

# Invisible Forum? The Public Outreach of the Asia-Europe Meeting (ASEM)

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## Abstract

Contributing to the wider field of studies of international communication strategies by major international fora, this study investigates a scholarly vacuum – the role of visibility in the Asia-Europe Meeting (ASEM). A novelty of this inquiry is that it is carried out on endogenous (*i.e.* deriving internally in ASEM) and exogenous (*i.e.* originating externally to ASEM) levels. Addressing the former perspective, this paper examines ASEM's official discourse and its vision of the role of visibility. Addressing the latter, exogenous perspective, the paper explores a rarely addressed dimension in ASEM studies, namely personal perceptions of the forum among Asian national elites (the opinions expressed by representatives of political, business, media and civil society circles in Japan, China, South Korea, Singapore and Thailand). The main rationale is to assess whether the degree of ASEM's visibility positively correlates to the direct involvement of the stakeholders into or to the achievement of the process. Positing its inquiry within a social constructivist perspective, this article argues that, instead of being conceptualised as the end-goal, visibility should be understood as an element in the construction of the Asia-Europe relations under the ASEM framework.

## Keywords

ASEM; Media; Perceptions

ACCORDING TO THE UNITED NATIONS, THE INTERNATIONAL COMMUNITY IS suffering from “summit fatigue”:

The number of meetings held under the auspices of the various intergovernmental organs has increased dramatically over the years. (...) It must now be clear to everyone that the international agenda has become overloaded with such meetings. Summit fatigue has set in, both among the general public and in many Governments (UNGA 2002, 9).

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This constant stream of top-level meetings<sup>1</sup> creates competition between the summits – over the availability of the heads of state/government, legitimacy, as well as media and public attention and recognition. Undeniably, these elements are intertwined: a summit with higher attendance is more representative and hence more legitimate; a summit which gathers more states, especially the ‘heavyweights’, attracts more media and public attention.

Unsurprisingly, in the global ‘pageant’ of summits, international forums often prioritise ‘PR’, media coverage and public recognition – predictable communication strategies in a heavily mediated international reality. The literature exploring such strategies generally focuses on a limited number of issues, such as how the public is informed by government agencies; how benefits are explained to the citizens; and finally, how the communication skills of civil servants can be improved (including how to use the media and work with media representatives in the most effective way) (Wilson 2009: 478-87).

The Asia-Europe Meeting (ASEM) is one international forum that assigns a strong priority to its communication strategy. Rather than confronting its reputation as a “talk shop” (Yeo 2003: 1; ASEM6, online) or addressing high absentee rates among the heads of state/government, the current focus is on increasing media visibility and public awareness. Contributing to the wider field of studies of international communication strategies by major international fora, this study investigates a scholarly vacuum – the role of visibility in ASEM. Positing its inquiry within a social constructive perspective, this article argues that instead of being conceptualised as the end-goal, visibility should be understood as an element in the construction of the Asia-Europe relations under the ASEM framework. The leading assumption is that seeking more visibility just for the sake of visibility is counterproductive to the summit’s success.

The tenth anniversary case study (when visibility was recognised as a key issue) chosen for this ASEM analysis is particularly representative of this relatively young forum (established in 1996). Comprising of 27 European Union (EU) member states, 19 Asian-Pacific states and two inter-regional organisations (the European Commission and the ASEAN Secretariat),<sup>2</sup> ASEM now represents almost 60 per cent of the world’s population, 60 per cent of the world’s total trade and 50 per cent of the world’s GDP (ASEM8 2010 online). This particular subject is analysed to further our understanding of international communications, international relations and diplomacy. Importantly, ASEM symbolises a new type of international interaction – a unique non-institutionalised inter-regional dialogue involving both nation-states and regional organisations and with a multi-sector comprehensive agenda. Despite being summit-driven, ASEM has established various additional levels of dialogue – not only between senior officials and ministers, but also inter-regional exchanges between parliamentarians, scholars, artists, business leaders, religious leaders, and students. It has also introduced mechanisms to support cooperation in intra- or inter-regional projects, such as the construction of railway networks, the Investment Promotion Action Plan, or the Trade Facilitation Action Plan.

However, for a summit-driven process, getting older and larger does not automatically mean increased legitimacy and recognition. A number of commentators have warned that ASEM is

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<sup>1</sup> To name just a few, United Nations General Assembly (UNGA), UN Conference on Climate Change, G8, G20, Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC), Asia-Europe Meeting (ASEM), ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF), US-China summit, EU-Russia summit.

<sup>2</sup> The initial ASEM partnership consisted of 15 EU member states and 7 ASEAN member states plus China, Japan, South Korea and the European Commission. ASEM’s first enlargement took place at its Fifth Summit in 2004 in Hanoi, where the ten new EU member states (Cyprus, Czech Republic, Estonia, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Malta, Poland, Slovakia and Slovenia) and three new ASEAN countries (Cambodia, Laos and Myanmar) became official members of the process. The subsequent round of enlargement in 2007 brought in Bulgaria, India, Mongolia, Pakistan, Romania and the ASEAN Secretariat. ASEM8 in October 2010 in Brussels welcomed Australia, New Zealand and Russia.

in danger of becoming increasingly irrelevant, overshadowed by bilateral relations and new arrangements (e.g. G20) (Islam *et al.* 2010: 2; JCIE *et al.* 2006: 7). As one solution to this problem, ASEM has sought to increase its visibility and public awareness. Indeed, the 7<sup>th</sup> ASEM Foreign Ministers Meeting (May 2005) (reported to the Heads of State and Government at the 6<sup>th</sup> ASEM Summit) frankly expressed serious concerns about the forum's profile, asserting that ASEM was clearly not visible enough: not only was the general public uniformly unaware of it, but its main stakeholders (namely business community, civil society, and parliamentarians) were not actively involved in or aware of the process (University of Helsinki Network for European Studies 2006; JCIE 2006).

