should reform that.'* (UK-1)

Yet, the case study here demonstrates that when the Parliament has got the power to influence a highly salient decision at the EU level, it does indeed become serious enough to attract the public eye.

*'SWIFT definitely got a lot of attention. It's hard to say whether the EP receives more attention in general. In Strasbourg last week the press room was not that full. Months ago it was hard to find a place to sit down.'* (UK-3)

The question is whether the EP 'will be able to use the Lisbon treaty to push into its new limits of its powers' (UK-1). Other significant areas, such as foreign policy given that the EP has sought to have a say over the budget of the External Action Service, the 'supervision of economic governance' (FRA-2), or Common Agricultural Policy which now is decided upon co-equally by the Council and the EP under the ordinary legislative procedure, are thus 'worth to keep an eye on' (UK-1). Yet, the increase in policy influence is not always appreciated: 'It's bad news for efficient policy making [as it] slows down and delays.' (UK-2)

*'The Parliament is revelling a lot at the moment by always referring to Lisbon. It makes a lot of noise. It is right to do that, of course. But it is too early to evaluate its influence.'* (GER-6)

Nevertheless, as shown in the case of SWIFT, the treaty revisions bear the potential to enhance the European Parliament's visibility in the European quality press, having shown little interest beforehand even when major issues were at stake (Baisnée 2003: 96). This also enhances the chances to generate greater awareness of the European Parliament among EU citizens in the long run.

### *The role of national parliaments*

The quantitative data thus far has demonstrated that we do not only find a variation over time, in that the EP receives significantly more media coverage after 1 December 2009. Instead, the amount of coverage differs also across countries. Here, the news value of *domesticity* is a highly relevant criterion for the interpretation of the EP's conduct with regards to the SWIFT case. For example, it would have been a 'sensitive

issue' in both Germany and the Netherlands as regards data protection (NL-2). In the Dutch case, *personification* also contributed to the media attention given the nationality of the main rapporteur, Jeanine Hennis-Plasschaert:

*'It's always very nationalistic of course. So, for us it's interesting that the liberal Dutch MEP was quite active on SWIFT [...] She was the leader of the move by the Parliament not to accept the deal. It was her moment of glory.'* (NL-1)

A British correspondent provides another reason for why the domestic readership was interested in the EP's rejection of the international agreement: 'When it takes a decision that affects Brit... you know ... Europe's relations with the United States ... That's a big deal!' (UK-1) That is to say that the public in the UK takes on another perspective given the close ties of the country with the US. Yet, that does not explain the differences in the number of articles published (Table 1), let alone the net attention the EP receives as compared to other actors, institutions and decisions as demonstrated in Table 2.

By employing regression models, the paper seeks to estimate whether the assumption holds which states that the way national parliaments would (be able to) exert influence on such an issue is reflected in the news coverage. Table 3 presents the Tobit regression models for the dependent variable that describes the percentage of words allocated to the European Parliament within each article. The standard errors are clustered by newspapers (here 17). As expected, the fact that the Lisbon Treaty has come into force increases the focus on the EP significantly by more than 40 percentage points throughout models 1-5. Similarly, on days, or just after the EP held public debates in Strasbourg on the SWIFT case, the text devoted to that is prolonged by about 15%, controlling for the other factors of public opinion, EU Presidencies and newspaper characteristics. Incidentally, all of the latter effects are not statistically significant. However, the effect of the number of debates taking place concerning the SWIFT issue in the national parliament is significantly negative. That is to say that the more the national legislature got involved in the European deliberation process, the slightly less the respective articles deal with the position of the European Parliament (by about half a percentage point).

[Table 3 about here]

