2.2.5.   Summary and Conclusion

A variety of studies presented in this section give explanations for the question of how media information influence political attitudes. Studies investigating the relationship between media information, *perceptions of social reality* and political attitudes provide some evidence for the assumption that reality perceptions act as a mediator of the mass media's impact on political attitudes. On the side of the independent variable, studies investigated effects on individuals' policy satisfaction and satisfaction with the performance of political leaders. It seems plausible to argue that the results may generalize media effects on political support. Thus, conceptualizing perceptions of political decision-making processes as a factor that mediates the relationship between media presentations of decision-making processes and political support appears to be promising.

Studies in the tradition of priming research provide evidence for the assumption that perceived *issue accessibility or perceived issue importance* might mediate the relationship between media information and political attitudes, and presidential evaluations in particular. In general, research so far has tended to neglect the question whether citizens consider the national importance of an issue and, hence, engage in a cognitive process, or whether priming is just a function of accessibility and occurs unconsciously (J. M. Miller, 2007). The influence of the assumed mediating variables is not explicitly investigated in most studies: "Despite the normative implications of the conventional wisdom that accessibility mediates agenda setting, to date the hypothesis has not been subject to empirical tests" (J. M. Miller, 2007, p. 691) because "in virtually every past agenda-setting study, content and accessibility are confounded" (J. M. Miller, 2007, p. 707). The same is true with respect to priming research.

Other studies provide empirical evidence for the assumption that *emotional responses* may mediate the effects of media information on policy attitudes. Although emotions appeared to be a relevant mediator of the relationship between media information and policy attitudes, little is known at present with respect to the role of emotions as a mediator of the media's impact on attitudes towards political institutions, actors or democracy. It appears that emotions are less likely to mediate the relationship between media presentations of day-to-day political decision-making processes and political support.

Political knowledge may mediate the effects of media information on confidence in political institutions. The findings are rather diverse, indicating positive indirect effects of media exposure on confidence in some cases and negative indirect effects in other cases. With regard to the research purpose of this study, I may assume that political knowledge might mediate the relationship between media information about political processes and citizens' political support. By increasing the knowledge about political processes, the media might also shape their perception. The two concepts, hence, appear to be closely related in that case.

The majority of studies which investigate media effects and consider mediating variables did not apply the data analytical procedures to estimate indirect effects in a

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strict sense. Hence most of what is known about the mediating impact of social reality perceptions, for instance, is based on plausible theoretical argumentations rather than on a solid empirical basis. Whereas a mediating variable is influenced by the independent variable and then, in turn, influences the dependent variable, a moderating variable specifies the conditions under which a given effect occurs, as well as conditions under which the strength or direction of an effect varries (cf. Baron & Kenny, 1986; Holmbeck, 1997). The following section provides an overview of variables that may moderate the relationship between media information and political attitudes.

2.3. Conditionality of the Media's Impact on Political Attitudes

This section provides a brief overview of variables that specify the conditions under which media effects on political attitudes are particularly likely. The purpose of this section is to inform the selection of moderator variables that might be relevant with respect to the present study's research interest. In order to provide a rather broad overview of possible moderators, the present section expands its focus on studies that explore the media's impact on political support and also includes studies on the relationship between media and attitudes towards policy issues. Several studies indicate that media effects are particularly strong, if the audience's trust in media is high (Section 2.3.1). Other studies indicate that media's impact on political attitudes varies as a function of individuals' political sophistication (Section 2.3.2). Further studies investigate whether media effects are contingent upon the general intensity of media use (Section 2.3.3). More recently, the modus of information processing has been the focus of scholars' attention. Section 2.3.4 provides an overview of research exploring the moderating role of online vs. memory-based processing of media information. Section 2.3.5 presents studies that explore the moderating effects of individual predispositions. Finally, Section 2.3.6 summarizes the findings and discusses suggestions for the present study.

2.3.1. The Role of Media Trust and Media Credibility

The perceived trustworthiness or credibility of mass media[22] is considered a relevant precondition for the media to have an impact on political attitudes. More precisely, media effects are supposed to be stronger if trust in media information is high (Matthes, 2007b, p. 187). This argument traces back to the classical persuasion studies by Hovland & Weiss (1951). Empirical support for the assumption that media credibility enhances the likelihood of media effects is given in an experimental study

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22   The terms are used interchangeably in media effects research (Kohring & Matthes, 2007, p. 231f.).