Consequently, the 2006 Helsinki summit agreed that low visibility was an obstacle for ASEM's successful outreach for the coming decade and in its *Declaration of the Future* highlighted the need to increase the forum's presence and the public's awareness of it and devised a series of guidelines on how to improve ASEM visibility. In particular, Annex III of the Declaration on *Visibility, public awareness, and links with stakeholders* listed four recommendations (ASEM 2006, Annex III). Since then, several initiatives have been launched in order to define ASEM's public image and improve its visibility (including media visibility) amongst both the general public and targeted stakeholders.<sup>3</sup> The leaders tasked the Asia Europe Foundation (ASEF) to enhance ASEM's visibility (ASEM6 Chairman's Statement 2006, para. 34). In addition, Chair's Statements of ASEM7 and ASEM8 continued to call for more visibility (CS7 2008: para. 41 and 45; CS8 2010: para. 82, 83 and 84).

However, a series of public and elite surveys conducted in 12 Asian countries in 2007-2010 (within the "The EU in the Eyes of Asia-Pacific" project)<sup>4</sup> indicated that these efforts had failed to increase ASEM's public awareness (for example, 95 per cent of respondents in the Philippines reported they were unaware of ASEM, 93 per cent in Macau SAR, 88 per cent in Malaysia, 85 per cent in Indonesia, and 77 per cent in India). Given the present institutional capacity of ASEM, its activities can realistically reach only a limited number of people (mostly 'elites') from the two regions. Thus, taking these public views as contextual backgrounds, this analysis focuses on the findings of the 'elite' survey in Asia. In particular, this study examines perceptions towards ASEM among four different groups of Asian national decision-makers (political, business, media and civil society). The main rationale is to assess whether the degree of ASEM's visibility positively correlates to the direct involvement of the stakeholders into or to the achievements of the process.

Social constructivism is used in this analysis to conceptualise the role of visibility in an international forum (ASEM in our case). In contrast to the realist perspective that gives states the central role on the international stage, social constructivism hypothesises that all

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<sup>3</sup> For its part, the European Commission (EC) sponsored a series of studies and workshops on ASEM image and visibility by involving national staff from the Foreign Ministries working on ASEM (*i.e.* the "Scoping Studies on Enhancing the Visibility of ASEM" presented in 2006 and the Asia-Europe Meeting Visibility/Communication Strategy Workshop "In Search for ASEM", held in Brussels 13-14 December 2007). Outcomes have taken the shape of an "ASEM Visibility Toolkit" recently distributed to all European staff working on ASEM (European Commission 2009a). During ASEM7, the leaders also endorsed an initiative on "Coordinating Cultural Activities for the Enhancement of ASEM Visibility" by senior officials. Besides, prior to ASEM8, the EC created a visibility support project to prepare and disseminate written materials about ASEM to media organisations, 'think tanks', academia, as well as other relevant organisations and individuals.

<sup>4</sup> The trans-national comparative project "The EU in the Eyes of Asia-Pacific" (2002 – on going) studies external images of the EU and ASEM in the news media, and perceptions of the EU among general public and national 'elites'. In 2010, the project has been conducted in 12 Asian locations (Japan, South Korea, mainland China, Hong Kong SAR, Macau SAR, India, Singapore, Thailand, Malaysia, Vietnam, Indonesia, and the Philippines), two Australasian states (Australia and New Zealand), five Pacific nations (Fiji, Papua New Guinea, Samoa, the Solomon Islands, and the Cook Islands), and two African locations (Kenya and the Republic of South Africa). The project is conducted by the National Centre for Research on Europe, University of Canterbury, New Zealand (Holland *et al.* 2007; Chaban and Holland 2008; Chaban *et al.* 2009; Holland and Chaban 2010). For more information on the project see [www.euperceptions.canterbury.ac.nz](http://www.euperceptions.canterbury.ac.nz).

actors who exert influence on the construction of identity are relevant (Wendt 1992). Importantly, in ASEM, a variety of state and non-state actors are involved (albeit to different degrees). Secondly, constructivism emphasises the importance of both normative and material structures. In particular, a central role is assigned to the notion of 'identity', which is shaped by both ideas and material structures, and which informs the interests (and thus the actions) of actors (Reus-Smit 2001: 219). With inter-subjectivity believed to constitute ASEM agents and structures, their identities in the international realm are seen as being formed and re-formed continuously. According to Wendt (1992: 406), "[it] is through reciprocal interaction that we create and instantiate the relatively enduring social structures in terms of which we define our identities and interests". Finally, citing an absence of comprehensive information and lack of rationality of states as actors, social constructivists argue that an evaluation of costs and benefits rests on cognitive factors (Wendt 1992; 1998): thus, past experience and ideas of ASEM participants at all levels are assumed to help shape perceptions of the forum's utility. In summary, constructivism helps demonstrate how the intangible (or non-material) factors of the ASEM process influence the participants, especially non-state actors.

This analysis proceeds with an overview of the methodology, followed by an examination of the role of visibility as described in ASEM's official discourses. The analysis then compares the perceptions of and attitudes towards ASEM identified among the four 'elite' cohorts from five leading Asian ASEM members: China, Japan, South Korea, Singapore and Thailand. The concluding discussion explores whether there is a positive correlation between the visibility of the summit in terms of perceptions of its effectiveness and legitimacy and the involvement of 'elites' in the process. Finally, a number of policy recommendations are proposed to ASEM (and other similar international fora) for raising visibility and increasing the direct involvement of stakeholders.

## Methodology

A methodological novelty in this analysis is that it has been carried out on both *endogenous* (deriving internally in ASEM) and *exogenous* (originating externally to ASEM) levels. Addressing the former perspective, ASEM's official discourse on visibility (and specifically its vision of the role of the media in raising its visibility) is examined. In this respect, the study analyses the texts of working documents, as well as responses to the face-to-face in-depth interview<sup>5</sup> with a key informant from the Public Affairs Department of the Asia-Europe Foundation (ASEF), the sole ASEM institution involved in promoting the process. The Public Affairs Department plays a key outreach role: the Department acts as the official face of ASEF in dealing with the diplomatic services and VIPs, and it also administers the ASEM "Infoboard", the official online platform of information on ASEM (<http://www.aseminfoboard.org/>). Since 2006, the ASEM Infoboard has been recognised as its main public interface on the web, significantly improving access to ASEM-related information on the Internet.

