

by Druckman (2001b), for instance. The framing of news from a credible source (New York Times) was found to have a greater impact on attitudes than news frames from a source considered non-credible (The National Enquirer). Consistently, J.M. Miller & Krosnick (2000) found that priming effects are more likely to occur among people with high levels of general trust in the media compared to individuals with low trust levels.²³ The assumptions of moderation were tested by including interaction terms as well as the original predictor and moderator variables in the regression models. Similar findings were provided by Garramone (1984). Wolling (1999) also reported results which indicate that credible media sources exert stronger influence on political attitudes than less credible media sources.²⁴ Media credibility was found to moderate the media's effects on the evaluation of government performance and the assessment of implementations of political decisions. The media's impact on other political attitudes was found to be independent of media credibility, however. The author therefore concluded that media credibility moderates the media's impact only in part (Wolling, 1999, p. 216f.). In contrast to the majority of findings, Matthes (2007b) reported results that do not support the assumption that trust in media moderates the strength of media effects. The findings are based on empirical tests using group comparisons (low vs. high trust respondents) in structural equation modeling. The author explained that the low variance in the trust variable might account for this finding.

2.3.2. The Role of Political Sophistication

A variety of studies suggests that the mass media's impact on political attitudes is contingent upon the level of political sophistication of the audience or other related concepts such as political expertise, political awareness, political knowledge and political involvement. The term political sophistication refers to the "cognitive complexity about politics" and is related to a person's political belief system (PBS)

23 Trust in the media was measured as self-reported measures, captured with three questions referring to the media in general.

24 The assumption of moderating effects was tested based on the inclusion of interaction variables into regression models. In order to compute the interaction variables, for each media outlet the author recoded high credibility levels with '1' and low credibility levels with a value of '0'. These values were then multiplied with the value that was assigned to the media outlets based on findings from the content analysis (Wolling, 1999, p. 279). Those product indicators were included in the regression analysis, the original media content indicators were excluded from the regression analysis. This procedure seems problematic for two reasons. First, the values of the product term for the non-credible media content will all be zero, as the product of any other number and zero is zero. Hence, no variance on the interaction variable for the non-credible media content existed. Moreover, not including the original predictor variable and moderator variable in regression analyses with product interaction terms is considered problematical, because the results are not controlled for the effects of both predictor and moderator variable on the dependent variable (Baron & Kenny, 1986, p. 1175f., Friedrich, 1982).

(Luskin, 1978, p. 861). High sophistication is given when the belief system is large (high number of political cognitions), wide-ranging (dispersion of cognitions among categories), and highly constrained (strong interconnectedness of cognitions). The three characteristics of the PBS – size, range and constraint – are interrelated. In the information-processing literature such an extensive, organized knowledge is referred to as expertise. Hence, “political sophistication is political expertise”, Luskin (1978, p. 861) concluded. Zaller (1992) also remarked on the similarity of concepts such as political expertise, sophistication, and involvement. He preferred the term “political awareness” because it encompasses both the “reception and comprehension of communications from the political environment” (Zaller, 1992, p. 21). Zaller operationalizes political awareness as political knowledge. In general, then, political expertise, political awareness, political knowledge, and political sophistication are related concepts.

The traditional dosage-resistance perspective in media effect research assumes that “the more knowledge one has, the more resistant one should be”, because knowledgeable people are assumed to have a variety of other sources for political information beyond media that might shape their political judgments (Krosnick & Brannon, 1993, p. 956).²⁵ Empirical evidence for the assumption is, for instance, given in a study on the association between talk radio use and political confidence by Pfau et al. (1998). The relationship between talk radio use and political confidence was found to be particularly strong for people who are less interested in politics. Hence, the authors came to the conclusion that for the politically less interested subjects, mass media depictions exert much greater impact than for the political experts (Pfau, et al., 1998, p. 732). Consistently, Valentino, Beckmann, et al. (2001) reported that politically sophisticated individuals were mostly unaffected by strategy framing effects, whereas the least sophisticated were particularly vulnerable to strategic campaign news coverage. Political expertise appears to reduce not only the likelihood of cognitive reactions to media content, but also emotional reactions. Hibbing & Theiss-Morse (1998) found that the relationship between media exposure and emotional attitudes was especially strong for political novices compared to politically experienced individuals.

Zaller (1992) argued that two conditions must be fulfilled so that political awareness enhances the likelihood of resistance to media’s impact. First, the media information needs to be inconsistent with individual predispositions. Second, the link between information and predispositions needs to be rather abstract. Conversely, “the more simple and direct the link between a predisposition and an issue, the less important awareness is likely to be in regulating responses to political communications on that issue” (Zaller, 1992, p. 48). Taking the two conditions into account, the

25 An alternative explanation of the mechanisms at work is given by research from cognitive psychology. From this perspective, it seems plausible to argue that politically knowledgeable persons are more resistant to media impact because they have more tightly organized political thoughts (Lusk & Judd, 1988) and, hence, are more likely to possess more extreme attitudes and have a greater attitude consistency. Both aspects were found to hamper attitude changes.

empirical results provided by the author support the assumption that politically aware people²⁶ are more resistant to media effects than individuals with low levels of political awareness. For instance, the author found that highly aware individuals were able to resist the dominant pro Vietnam War messages in media information in the period from 1964 to 1966. As a result, patterns of support differed for politically aware compared to politically unaware people.

Others argue that political expertise is a factor that facilitated information storage and retrieval and, hence, increases the likelihood of media effects. For example, Price & Zaller (1993) found that the more political knowledge a person has, the better is the individual recall of media information. And Tewskbury (1999) showed that politically knowledgeable people are more likely to engage in systematic information processing than people with low levels of political knowledge. Information storage and retrieval, in turn, may enhance media effects (Krosnick & Brannon, 1993, p. 956). For instance, Krosnick & Brannon (1993) found greater priming effects for political knowledgeable, when the effects of political knowledge, media exposure and political interest were investigated simultaneously. Similarly, Wolling (1999) reported findings which indicate that the effects of negative media information on perceived internal political efficacy are stronger if political interest is high. The author concluded that people need to be interested in political information and process the information thoroughly for the information to have an effect on political attitudes (Wolling, 1999, p. 215).

2.3.3. The Role of Intensity of General Media Use

The traditional dosage perspective in media effect research assumes that “the greater one’s dosage of media content, the more one should be influenced by it” (Krosnick & Brannon, 1993, p. 956). Empirical support for this assumption is given in a study by A.H. Miller et al. (1979, p. 75ff.), for instance. The results indicate that the impact of media criticism on respondents’ political cynicism is greater for those respondents with high media exposure levels compared to respondents with low media exposure levels. The alternative hypothesis, in contrast, assumes smaller media effects under the condition of greater dosages. This hypothesis is based on the assumption that people who are only minimally exposed to the news “will absorb little other than the ‘big message’ contained in the lead stories and repeated regularly across media and across time” (Krosnick & Brannon, 1993, p. 956). In support for this assumption, the study by Krosnick & Brannon (1993) showed that media priming effects are stronger for people with lower levels of general media exposure compared to individuals with high levels of exposure.

26 Political awareness is measured with questions about factual knowledge about politics, because this captures “what has actually gotten into people’s minds” (Zaller, 1992, p. 21).