

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 & Skroll, 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