Addressing the *exogenous* perspective, a rarely addressed dimension in ASEM studies (as well as in the studies of any other international fora) is explored, the personal perceptions of the forum from Asian national 'elites'. The *elites* were defined in this analysis as active members of their national societies, with positions of responsibility and with the power to

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<sup>5</sup> The interview took place on 9 December 2009 in Singapore at the ASEF headquarters. The interviewee has a ten-year working experience in the Department and currently occupies a senior position in it.

exercise influence in their respective field (an approach supported by Wright Mills, Ferdinand Lundeborg as cited in Carlton 2006).<sup>6</sup>

The perceptions were solicited in the course of individual semi-structured face-to-face interviews with representatives of political, business, media and civil society circles.<sup>7</sup> Political elites were chosen for this analysis, since in its core ASEM is a political project involving mainly politicians. The business cohort was chosen since the business community are considered to be key stakeholders and officially participate in the forum. The ASEM agenda is typically dominated by economic and trade matters, stressing the promotion of inter-regional trade and investment. With a majority of the forum's initiatives targeting economic relations, it could be seen as just another reflection of the economy-oriented relationship between Asia and Europe. Additionally, some Asian ASEM countries are reluctant to talk about politics, fearing criticism of their domestic records on human rights and democracy (Gaens 2006: 86; Maull and Okfen 2003: 243); thus, the dominance of economic interactions prevails. Apart from the political and economic pillars, ASEM also has a 'social-cultural' pillar and the study therefore involved members of civil society (among those, representatives of NGOs, academia, think-tanks and trade unions). In contrast to the three groups described above, media representatives had not been actively targeted in the first decade of ASEM's activities. This cohort was not mentioned in any of the official documents and while involved solely in two early ASEM activities (the first and second ASEM Editors' Roundtables in 1997 and 2000 respectively), it was not until 2006 that the ASEM Editors' Roundtables became a regular event held in the week before the biennial summit. The 2007 in-depth interviews focused on five leading Asian ASEM members: China (interviews conducted in Shanghai and Hong Kong SAR), Japan (Tokyo), South Korea (Seoul), Singapore and Thailand (Bangkok). In total, 171 interviews were conducted to assess the elites' perceptions of the EU in general and ASEM in particular (Table 1).

**Table 1:** Interviewed elites

	Business	Political	Civil Society	Media	Total
China (Shanghai)	8	8	8	8	32
China (Hong Kong)	6	9	8	8	31
Japan	8	8	8	8	32
South Korea	4	7	7	9	27
Singapore	8	8	8	8	32
Thailand	6	4	3	4	17

<sup>6</sup> An alternative understanding of the concept 'elites' asserts that power is possessed by the society as a whole and that "society is made of many elite, educational elite, political elite and so on, which despite their difference function in complementary ways in order to sustain society" (Dahl, Bell in Carlton 2006, p. 7).

<sup>7</sup> The *business elite* were identified as members of national business roundtables, Chambers of Commerce, and other official business networks, and leading exporters to the EU; the *political elite* were identified as primary political actors, with a primary focus on current members of national parliaments representing different parties and a secondary focus on government officials and servants; the *civil society elite* were identified as representatives of various non-governmental organisations and non-state actors (both of international and local status). The *media elite* were identified as "international, political and business editors, editors-in-chief, television news broadcast producers and both key locally- and Europe-based correspondents of the media outlets that were established as the national leaders in the EU coverage" (National Centre for Research on Europe 2008).

<b>Total</b>	40	44	42	45	171
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All questionnaires were administered in local languages by native speakers aware of cultural protocols. Within a number of broader EU-related questions, participants were asked further questions on how they perceived ASEM's importance and effectiveness in the context of their country's relations with the EU. In a section that specifically addressed the interviewee's perceptions of 'special issues', such as the EU's enlargement or the impact of the Euro as an international currency, two questions were dedicated to the ASEM process, namely *How would you describe the impact of the ASEM process on interactions between the EU and your country?*; and a follow-up question, *Last year [2006], there was an ASEM meeting in Helsinki in September. How would you describe the effect of that meeting on your country?* The media questionnaire also contained a series of questions dedicated to news production practices in relation to the EU and ASEM.

This study focuses on a particular time period, *i.e.* 2006, which was the 10<sup>th</sup> anniversary of ASEM and the time when visibility was recognised as a key issue. This timeframe was instrumental in narrowing the data for this analysis. The project interviews in Japan, China, South Korea, Singapore and Thailand were conducted in 2007 and were conceptualised as an immediate follow-up of a benchmark summit. The selection of case studies provides a valid sample to pinpoint regional commonalities and differences – all countries in the sample are among Asia's main political and economic players, representing North and East Asia. Importantly, this study does not attempt to compare the elite perceptions across national lines (a possible topic for a follow-up analysis), but focuses its inquiry on differences in views between the four cohorts of ASEM stakeholders (a research perspective instrumental in tracing correlation between ASEM's visibility and the direct involvement of the stakeholders into the achievements of the process).

### **ASEM: architecture and visibility**

A key motivation behind ASEM's creation was to establish a 'missing link' in the triadic relations between the global economic hubs: North America, Europe and East Asia (May 2005: 38, 43; Hånggi 1999). The Asian side expected ASEM to facilitate Asia's access to the 'fortress Europe' markets after the completion of the Single European Market in 1992, diversify its economic and diplomatic partners, and attract the rather inward-looking EU. The European side sought to access the booming East Asian economies and prevent its own marginalisation on the international stage. ASEM was also expected to secure the United States' commitment to multilateralism. Yet, despite these promising initial expectations for the last 15 years, ASEM has been consistently accused of lacking concrete achievements and being a mere 'talk-shop'.