However, the German newspapers bias the overall sample as they report comprehensively about SWIFT and the European Parliament. Some, in fact, ‘promoted the issue from the beginning, regardless of the parliament’ (GER-5) Model 6 therefore, excludes the German newspaper articles, omitting the significant effect of parliamentary engagement at the national level. Similarly, Tables 4 and 5 provide a T-test comparing the means of the independent variable by parliament strength after the Lisbon Treaty came into force. The results – the EP receives more attention in countries where rather weak parliaments form part of the political culture – are not significant once Germany is excluded from the analysis. This could also be due to the small sample size (N= 122). Nevertheless, the hypothesis about the reflection of the national parliament’s strength in the news coverage has to be rejected at this point. But the opposite is not necessarily true either. Instead, the analysis clearly demonstrates that the EP, once granted with greater rights, has become the master of the press reportage. In fact, national parliaments’ competences in the area of pure foreign affairs – as opposed to European affairs – rarely exceed the scope of international treaty ratifications (von Beyme, 1998). In countries where the legislature is rather weak per se, the EP’s take on the issue must have been welcomed for these reasons. It has stepped in where its national counterparts were not able to offer any public scrutiny. In contrast, newspapers in countries where stronger parliaments influence salient political issues, a sense of jealousy might have caused the lower coverage of the EP in the SWIFT case. Indeed, despite the formal acknowledgement of their participation in EU policy-making by the Lisbon Treaty, national parliaments might fear to lose out in the process of further European integration (cf. Maurer & Wessels, 2001) – they have yet to define their new role (Neunreither, 2005). Here, the German broadsheets are therefore not an outlier, but represent the best example. In fact, the opposition in the Bundestag explicitly demanded more influence in negotiating SWIFT agreement. The social democrat Gerold Reichenbach claimed publicly that the involvement of the German Parliament would be ‘absolutely essential’ following the increased responsibility through the Lisbon Treaty and the judgement by the German Constitutional Court in 2009 underlining the sovereignty of the Bundestag in EU affairs (Bundestag, 22/04/2010).

Some correspondents indeed confirm the rivalry hypothesis by highlighting the (perceived) absence of some parliamentary competences at the EU level. A French

correspondent picks up on the ‘joke’ with which his British colleagues describe the European Parliament:

*‘For me, it is a ‘serious joke’. It is still improving, gaining powers, has some interesting MEPs and speakers, playing a real role, but sometimes not as serious as national parliaments, like the Bundestag, the House of Commons or Assemblée Nationale’ (FRA-2)*

This especially concerns the right of legislative initiative. The lack thereof would not render it a ‘fully-fledged parliament’ (GER1). However, the EP indirectly received this right with the Maastricht Treaty that has allowed the legislature to request the Commission to propose certain issues (Art. 138b). Furthermore, despite many national parliaments and their members holding de jure rights to introduce bills, de facto the intertwining of the majority and the government undermines this possibility with the executive normally taking the initiative in drafting legislation (Mattson, 1995: 455). Zeh (2005) even criticises the German ‘Gesetzgebungsfunktion’ (emphasis added) as misleading as the Bundestag does not *provide* legislation itself but influences legislative formulation. Parliaments in Europe, including the one in the EU political system, are merely involved in the legislative process by devising and adopting legislation as well as by scrutinising the government’s proposals (see also Norton, 2004). This misperception of parliamentarism originates in the domestic political context and extends to the European level which leads the journalists to compare parliaments in terms of strengths. It, in fact, demonstrates that national parliaments serve as a measure of the European Parliament’s legitimacy for the European media as anticipated above.

That is supposedly also why the European Parliament is being criticised for the lack of interplay between majority and opposition parties inside the parliament going as far as linking it to the democratic deficit: ‘I miss democracy in the Parliament to some extent – the democratic power games between majority and opposition, that happen far too seldom, far too seldom’ (GER-1) This underlines that the EU and especially the European Parliament would benefit in terms of public salience from more political contestation (Hix, 2008). However, institutional battles are sometimes inevitable given the setup of the EU political system in which the executive, comparably to presidential systems such as the US, does not evolve directly from the elected

parliamentary majority. While being distinct from the European parliamentary and semi-presidential democracies, these encounters, as we have seen above, can attract the press even if they are not appreciated as it would 'paralyse the political culture' (GER-2). Ironically, the Americans seem to have understood the European Parliament's role in the SWIFT decision far better than their European counterparts since they have been lobbying the European Parliament considerably. In the European press the letters by Hillary Clinton, the Secretary of State and Timothy Geithner, Secretary of the Treasury, which were sent even before the EP's vote in February, or the visit by Joe Biden have not resonated noticeably.

