The European Public Sphere
From Critical Thinking to Responsible Action

Luciano MORGANTI & Léonce BEKEMANS (eds.)
With the support of LifeLong Learning Programme of the European Commission, ECREA, and the logistic support of the Committee of the Regions.

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© P.I.E. PETER LANG s.a.
Éditions scientifiques internationales
Brussels, 2012
1 avenue Maurice, B-1050 Brussels, Belgium
www.peterlang.com; info@peterlang.com

Printed in Germany

ISSN 1376-0904
D/2012/5678/90

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

CIP also available from the British Library, GB

Bibliographic information published by “Die Deutsche Nationalbibliothek”
“Die Deutsche Nationalbibliothek” lists this publication in the “Deutsche Nationalbibliografie”, detailed bibliographic data is available on the Internet at <http://dnb.d-nb.de>. 
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Foreword

European Communication Scholars,
European Public Sphere

The European Public Sphere is at the junction of numerous facets of communication science. It’s no wonder that the conference behind this publication involved three different thematic sections of ECREA (International and Intercultural Communication, Journalism Studies and Communication Law and Policy). It shows how communication science approaches complex objects by mobilising multidisciplinary tools and competences. It is also a sure sign that communication is not so much a discipline as it is a specific, multifaceted view on issues and topics, which involve communication phenomena.

ECREA is an academic association, grouping nearly 3,000 scholars from across Europe and beyond. Its membership and structure reflects the diversity of communication scholarship. The academic background of its members is varied – they join ECREA because they recognise themselves as doing “communication research”, regardless of whether they hold a degree in communications or not. ECREA thus combines at least three levels of diversity: objects studied, disciplines and methods used and national backgrounds with their corresponding academic traditions.

In many ways, ECREA forms a sort of European academic public sphere in its own right. It is a rallying structure for scholars who feel they share common goals, practices and methods. It is a forum to exchange and debate, offer and demand. It is a venue to meet and create, to build and consolidate, to expose and disseminate. ECREA has developed structures, rules, procedures and artefacts to give life to this public sphere and to enable and stimulate all those activities. When ECREA became involved in the conference and its ensuing book, it was, in a way, one public sphere looking into another.

The kind involvement of the Committee of the Regions is also significant. Policymaking circles are a paradox. They are, in essence, seeking out every relevant fact, information, even educated guess, that can guide them to serve their aims. At the same time, they are very hard to penetrate for those who believe they should be heard. Policy-makers and scholars live in adjacent worlds, in parallel universes. Both have high interest in, but are also suspicious of the other. Both are peeking...
above the fence, but keeping on their own side unless summoned by the other. So when a university (VUB), a learned society (ECREA) and a major European institution (the Committee of the Regions) join forces to reflect on the European Public Sphere, one can only be delighted that a door has opened in that fence; that a tendril is growing between these two worlds that have so much to share and so few opportunities to do so.

This publication is the materialisation of an outstanding occurrence; a joint effort by academic and policy-making circles to discuss and reflect upon a topic which lies at the heart of current societal crisis – that of the concept and the reality of a European Public Sphere.

François Heinderyckx

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