The process is driven by the biennial summits, which gather heads of state/government from Asia and Europe.<sup>8</sup> At each summit, leaders set the pace and direction of the whole ASEM process for the following two years. Between summits, ministers and senior officials across various policy fields meet and carry out instructions from the summit. Foreign Ministers, Financial Ministers and Economic Ministers meet at least once every two years (although the Economic Ministers' Meeting has been suspended since 2005), whilst ministers for other

<sup>8</sup> The first ASEM was held in Bangkok on 1-2 March 1996; ASEM2 was held in London on 3-4 April 1998; ASEM3 was held in Seoul on 20-21 October 2000; ASEM4 was held in Copenhagen on 22-24 September 2002; ASEM5 was held in Hanoi on 8-9 October 2004; ASEM6 was held in Helsinki on 10-11 September 2006; ASEM7 was held in Beijing on 24-25 October 2008; ASEM8 was held in Brussels on 4-5 October 2010; ASEM9 will be held in Laos in 2012.

policy areas meet according to the decisions of the summits. Senior officials meet prior to the ministerial meetings of their relevant policy area. ASEM partners can initiate joint projects at all levels of these meetings.

Due to its informality and multi-dimensionality, leaders from the two regions are free to adjust summit agendas. Consequently, these top-level meetings feature an impressive range of topics – from security and trade to environmental protection and people-to-people contacts – and ASEM is more attuned to the changing situation in the world than other bilateral or multilateral fora, which often focus on a single area. However, this informality, as well as the absence of a permanent coordinating body, triggers ASEM's ubiquitous reputation as a 'talk-shop'. Even though most initiatives are raised during the summits, the process is more than the meetings among the government officials (those are grouped as "Track 1" ASEM events). Importantly, ASEM has established a semi-official "Track 2" for events among non-state actors as well as the general public in the two regions. The Asia-Europe Foundation (ASEF), ASEM's only institution, is mandated to oversee Track 2 activities.<sup>9</sup> Besides, business leaders have been brought together during the Asia-Europe Business Forum (AEBF) since 1996; Members of Parliament were gathered under the Asia Europe Parliamentary Partnership Meeting (ASEP) in 1996, 2002 and 2004. Outside the official tracks, civil society has organised its own biennial meetings parallel to the ASEM summit since 1996 - the Asia-Europe People's Forum (AEPF).

Despite the popular potential of this multi-level set-up, both sides of the process admit that ASEM remains elitist. For Asia, ASEM is "mostly the concern of officials and leaders, and not so much the concern of the average citizen" (Thailand in JCIE 2006: 144). The 2001 *Vademecum* for ASEM issued by the European Commission realistically described the ASEM process as a "top-down dialogue among leaders and warned that despite 'bringing together leaders of nearly half of mankind and world gross national product, the ASEM process is not well-known to the public'" (EC 2001: 8). The findings of the 2006 public survey under the auspices of "The EU through the Eyes of Asia-Pacific" research project in the five Asian countries chosen for this analysis confirmed these views: around two-thirds of the general public respondents were either not aware of ASEM's existence or did not pay attention to it (Holland *et al.* 2007).

The need to reach out to the public effectively has been repeatedly stressed in various ASEM documents. For example, the need to include the people can be found in all Summit Chairman's Statements (CS1 1996: para. 4 and 17; CS2 1998: para. 3 and 20; CS3 2000: para. 15 and 17; CS4 2002: 2; CS5 2004: para. 3.1 and 3.6; CS6 2006: para. 2, 32 and 34; CS7 2008: para. 9 and 33; CS8 2010: 18-20). The 2001 *Vademecum* called for joint efforts between European and Asian partners to "make ASEM better known to the general public" (EC 2001: 8) noting that for a more mature process, a "bottom-up approach should be given more importance and weight" (*Ibid.*).

The interview with a key informant from the ASEF Public Affairs Departments assisted in identifying a number of issues surrounding ASEM's current low visibility. It was stressed that the very nature of the ASEM process – informality and complexity – are the most powerful challenges to the forum's visibility. The informant noted that, within the ASEM process, "there is no one with a master plan"; as a result, "the process may not immediately lend itself to visibility". In raising ASEM's profile, a special role was assigned by the interviewee to the mass media. Taking ASEM's need to increase its visibility *a priori*, the key informant underlined difficulties in attracting media attention to ASEM and ASEF initiatives. First, it was noted that ASEF has not been given the necessary resources and/or mandates to act as a 'media centre' for ASEM. Second, among the limitations and constraints to raise ASEM's

<sup>9</sup> For more information, see [www.asef.org](http://www.asef.org).

visibility, the interviewee listed the “need to understand the background and the climate of the media industry”. The interviewee was realistic in admitting that many worthy initiatives were “not news breaking” and that “the media don’t have the kind of capacity in terms of resources and time to check, to think about things, to [dig] deep anymore. And for a process like ASEM, which does not instantly give you that kind of instant results, it is quite quick to say ‘it is useless’”. Third, the official statements released to the media do not necessarily offer a deep analysis of the Summits and their outcomes; the ASEM Summit Chairman’s Statements and Political Statements circulated to the media were given as an example. To address this information gap and attract newsmakers’ attention to topical issues, ASEF organises colloquia, seminars and roundtables specifically targeting senior editors and leading journalists. One of ASEF’s objectives during these meetings is to encourage news writers to go beyond a parochial agenda in reporting on ASEM. ASEF also facilitates channelling the outcomes of these meetings into higher level recommendations, for instance, the implementation of the ASEF Journalism Colloquium in the fourth ASEM Interfaith Dialogue in 2008 (4<sup>th</sup> ASEM Interfaith Dialogue 2008; 6<sup>th</sup> ASEM Journalists’ Colloquium 2008).

Yet another challenge is the idiosyncratic way in which ASEM is promoted (*i.e.* depending on the country hosting an ASEM event, be it a summit, a ministerial meeting or journalists’ workshop). Indeed, those countries hosting an ASEM event are exclusively responsible for media relations, which makes the visibility of the process dependent on the host country’s attitude towards, and relationship with, the local media. For example, the ASEM Interfaith Dialogue, which started in 2005 and is hosted annually by a different ASEM country, has a standard format, yet the way in which this annual talk is organised and publicised can be very different. While some hosts invite various types of participants, from national-based non-governmental organisations to international organisations to national and regional officials, and extensively involve the media, others organise a low profile meeting.