## **Conclusions**

By pursuing a single yet crucial case study, the paper demonstrated that the EP, once having a say in a highly salient policy area and making use of that influence as in the case of SWIFT, is indeed able to stipulate public attention mediated by the European quality press. While this not necessarily holds for other policies and decisions taken by the EP, the research reveals a potential for more media coverage when relevant news values apply to the EP's behaviour in the post-Lisbon era. Further research is required to evaluate this potential more comprehensively. Yet, the findings have positive implications for the democratic deficit debate as the media hold the important function of transmitting news and information to Europe's citizens. Hence, their reportage could potentially lead to more public awareness of the EU and its representative body. Nevertheless, the paper also found variation in media reportage across country. The main reason for that was related to the engagement by national parliaments in the SWIFT debate. As exemplified by the German case, the stronger the respective legislature, the lower the news coverage about the EP suggesting a rivalry between parliamentary institutions at different levels in the mediated public sphere. It underlines the necessity of clearly defined roles in the EU decision-making process to evade any potential contention and instead enhance co-operation which the Lisbon Treaty prescribes by the 'Protocol on the role of national parliaments in the European Union'. This is beyond the scope of this paper but provides food for thought with respect to further research.

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**Table 1: Data overview**

Newspaper	Country	Affiliation	No of correspondents	Correspondents interviewed	Articles about EP	Total by Country	Other articles	Total by Country	N
Irish Times	IRE	centre-left	1	1	9		4		<b>16</b>
Irish Examiner		centre-right	1	1	2		1		
Sunday Business Post		business/financial	0	0	0	<b>11</b>	0	<b>5</b>	
The Guardian	UK	centre-left	2/1 <sup>a</sup>	1	5		1		<b>27</b>
The Times		centre-right	1.5 <sup>b</sup>	1	1		1		
Financial Times		business/financial	4	1	11	<b>17</b>	8	<b>10</b>	
Le Monde	FRA	centre-left	4/3/2 <sup>a</sup>	1	19		13		<b>80</b>
Le Figaro		centre-right	2/1.5 <sup>ab</sup>	1	7		2		
Les Echos		business/financial	1	0	23	<b>49</b>	16	<b>31</b>	
De Volkskrant	NL	centre-left	2	0	4		3		<b>49</b>
Trouw		centre-right	2	1	10		4		
NRC Handelsblad		business/financial	2	1	12	<b>26</b>	16	<b>23</b>	
Sueddeutsche Zeitung	GER	centre-left	3/2 <sup>a</sup>	1	38		25		<b>210</b>
FAZ		centre-right	4	4	42		25		
Handelsblatt		business/financial	3	1	57	<b>137</b>	23	<b>73</b>	
Der Standard	AT	centre-left	1	0	23		16		<b>73</b>
Salzburger Nachrichten		centre-right	1	1	20		9		
WirtschaftsBlatt		business/financial	1	1	5	<b>48</b>	0	<b>25</b>	
Total				17		<b>288</b>		<b>167</b>	<b>455</b>

<sup>a</sup> The number of correspondents changed over time of the investigation (1 June 2006 – 30 November 2010), <sup>b</sup> 0.5 means that the staff is supported by a freelancer on location

**Table 2:** Descriptive statistics for dependent variable: Percentage of words about EP in article, by country

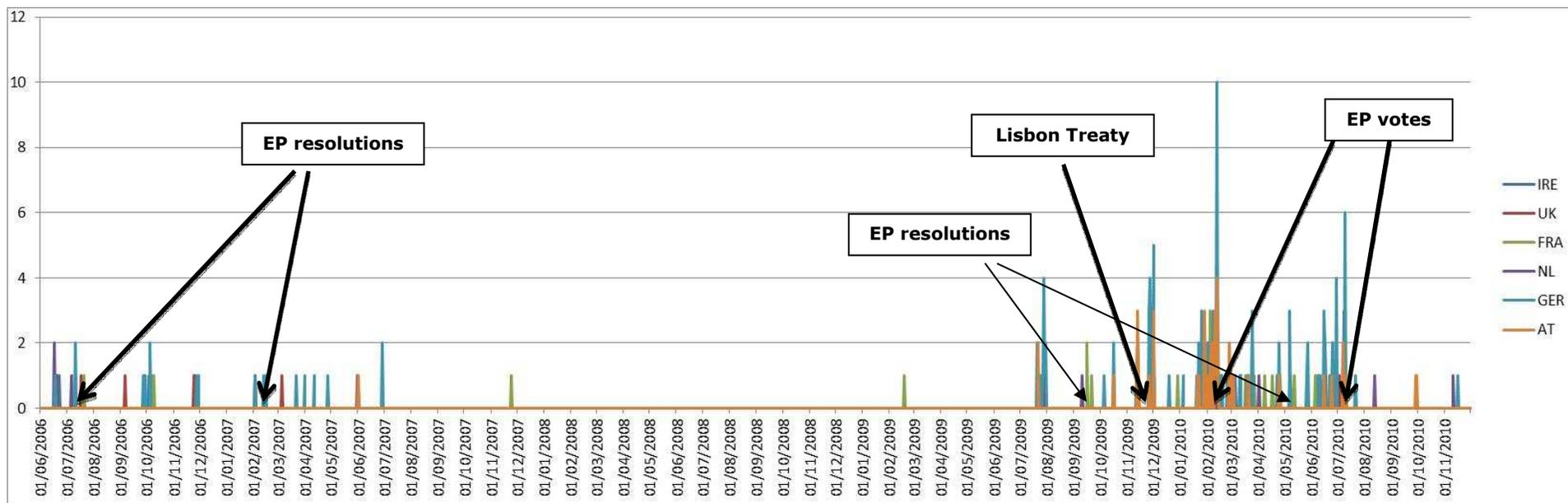
Country	Mean	N	Std.		
			Deviation	Minimum	Maximum
IRE	20.019	16	25.57615	0	72.91
UK	28.7811	27	35.80306	0	100
FRA	30.1153	80	34.63982	0	100
NL	24.415	49	28.62572	0	89.7
GER	21.5226	210	26.89278	0	100
AT	28.7144	73	30.71649	0	100
Total	24.8766	455	29.78576	0	100

