

2.2.2. Trough Effects on Issue Accessibility or Perceived Issue Importance

Another explanation for the mechanisms by which media information affects political attitudes is suggested by priming theory.²¹ Some scholars argue that priming effects provide an explanation for the mechanisms by which negative media information affects political attitudes, because most of the stimuli used in priming experiments have been bad news, not good news (Kosicki, 2002, p. 76). Building on the idea of agenda-setting, researchers formulated the hypothesis that media coverage influences citizens' assessment of the presidential performance by altering the importance that citizens describe to national policy issues (Iyengar, Kinder, Peters, & Krosnick, 1984; Kosicki, 1993; M. E. McCombs & Shaw, 1993). The priming hypothesis assumes that "by focusing on some issues and not others, the news may determine the standards by which a president's performance is evaluated and may, as a result, provoke surges and declines in presidential popularity" (J. M. Miller & Krosnick, 1996, p. 80). Iyengar & Simon (1993) examined the priming hypothesis in the context of the Gulf crisis based on a combination of content analysis and survey data. The content analysis of the American Broadcasting Company (ABC) news coverage between August 1990 and May 1991 showed that the Gulf war received an increasing amount of media attention. As a parallel trend, citizens were found to perceive that the crisis was the most important problem facing the country. As a consequence, they assigned greater weight to their beliefs and opinions concerning foreign policy when forming attitudes towards George Bush. These attitudes were shown to override the role of economic assessments, and, in turn, made the perception of George Bush more positive. Similarly, Krosnick & Brannon (1993), based on survey data from the National Election Panel Study (NES), found support for their assumption that the media's focus on the Gulf crisis increased the impact of George Bush's handling of the crisis on his overall job performance. In a study on the Iran-contra disclosure, Krosnick & Kinder (1990) found the same effect pattern. The authors assumed that for citizens who had been interviewed after the disclosure, the issue of the U.S. intervening in Central America had a greater impact on their presidential evaluations than for citizens who had been interviewed before the story broke. Other studies showed that although priming effects may explain presidential evaluations, they are less applicable to predict evaluations of political groups (McGraw & Ling, 2003). In all these studies, the assumed indirect priming effects were not the subject of strict empirical tests, however.

21 Discussions on how priming and framing effects differ go beyond the scope of this paper. For further information see, for instance, Price & Tewksbury (1997).

2.2.3. Trough Effects on Emotions

Most research in the field of political media effects focuses on cognitive, not on affective responses. Hence, Kinder (1998, p. 190) argues that “about the emotional requirements of citizenship, or the emotional foundations of political opinion, little is heard”. Until now, only a few studies have explored the relationship between media information, emotional responses and political attitudes. For instance Schemer (2009) reported findings that indicate that the news coverage in tabloids fuels negative emotions. Those negative emotions, in turn, affected subjects’ political attitudes. Based on data from a three-wave panel survey the author showed that political media information in the context of a referendum on the asylum law in Switzerland raised negative emotions, such as fear and anger. These emotions were found to have consequences for policy judgments, more precisely attitudes towards the modification of the asylum law, in turn. This finding is consistent with results from a study by Sotirovic (2001). The author showed that fear acts as a mediator of media use on attitudes towards punitive policies. In line with these results, Holbert (2004) found that police reality show viewing predicts fear of crime. Fear of crime, in turn, was found to lead to the endorsement of capital punishment and handgun ownership.

2.2.4. Trough Effects on Political Knowledge

A variety of studies indicate that media information increases the audience’s political knowledge (Chaffee & Kanihan, 1997). For instance, Benoit, McKinney, & Stephenson (2002) found that watching primary campaigns enhanced the viewers’ knowledge of the candidate’s policy positions. Studies that address the question of how media effects on political knowledge are related to changes in political attitudes are rather rare. Interesting findings in this respect are provided in a study by Moy & Pfau (2000). Using structural equation modeling, the authors not only investigated direct effects of media information on confidence in political institutions, but also indirect effects through the media’s impact on political knowledge. Findings indicate that newspaper use increased political knowledge, which in turn enhanced trust and confidence in the presidency and Congress. Talk show viewing, in contrast, had a negative indirect effect on trust and confidence in Congress via political knowledge. Overall, the authors found more positive indirect effects than negative indirect effects. On the whole, then, the findings suggest that media’s impact on political knowledge might lead to an increase of political support. Findings from a study on trust in the World Trade Organization (WTO) do not confirm this assumption (Moy, Torres, Tanaka, & McCluskey, 2005). The authors found no indirect effects of media reliance through institutional knowledge on trust in the WTO.