A final challenge is the “various level(s) of conflict with the media within the ASEM framework”. For example, the summits of Foreign Ministers compared with the summits of Financial Ministers do not feature the same relationship with the media, the latter attracting less media coverage and attention (the financial crisis of 2008 notwithstanding). The underlying issue here, however, is whether ASEM itself actually wants all its outcomes to be reported in the media.

### **ASEM and its stakeholders: exogenous perspectives**

Analysing the major trends within Asian ‘elite’ opinion of and attitudes towards ASEM, this section begins by assessing the level of awareness. Revealingly, 71.6 per cent of respondents were not aware of the 6<sup>th</sup> Summit. Of the four cohorts, politicians were the most aware (52.3 per cent of the political sample). Business and civil society respondents were significantly less aware (27.5 per cent and 20.2 per cent of their respective samples), while only 19 per cent of all media respondents interviewed were aware of ASEM6. Arguably, this finding not only illustrates the failure of ASEM to reach its stakeholders outside the political realm, but highlights that regional media opinion-makers remain the most ignorant of the process. Responses to the question were further categorised along a simple continuum of attitudes towards ASEM, namely *positive*, *uncertain* or *negative* with more nuanced sub-categories then identified (four sub-categories each for the *positive* and *negative* categories, and three for *uncertain*) (Table 2). The frequencies of the responses were then coded and given a numerical value in order to compare the attitudes across the cohorts and issues identified (Figures 1, 2 and 3).

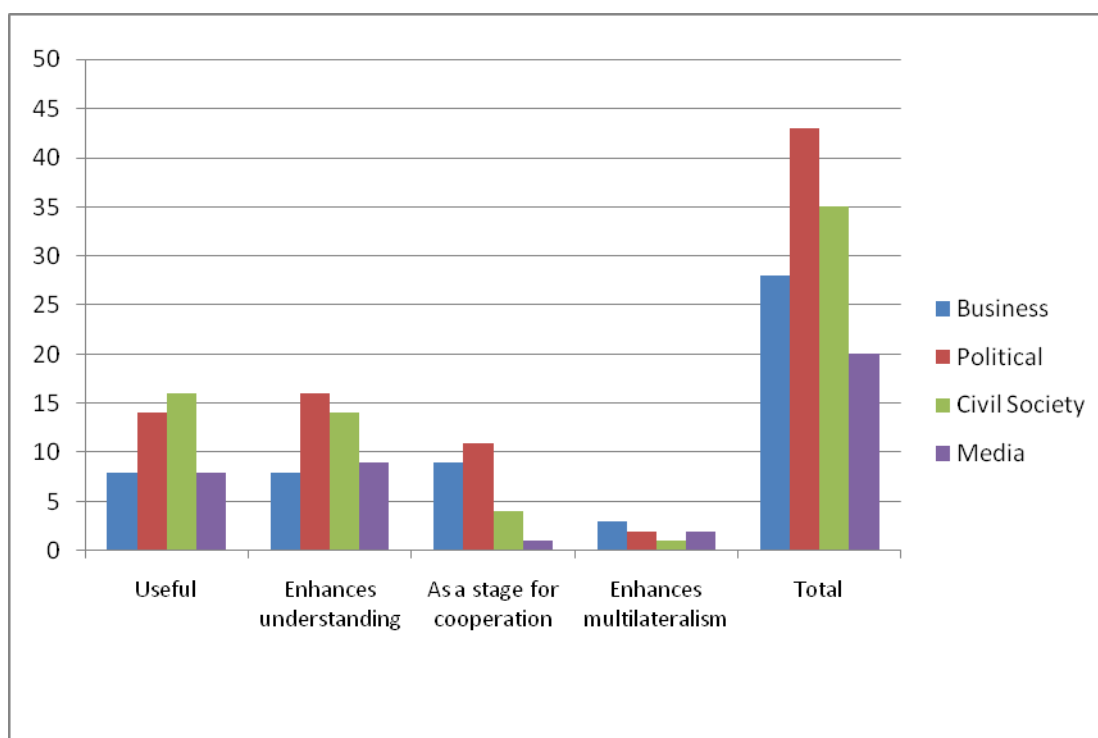


**Table 2:** Categories and sub-categories of elites' attitudes towards ASEM

Category	Negative	Uncertain	Positive
Sub-categories	Useless	Don't know	Useful
	No substantial impact	No impression	Enhances good relations and communication
	Impact is overestimated	Not familiar with ASEM	A stage for political and economical cooperation
	My country is insufficiently active in ASEM		Enhances multilateralism

Numerical coding of the responses according to the expressed attitudes allowed identification of the most typical responses in each sub-category and distribution of dominant attitudes among the cohorts. The coding revealed that in the *positive* category (Figure 1), *media* elites were the least positive. In contrast, *political* elites were the most enthusiastic about ASEM of the four cohorts. Owing to the inter-governmental nature of the ASEM process, its meetings and official events tend to involve people working for national governments more than those from other fields. As a result, the national political elites interviewed appeared to be more familiar with and supportive of the ASEM process.