**Table 3:** Tobit models, with standard errors adjusted for 17 clusters in ‘newspaper’ (14 clusters in model 6); dependent variable: Percentage of words about EP in article

	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4	Model 5	Model 6
Lisbon Treaty	42.0067*** 6.7886	41.6308*** 6.7618	41.3992*** 6.67	41.8333*** 6.7512	42.4558*** 6.1295	57.1988*** 3.5298
SWIFT debate in EP	15.0317*** 3.2049	15.0725*** 3.3045	15.1135*** 3.2794	15.0753*** 3.3155	15.1524*** 3.2333	13.3503** 5.6694
No of SWIFT debates in NatParl	-0.4498*** 0.1491	-0.5793*** 0.1878	-0.4786** 0.2103	-0.6108*** 0.2182	-0.6074*** 0.1894	-1.2606 0.8832
NP page size		0	0	0	0	0.0001
		0	0	0	0	0.0001
NP circulation		0	0	0	0	0
		0	0	0	0	0
NP left		-5.4914 3.8516	-3.3959 3.9747	-5.3941 3.7055	-5.647 3.8487	-0.6506 4.8083
NP right		-0.8773 2.6549	0.9724 3.3828	-0.7487 3.0039	-1.0982 2.6071	6.6087 4.8118
EB trust in NatParl			-0.2073 0.1979			
EB support for EU				0.064 0.181		
EU Presidency					8.9214 9.796	
Constant	-5.7306 5.5647	-0.7035 7.6751	7.3875 11.7166	-3.2773 11.0553	-2.0091 7.0885	-30.0223*** 9.9125
Sigma constant	34.8306*** 2.1978	34.7167*** 2.2301	34.7144*** 2.2545	34.7171*** 2.226	34.6711*** 2.2532	35.2338*** 2.5923
N	455	455	455	455	455	245
Pseudo R Squared	0.0490	0.0496	0.0499	0.0497	0.0499	0.0739
Country excluded	-	-	-	-	-	Germany

Legend: b/se; \* p<.1; \*\* p<.05; \*\*\* p<.01

**Figure 1:** Newspaper reporting about the EP dealing with the SWIFT case over time (01/06/2006 – 30/11/2010) and by country (N=288)



**Table 4:** Independent sample t-test;  $t = 2.880$  (equal variances assumed),  $df = 239$   $p = 0.004$ ; Post-Lisbon sample,  $N = 241$

Dep. variable	Classification	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
EP share %	Countries with weak parliaments	60	48.7433	32.58609	4.20685
	Countries with strong parliaments	181	35.5416	30.14895	2.24095

**Table 5:** Independent sample t-test;  $t = 0.822$  (equal variances assumed),  $df = 120$   $p = 0.413$ ; Post-Lisbon sample, Germany excluded,  $N = 122$

Dep. variable	Classification	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
EP share %	Countries with weak parliaments	60	48.7433	32.58609	4.20685
	Countries with strong parliaments	62	44.2169	28.15358	3.57551

