

RESEARCH NOTE

Presumed Online Media Influence and Support for Censorship: Results from a Survey among German Parliamentarians

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The consequences of perceived media influences have been examined in numerous studies on the third-person effect (Davison, 1983) and the influence of presumed media influence approach (Gunther & Storey, 2003). One consequence, namely the support for media censorship, is viewed as the “gold standard” (Cohen & Weimann, 2008, p. 386): Individuals demand to limit the power of the media because they perceive a strong and negative media impact on other people.

Although this association has been examined frequently, there are still research gaps. On the one hand, previous studies have only rarely dealt with respondents who were in a position to actually decide upon or implement restrictions outside the respondents’ own private sphere (e.g., parents; Hoffner & Buchanan, 2002). People with political authority have the power for this kind of action. On the other hand, previous studies have, in most cases, examined censorship demands with respect to traditional mass media; online media were hardly ever taken into account.

Finally, previous research concerning the support for censorship as a result of presumed influences was focused on content that was perceived to have explicitly harmful effects (Feng & Guo, 2012, p. 42). What happens if influences are not perceived as harmful *per se* remains an unanswered question. This is, for instance, the case with the Internet’s political influence.

That is why politicians’ attitude toward limiting online media’s political influence (as a consequence of presumed influences on the public) seems to be a relevant issue. It was examined in a survey of members of the Bundestag, Germany’s national parliament.¹

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¹The issue of Internet regulation and also censorship is a relevant topic in Germany, and it is discussed in German politics and the public (Hoffmann & Katzenbach, 2012, p. 214). Some examples: The Bundestag set up a multi-stakeholder *Commission of Inquiry on the Internet and Digital Society* (<http://www.bundestag.de/internetenquete>) in 2010; the commission was, among other things, concerned with online access as well as structures and security. Censorship of online content has been publicly discussed in Germany on several

The Perception of Media Influences and Attitudes Toward Censorship

Research on presumed media influences can be divided into two categories. Many studies have been based on the hypothesis that states that individuals deem other people more susceptible to media influence than themselves (Davison, 1983). This so-called third-person perception has been clearly proven (Sun, Pan, & Chen, 2008).

Additionally, studies have examined the consequences of presumed influences. *Prevention* is the most frequently examined category of these consequences (Tal-Or, Tsifti, & Gunter 2009): Strong presumed influences of content that is harmful from one's own perspective can result in claims for banning or at least restricting the dissemination of such content. For instance, studies have shown that people's support for censorship of violent content or pornography is increased if they assume that these have a stronger influence on other people than on themselves (e.g., Gunther, 1995; Hoffner et al., 1999; Lee & Tamborini, 2005; McLeod, Eveland, & Nathanson, 1997; Rojas, Shah, & Faber, 1996; Zhao & Cai, 2008). However, in other studies, third-person perceptions had no or only little impact on demands for censorship. Here, presumed influences on other people proved to be better predictors (e.g., Lo & Paddon, 2000; Youn, Faber, & Shah, 2000; for a methodological discussion, see Schmierbach, Boyle, & McLeod, 2008). Some studies used the perceived influence on others exclusively as a predictor (e.g., Cohen & Weimann, 2008); this is in accord with the influence of the presumed media influence approach (Gunter & Storey, 2003), which states that individuals perceive media influences on others and react to that perception.

The Perception of Political Media Influences and Attitudes Toward Censorship

It has also been examined whether presumed media influences are associated with supporting restrictions in political communication. Such studies deserve particular attention for two reasons: First, media coverage of politics is of outstanding importance in democratic societies. This is why, according to a widely held notion (e.g., Habermas, 2006), media coverage of politics must be subject to the least possible restrictions. From this perspective, demands for limiting the media's political influence are problematic.

Second, most people probably consider political media coverage much less problematic than, for example, pornography. However, it is a crucial factor in whether people support censorship that they deem the media content in question negative (e.g., Feng & Guo, 2012).

occasions; the most prominent example of this was the dispute about an *Access Restriction Act* passed by the Bundestag, and which was mainly directed against child pornography Web sites (Hoffmann & Katzenbach, 2012, p. 209f.). Following much protest, the law was repealed. Among other things, people were worried that politically unpopular pages could also be banned on the basis of this act. There have also been discussions about restrictions to political content; for instance, regarding the homepages of extreme right-wing parties, but also with respect to the question which rights and freedom should be granted to members of the public who report about political issues on blogs or other webpages.