**Figure 1:** Distribution of responses in the *positive* category of ASEM perceptions

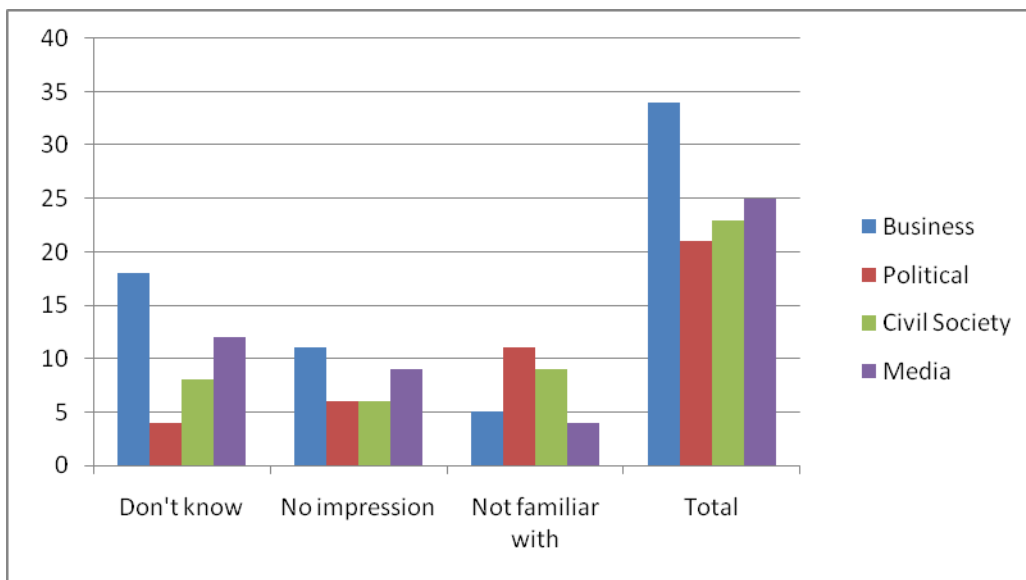


The most typical positive responses profiled the forum as a useful event enhancing understanding between the participants. In contrast, visions of ASEM's contribution to the creation of a multilateral world were the least frequently mentioned. The stakeholders

appeared to understand well that ASEM has yet to be successful in providing ‘multilateral utility’.<sup>10</sup> It is also interesting to note that positive perceptions of ASEM by *political* elites were the most reflective of ASEM’s peculiarities, while the comments by *business* and *media* respondents were rather generic (*i.e.* suitable to describe any existing international forum).

Turning to the *uncertain* category, it was *business* respondents who were found to be the most unsure about the ASEM process and its benefits to them and their countries, with *media* representatives following (Figure 2). The most frequent response among business people was “I haven’t paid attention to that meeting”. Notably, in ASEM, the participation of the business community was officially more welcomed and encouraged, especially when compared with that of the civil society (Gilson 2005: 315-317). However, none of the interviewed business leaders had attended any ASEM-related event, a finding that arguably illustrates that, despite ASEM’s consistent priority assigned to its economic pillar, the outreach to the business community remains limited.

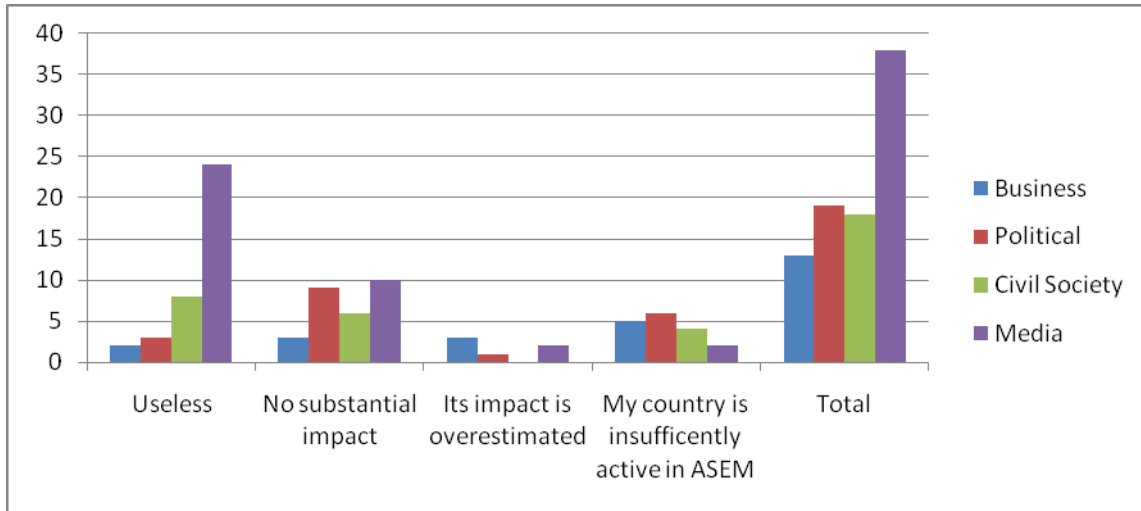
**Figure 2:** Distribution of responses in the *uncertain* category of ASEM perceptions



*Negative* responses were the most typical among *media* professionals (Figure 3) – a worrisome trend indicating that regional opinion-makers and news-gatekeepers have a somewhat sceptical attitude towards the forum (which, it is argued, may influence their decision on how much and what kind of ASEM reporting appears in national news outlets). The dominant perception shared was *Useless*, followed by *No substantial impact*. For example, a Japanese media respondent gloomily noted, “I think the impact of the ASEM is nothing”. His Chinese counterpart echoed, “I don’t think it has quite some substantial effect. It’s more like a ceremonial event, to maintain a gesture of politeness and negotiation. It does not have such decisive effect”. A Singaporean newsmaker shared a similar sentiment, “I think it’s good in building up relations, but I see the ASEM process as a waste of time. It’s all a lot of ‘talk shop’, a lot of speeches but (they are) meaningless”. This dominant critical response from the regional opinion-formers may indicate that ASEM has failed to ‘stand out’ for them in a constructive way from the gallery of various summits.