**Table A.1:** Descriptive statistics for relevant variables

	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation
EP share %	455	0	100	24.8766	29.78576
No of Correspondents	455	1	4	2.3352	1.11076
No of SWIFT debates in NatParl	455	0	22	11.9516	9.51916
EB trust in NP	455	19	77	42.8242	10.10255
EB support for EU membership	455	29	79	54.2154	11.59702
NP circulation	455	38000	654000	233777.2549	1.30E+05
NP page size	455	89760	218900	148903.9187	46077.10753
Valid N (listwise)	455				

**Table A.2:** Frequencies for relevant variables

	Frequency	Percent	N
SWIFT debate in EP	99	21.8	455.0
Lisbon Treaty	241	53.0	455.0
EU Presidency	19	4.2	455.0

**Table A.3:** Bivariate correlations and p-value

	EP share %	No of SWIFT debates in NatParl	SWIFT debate in EP	Lisbon Treaty	NP page size	NP circulation	No of Correspondents	NP affiliation	EB trust in NP	EB support for EU	EU Presidency
EP share %	1										
No of SWIFT debates in NatParl	-0.1082 0.021	1									
SWIFT debate in EP	0.2895 0	0.0397 0.3987	1								
Lisbon Treaty	0.4976 0	0.0605 0.1977	0.2942 0	1							
NP page size	-0.015 0.7504	0.1743 0.0002	-0.0016 0.9734	-0.0185 0.6931	1						
NP circulation	0.024 0.6096	0.4576 0	0.0005 0.992	0.105 0.0251	0.6109 0	1					
No of Correspondents	-0.1302 0.0054	0.6014 0	-0.0297 0.5278	-0.0487 0.2998	0.2722 0	0.3973 0	1				
NP affiliation	-0.0317 0.4999	0.0834 0.0756	0.0038 0.9357	-0.0869 0.064	-0.2459 0	-0.4604 0	0.2075 0	1			
EB trust in NP	-0.0833 0.0759	0.0995 0.0339	0.0182 0.6992	-0.0679 0.1481	-0.039 0.4061	-0.222 0	-0.2417 0	-0.0705 0.1331	1		
EB support for EU	-0.1238 0.0082	0.3673 0	-0.0245 0.6019	-0.1478 0.0016	0.356 0	0.1837 0.0001	0.1671 0.0003	0.1167 0.0127	0.2151 0	1	
EU Presidency	-0.0945 0.0438	0.0715 0.1275	-0.0835 0.0753	-0.2215 0	-0.1479 0.0016	-0.0948 0.0432	0.0261 0.5793	0.0456 0.3315	0.0537 0.2528	-0.038 0.4184	1

**Table A.4:** Regression models, with standard errors adjusted for 17 clusters in ‘newspaper’ (14 clusters in model 6); dependent variable: Percentage of words about EP in article

	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4	Model 5	Model 6
Lisbon Treaty	42.0067***	26.8883***	26.8208***	26.8975***	27.4337***	35.2377***
	6.7886	3.3426	3.3643	3.3132	3.0034	2.8461
SWIFT debate in EP	15.0317***	11.6415***	11.6551***	11.6412***	11.7159***	10.7306**
	3.2049	2.7655	2.7547	2.7665	2.7183	4.7677
No of SWIFT debates in NatParl	-0.4498***	-0.6171***	-0.5956***	-0.6185***	-0.6358***	-0.5559
	0.1491	0.1221	0.1255	0.1395	0.124	0.5396
NP page size		0	0	0	0	0
		0	0	0	0	0
NP circulation		0.0000*	0.0000*	0.0000*	0.0000*	0
		0	0	0	0	0
NP left		-4.7329***	-4.2803**	-4.7255**	-4.9015***	-2.5537
		1.4925	1.7885	1.6292	1.499	2.6532
NP right		-0.0795	0.3085	-0.0708	-0.2807	2.9162
		1.5764	1.885	1.7281	1.5304	2.785
EB trust in NatParl			-0.0479			
			0.126			
EB support for EU				0.0031		
				0.1021		
EU Presidency					5.9537	
					4.5745	
Constant	13.1897***	13.8852***	15.7496**	13.7624**	12.9184***	-0.3064
	2.3352	3.6979	7.2599	5.097	3.3805	5.4347
N	455	455	455	455	455	245
R Squared	0.2855	0.2858	0.2844	0.2842	0.2857	0.3558

Legend: b/se; \* p<.1; \*\* p<.05; \*\*\* p<.01