

2.3.4. The Role of Information Processing Strategies

Recent research investigates the mode of attitude formation as an important variable that moderates media effects (Matthes, 2007a, 2007b). Two strategies of attitude formation are discussed in the literature, namely memory-based attitude formation and online attitude formation. Memory-based models focus on attitude accessibility and assume that individuals form evaluative attitudes based on information that is “on top of their heads” and hence more easily available (D. A. Scheufele, 2000, p. 299). Opinions are constructed at the time the judgment is expressed, attitudes rely on information recall and specific items must be retrieved from memory in order to construct an overall evaluation (Hastie & Park, 1986). Thus, in case of memory-based attitude formation, there is a strong correspondence between retrieved information in memory and the evaluative attitude (Hastie & Park, 1986; Lichtenstein & Skrugl, 1987). Judgments that are built online are made at the time the information is acquired. The updated evaluation is then transferred to the long-term memory (Kinder, 1998, p. 184f.). Aspects that alter evaluations might vanish from memory, and people just retrieve the overall evaluation from memory “without reviewing the information upon which it is based” (Rahn, Aldrich, & Borgida, 1994, p. 193). Hertel & Bless (2000) mention that a precondition for online information processing is that there are pre-existing attitudes. Likewise, Tormalla and Petty (2001, p. 1600) state that if there was no opinion formed prior to information exposure, the judgment will be built in a memory-based fashion at the time a decision is required. Whereas some authors speak of contrasting models, others argue that both models “are ‘right’ but under different conditions” (McGraw, 2000, p. 813).

The most current and comprehensive investigation of media effects as a function of the information processing strategy was recently provided by Matthes (2007a, 2007b). The author argues that the impact of media frames is greater for memory-based attitudes than for online-built attitudes. Using group comparison in structural equation modeling, the empirical results support this assumption. This finding is in line with empirical results from other studies in media effects research (Druckman & Nelson, 2003; Krosnick & Brannon, 1993). However, these studies fall short in actually investigating the role of information processing strategies and merely refer to such strategies when explaining the obtained results.

2.3.5. The Role of Individual Predispositions

Considering the role of individual predispositions, the “reception-acceptance model” of attitude change by Zaller (1992) is of particular relevance in public opinion research. Zaller (1992, p. 22) defined predispositions as “stable, individual-level traits that regulate the acceptance or non-acceptance of the political communications a person receives.” Predispositions are argued to be part of lifetime experiences, to be shaped by socialization and to depend on personality factors and tastes. Moreover, political predispositions are assumed to be rather independent from mass media

information, a type of elite-supplied information: “Elites are not assumed to have an important role in shaping people’s political predispositions” (Zaller, 1992, p. 23). If predispositions are influenced by media information, then this impact is argued to be subject to long-term changes. Zaller (1992, p. 23) conceptualizes *political values* as one “of the various different types of predispositions” and the central moderators of attitude changes. Values are understood by Zaller (1992, p. 23) as “general and enduring standards” that have a more central position than attitudes in individuals’ belief systems.²⁷ The author assumes that the likelihood of media effects decreases with the distance between individual values and the value coloration of the messages. Based on surveys from the Center for Political Studies (CPS) and data from the National Election Studies (NES), the author found support for the assumption that political values hamper the influence of contradictory information on attitudes. The effects were consistent over a variety of measures of political predispositions. For instance political values were measured as hawk-dove attitudes (Zaller, 1992, p. 213ff.), attitudes concerning domestic politics and foreign politics, left-right orientation, and values regarding job guarantees, government services, and minority aid (Zaller, 1992, p. 344f.). The applicability of “reception-acceptance model” is restricted to specific circumstances: “The model applies only to cases in which one can demonstrate or plausibly assume the existence of particular change-inducing messages having distinct ideological colorations” (Zaller, 1992, p. 301). No empirical support for the model was found, for instance, with regard to the explanation of trust in government (Zaller, 1992, pp. 299-301).

Other predispositions considered in media effects research are *viewer expectations*. For instance, Pfau (1987) studied the influence of televised intraparty political debates during the 1984 presidential campaign as a function of viewer expectations with regard to appropriate communication behavior. Drawing on expectancy theory (Burgoon & Miller, 1985)²⁸ the author argued that if the language used in the intraparty political debates violates these viewer expectations, the support for political actors involved in the debates will decrease. Survey data based on a quasi-experimental design supports this assumption. Hence, the author concluded that “expectancy theory should be incorporated into further studies of political debate influence. As in this study, it is likely to better predict attitude change than standard explanations (such as attitudes about issue positions, leadership, and personality)” (Pfau, 1987, p. 695).

A study by Mutz & Reeves (2005) focused on the role of *personality factors* as a moderator of media effects. More precisely, the authors hypothesized that the individual propensity for conflict avoidance moderates the impact of exposure to uncivil discourse in a televised political debate on political trust. The results showed that respondents who are generally uncomfortable with face-to-face disagreement had much lower levels of political trust as a result of exposure to the uncivil condition

27 According to Zaller (1992) values constitute “domain-specific organizing principles”. The term “ideology”, in contrast, refers to a more general left-right scheme.

28 Expectancy theory assumes attitude changes in relation to expectations about language use.

compared to exposure to the civil condition. For respondents who find disagreements somewhat enjoyable, exposure to the uncivil condition generated slightly higher levels of political trust than exposure to the civil condition.

Predispositions can also be understood in terms *individual schemas*. For example, Shen (2004) suggested that media framing effects are moderated by individual differences in political schemas. Schemas are defined as knowledge structures that describe chronically accessible and organized knowledge about a given concept. A schema is hypothesized to moderate media effects by influencing the “encoding, selection, abstraction, [...] storage [...], retrieval and interpretation of information” (Shen, 2004, p. 133). Based on an experimental study, the author showed that subjects with different schemas responded to media stimuli significantly differently. Individuals with issue political schemas were more likely to draw upon issue-related thoughts after being exposed to issue messages than participants with character schemas. In contrast, individuals with character political schemas were more likely to draw upon character-related thoughts after being exposed to character messages than participants with issue schemas.

2.3.6. Summary and Conclusion

Research shows that a variety of factors may moderate the relationship between media information and political attitudes. Studies are largely consistent in their finding that media effects are stronger if *trust in media* is high. Although several studies indicate that *political sophistication* enhances the strength of media effects, other findings indicate less intense media effects for politically knowledgeable people compared to novices. In general, then, the empirical evidence regarding the moderating role of political expertise is inconsistent (De Vreese, 2004; Krosnick & Brannon, 1993). The diversity of findings might to some extent be explained by different operationalizations of political sophistication, ranging from the single-item measures as the level of formal education (Valentino, Beckmann, et al., 2001), a combined index encompassing awareness of, interest in and knowledge about a political institution (Moy & Pfau, 2000), to factual knowledge (Zaller, 1992). In addition, Druckman & Nelson (2003, p. 732, emphasis in original) suggested that a possible confounding of political knowledge and prior opinions may explain the variance in research findings:

“The problem with past work is that while individuals with prior opinions may be more knowledgeable, it is not the knowledge *per se* that is at work; rather, it is the existence of prior opinions based on other information that vitiates the impact of a new frame.”

The differences in research findings might also be accounted for by varying context factors, such as trust in the media. For instance, Miller & Krosnick (2000) suggest that knowledge only enhances priming effects among people who trust the media. Moreover, the impact of political knowledge appears to differ with respect to the type of media effects under study. Whereas political knowledge is found to hamper the media’s persuasive impact on evaluative political attitudes (for instance