Consequently, studies on presumed *political* media influences and the effects of these perceptions on support for censorship focused on content, which can be deemed negative, such as unfair election campaign coverage (Salwen, 1998), negative political ads (Salwen & Dupagne, 1999), political attack ads (Wei & Lo, 2007), or news about election polls (Wei, Lo, & Lu, 2011). Third-person perceptions sometimes increased the support for limiting the influence of this content; presumed strong influences on others always had this effect.

Politicians' Perception of Political Media Influences and Attitudes Toward Censorship

Taken together, results show that perceived influences on others can influence one's approval of censorship of political media content whose effect is perceived to be harmful. Thus far few studies have investigated whether this is also true for politicians. However, studies among politicians are significant because politicians' presumed media influences might have consequences that go beyond the people in question (this also holds for other professional groups that have been the object of research on presumed influences; Huh & Langteau, 2007; Tsfati, Cohen, & Gunther, 2011; Tsfati & Livio, 2008). This was shown in a study conducted among members of Israel's Knesset: Presumed strong media influences on voters resulted in the parliamentarians spending more time on media-related activities (Cohen, Tsfati, & Sheaffer, 2008).

Moreover, politicians are a special group considering the potential restrictions on media: If politicians consider limitations of media influences necessary, they have the power to initiate corresponding measures. But why would politicians come to this assessment? After all, they should be aware of the importance of free media. However, there are possible reasons for demanding more control: One starting point could be the perception that the media prefer the positions of the respective political opponents (hostile media perception; Vallone, Ross, & Lepper, 1985). Moreover, politicians could be skeptical about political media influence because they think it is *too* strong. Studies among parliamentarians in different countries have shown that this perception exists (e.g., Kepplinger, 2009; Strömbäck & Nord, 2006; Van Aelst et al., 2008). Results of a survey among members of the previous German Bundestag show that the perception of too strong influence was positively associated with the parliamentarians' willingness to control the media influence (Dohle, Blank, & Vowe, 2012).

Politicians' Perception of Political Influences of Online Media and Attitudes Toward Censorship

Finally, another reason for a skeptical view on political media content could be politicians' unease regarding new media developments and the potential effects connected to online media. Of course, Web sites with news about politics have long been established, and the importance of a politically unrestricted Internet is underlined time and again (see for example the *Freedom House* report; Kelly, Cook, & Truong, 2012). Moreover,

politicians use social networks, weblogs, and other platforms themselves (e.g., for Germany, Zittel, 2009). However, some aspects could be evaluated negatively: For instance, political communication in the online world takes place at a much faster pace. In addition, many more people can participate in political communication than the limited circle of journalists—some even take part from an anonymous position. Furthermore, a completely free Internet also means that political groups with radical or even undemocratic views can spread their positions without restrictions and to a potentially unlimited audience. This can leave politicians under the impression that online communication in politics is not objective, problematic in some respects, and difficult to control.

On the basis of our argumentation so far, the politicians' assumption that online communication has a *strong* effect on the public could be a variable that strengthens politicians' conviction that online media should be more strictly controlled. Therefore, it is expected:

Hypothesis 1 (H1): The stronger politicians perceive the political effects of online media on the public to be, the more politicians will be willing to support censorship of online media.

Restrictions of media influence are (particularly) supported when this influence is assumed to be negative. With respect to the political influence of online media, however, it cannot be taken for granted that politicians are unanimous in deeming it harmful. This is why the evaluation of the influence will explicitly be taken into account:

Hypothesis 2 (H2): The more negative politicians perceive the political effects of online media on the public to be, the more politicians will be willing to support censorship of online media.

Finally, it is hypothesized that the perceived strength and evaluation of the influence can have a combined effect on support for censorship measures:

Hypothesis 3 (H3): The stronger and more negative politicians perceive the political effects of online media on the public to be, the more politicians will be willing to support censorship of online media.