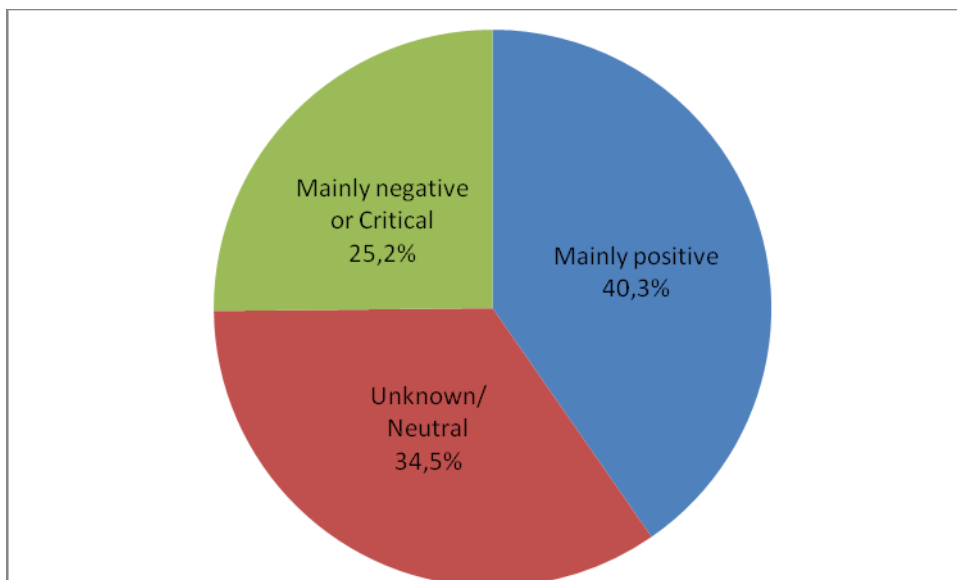
<sup>10</sup> The term ‘multilateral utility’ has been coined by Christopher Dent to refer to the “proactive contributions” of any regional, inter- or trans-regional regime to the establishment of multilateral global governance. Dent has argued that ASEM has failed to achieve this (Dent 2004).

**Figure 3:** Distribution of responses in the *negative* category of ASEM perceptions



To complement the general question on elites’ attitudes towards ASEM as a process, a follow-up question was asked – *Last year, there was an ASEM meeting in Helsinki in September. How would you describe the effect of that meeting on your country?* — in order to probe the respondents’ visions of a specific major ASEM event (presumably one still fresh in their memory) and its relevancy to the country in question. Responses to the follow-up question helped to assess the perceived importance and awareness of the ASEM6. Following a similar procedure, the responses were first analysed according to the tripartite paradigm – *positive, uncertain* and *negative* – and then coded numerically to identify the frequency of responses (Figure 4).

**Figure 4:** Elite’s attitude towards the 6<sup>th</sup> ASEM Summit (% of respondents)



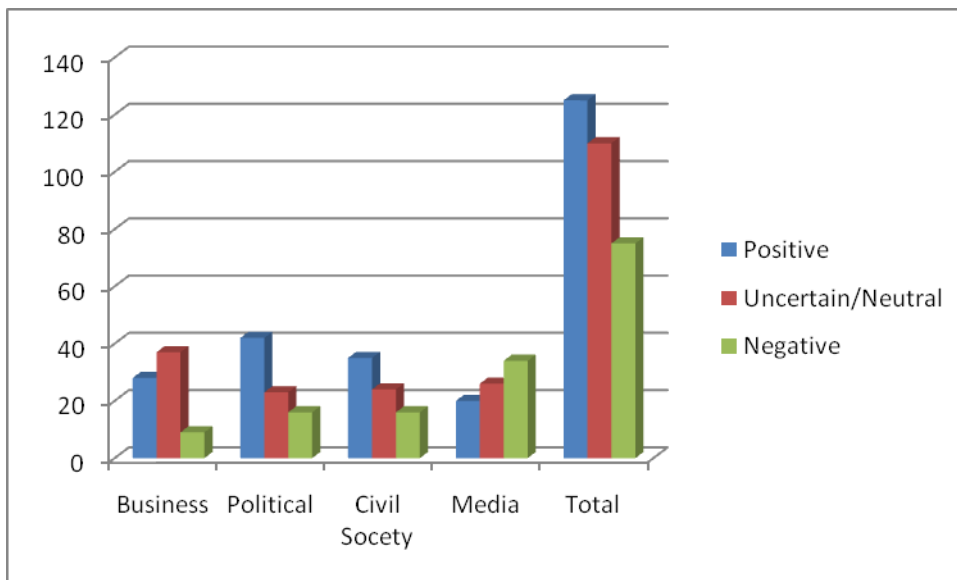
The distribution of attitudes towards the 6<sup>th</sup> Summit reflected a polarised vision towards the meeting among the elite respondents. Comments ranged from a sceptical view that “its

substantial impact must be small” (Korean business respondent) to a more cautious vision that “any process that promotes integration of the world in a broader sense is positive” (Singaporean business elite) to one of high praise:

ASEM is one of the summits that promote communication and understanding. Every country has its own value views, and that’s why we need communication and negotiation to achieve harmonious development. The ASEM is of great benefit to the whole world (Chinese political elite).

Interestingly, the *positive* category led with 40.3 per cent, possibly pointing to the fact that a recent concrete event may have more relevance to the perception of the ASEM than a more abstract notion of the ASEM process. However, media representatives were again the exception to this trend and displayed predominantly negative attitudes towards ASEM’s role and effectiveness (Figure 5).

**Figure 5:** Distribution of *positive*, *negative* and *uncertain* attitudes



Importantly for this analysis, ASEM6 reemphasised three specific roles crucial for ASEM as the prime point of convergence between the two regions: first, acting as a framework for dialogue and cooperation; second, promoting effective multilateralism, by offering its members the opportunity to further build common ground; and third, acting as a catalyst in the broader context of EU-Asia relations, by supporting other relevant cooperation and reinforcing regional identities and community-building. By identifying which of these roles were actually attributed to ASEM by the Asian stakeholders, this analysis discovered that the vision of ASEM as a facilitator of dialogue and cooperation between the two regions was the most typical, while the other two roles remained on the periphery of elite perceptions.

## Discussion and conclusions

According to ASEM's unofficial handbook, the *Asia-Europe Cooperation Framework 2000* (AECF 2000, para. 8), ASEM's three main aims are to "foster political dialogue, to reinforce economic cooperation and to promote cooperation in other areas" between Asia and Europe. With these somewhat vague objectives, a number of participants and commentators argue that ASEM is not designed to deliver concrete results but mainly to build bridges, which is a rather intangible and long-term process (Yeo 2008: 87). This interpretation of the ASEM process could be instrumental in understanding the results of the in-depth survey of the opinions gathered from 171 national policy- and decision-makers from five Asian countries. Its findings illustrated that ASEM remains generally poorly recognised and even unacknowledged among Asian national elites. The share of *negative* and *uncertain* attitudes towards the forum heavily outweighed *positive* attitudes, with ASEM seen by Asian stakeholders as failing to produce an impression of relevancy, attract their attention or solidify positive opinion.

One aspect of ASEM's visibility problem relates to ASEM's dealings with mass media. The analysis of endogenous and exogenous perspectives on the role of the media in raising ASEM's visibility revealed a discrepancy between official declarations about the improvement of ASEM's visibility and actual reality. The only agency dedicated to ASEM's promotion – ASEF – has neither a clear mandate nor resources to carry out an ASEM-wide communication strategy. Moreover, internal constraints inhibit ASEM's ability to profile itself more assertively to the media industry. Among those, there is ASEM's complexity reflecting the sum of a large number of smaller processes both in Asia and Europe. Changing locations means changing hosts who have different strategies for involving stakeholders and sharing information and outcomes with the national and international media. Moreover, ASEM's 'closed-door' nature and informal setting make relationships with the media even more complicated and limit access. The absence of an ASEM 'master-plan' (*i.e.* information on the continuity of the process and concrete results that match it) aggravates the media relationship, as journalists often do not have time or resources to 'dig deeper' and appear to lose interest between the long intermissions between the ASEM events. Alarming, the positive potential of the forum was not recognised by media respondents who were the most sceptical and negative in their attitudes towards ASEM of the four interviewed elite cohorts: as one Korean interviewee noted, "without [ASEM] the relations between the two [regions] would be also good".

Raising visibility for an international forum in general (and ASEM in particular) remains an important ingredient in that forum's public recognition globally and regionally. In this light, ASEM8 Chair's statement noted that the leaders "recognized that as a member-driven gathering, ASEM crucially depends for its visibility on the initiatives, actions and communication policies of partners themselves. The Leaders therefore called on all ASEM partners to increase their efforts and promote public awareness of ASEM through visibility work plans and policies, choice channels of communication and focused cultural activities".

This article concludes with the argument that powerful tools in raising ASEM's visibility would include an increased direct involvement of local stakeholders (obviously, in tandem with their exposure to sophisticated information about the forum). The multi-layered institutional architecture and comprehensive and open agenda of each summit provides ASEM with a unique potential to warrant such direct involvement. This analysis has indicated that the more involved the stakeholders are in the ASEM process, the more aware they are of the process, and also the more positive is their evaluation. One of the main comparative finding was the perceptible difference in the attitudes towards ASEM among various cohorts, with *political* elites (typically more directly involved into the process) profiling more positive visions, and with *media* elites featuring the most negative perceptions. A more nuanced

analysis explicated that the media respondents were among the least aware of (and the least involved in) the process, whilst the political elites were the most informed. Business elites appeared to be the most uncertain and overall uninterested. Arguably, while official ASEM strategies are directly targeting members of the business community, none of the randomly selected business interviewees participated in ASEM-related activities (illustrating that ASEM outreach remains limited). The sense of 'belonging' to the process is seen here as crucial - according to the social constructivist perspective, once the actors build up an identity as key stakeholders, they will contribute positively to ASEM accordingly. The analysis anticipates that the perceptions of the stakeholders towards ASEM may shape the outcome of the process: the more the stakeholders feel they belong to ASEM, the more willingly and actively they contribute to the process; the more they understand the process, the less unrealistic expectations and more constructive attitudes will be profiled.

To conclude, a set of recommendations into possible measures to improve the visibility of ASEM in Asia is offered. A closer and more intensive involvement of national stakeholders (including media elites) is the key. First, the complex relationship between ASEM and the media is undoubtedly influenced by ASEM's procedural intricacies, as well as media industry constraints and demands. When it comes to raising visibility, this article argues that a correct question to ask is not *How can the media help ASEM to raise ASEM's visibility?*, but rather *How can ASEM help the media to raise ASEM's visibility?* The involvement of media professionals into the process becomes the key. With ASEM currently unwilling to change its 'closed-door' and informal character, this analysis supports the idea of an ASEM Media Centre (established independently, or in cooperation with ASEM's Public Affairs Department). Such a centre would be responsible for developing a communication strategy in conjunction with the forum's members. Among its major mandates would be the coordination of ASEM's relations with the national media in a more coherent and comprehensive manner (for example, targeting the media corps of a specific host state when the forum changes its location, as well as approaching the media in the member states on an everyday basis when ASEM's outcomes are reported to the public). Importantly, such a body, if created, should be skilful in navigating cross-cultural and political discourses of media-government interactions in each ASEM location. Second, by targeting an exogenous level in relations with the media, ASEM could attempt to influence the personal perceptions of the local newsmakers by establishing a more proactive attitude in involving leading journalists and editors in a wider variety of events surrounding the forum. Continuing the practice of media-orientation seminars (possibly conducted in conjunction with EU diplomatic missions in Asia) in various location is another venue for raising media awareness of, and familiarly with, the process.

The challenge for engaging stakeholders is considerable. The onus lies with the ASEM process to 'add value' to traditional bilateral ties in order to 'incentivise' stakeholder interest. Clearly, priority needs to be given to specific topics that have direct regional appeal and relevance. A more systematic identification of representative stakeholders, particularly those who can contribute to decision-making at the national level, would be an important first step.

Last but not least, the gap between the expectations created by ASEM's rhetoric and the practical difficulties the forum faces in producing a palpable impression and involving its stakeholders on a more official level both in Europe and Asia is counterproductive to its role as a facilitator of dialogue and exchange between the two continents. This analysis stresses the need for ASEM's realistic and concrete communication strategies when dealing with stakeholders. Such strategies should necessarily incorporate the feedback from the leaders of the business community, civil society and the media. With a regular consultation system, stakeholders will build up their ownership and trust. Such ambitions, of course, again demand substantial institutional resources.

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