Method

Procedure and Sample

A standardized survey among members of the 17th German Bundestag was conducted in spring 2012. All 620 members were invited to fill out a questionnaire,² and 194 members participated (response rate: 31.3%).

²All 620 members of parliament received a letter addressed to them personally, which included an invitation to take part in the survey, the questionnaire, and a stamped return envelope. The parliamentarians were informed that this was an academic survey and that participation was on a voluntary and anonymous basis. A first reminder was sent 2 weeks later, this time by email, to the parliamentarians personally. The email contained a link to an online questionnaire. This online questionnaire was the same as the one sent to

Compared with the whole Bundestag (see Deutscher Bundestag, 2012), the sample is not biased regarding central variables: 28.1% of the respondents were female (compared with 32.9% in the whole Bundestag), and 71.9% were male (compared with 67.1%).

About 25.8% of the respondents were born in 1950 or earlier (compared with 21.3%), 29.0% between 1951 and 1960 (compared with 34.0%), 29.0% between 1961 and 1970 (compared with 27.6%), 14.8% between 1971 and 1980 (compared with 15.2%), and 1.2% in 1981 and later (compared with 1.9%).

A total of 38.6% of the participants represented the Christian Democratic Union/Christian Social Union (compared with 38.2%), 23.9% the Social Democratic Party (compared with 23.6%), 17.4% the Free Democratic Party (compared with 15.0%), 7.07% the Alliance 90/The Greens (compared with 11.0%), and 13.0% the Left Party (compared with 12.3%).

Measures

Perceived online media influence. Five items were used to measure the strength of the perceived online media influence. The politicians were asked how much political influence they thought (a) Facebook and other social networks, (b) online news sites, (c) Twitter, (d) weblogs, and (e) YouTube had on the public (1 = *no influence* to 5 = *very large influence*). The five items were averaged to create a scale of presumed online influence ($M = 2.56$; $SD = 0.56$; $\alpha = 0.72$; factor analysis with a single-factor solution, accounting for 48.32% of the variance).

Evaluation of perceived online media influence. The participants' evaluation of the influences was covered in a single question: "How negative or positive would you evaluate the political influence of the Internet regarding the public?" ($M = 2.99$; $SD = 0.74$; 1 = *very positive* to 5 = *very negative*).

Support for censorship of online media. Willingness to support censorship was measured with three items. First, the participants' attitude toward limiting the online media's political influence was examined: "How strongly do you agree with the following statement: The Internet's political influence should be restricted" (1 = *do not agree at all* to 5 = *agree very strongly*). Furthermore, the participants' attitude toward increased control by the government was examined: "How important do you think an initiative that supports stricter control of the Internet by the government would be?" (1 = *very unimportant* to 5 = *very important*). Finally, the politicians were asked to answer the question "Would you support such an initiative by signing a petition for stricter control of the Internet?" (1 = *definitely not* to 5 = *definitely*). The three items were averaged to create an index of support for censorship of online media ($\alpha = 0.82$; factor analysis with a single-factor solution, accounting for 71.51% of the variance).

Covariates. In addition to the politicians' age in years ($M = 52.68$; $SD = 10.11$), their sex, the level of education they had attained [20.5% had 13 years (high school) or fewer years of education; 79.5% had >13 years], and their

them by post. Thus, there was another possibility to participate. A second and last reminder was sent to the parliamentarians 4 weeks after the first reminder, also by email.

party affiliation, the respondents had to indicate for how long they had been a member of the Bundestag ($M=9.03$ years; $SD=6.41$).

The parliamentarians were also asked to provide information on how much time they spent using online media during an average day ($M=3.08$ hours; $SD=2.47$). One item tested how suitable they thought the Internet was for providing political information ($M=4.14$; $SD=0.84$; 1 = *not suitable at all* to 5 = *very suitable*). Moreover, the parliamentarians had to estimate how often the public uses the Internet to get information about politics ($M=3.21$; $SD=0.80$; 1 = *very rarely* to 5 = *very often*), and to evaluate the online media's influence on themselves ($M=3.09$; $SD=0.70$; 1 = *very positive* to 5 = *very negative*).

Results

The results show that the parliamentarians do not support online censorship strongly: They rather tend to object that the political influence of the Internet should be restricted ($M=1.84$; $SD=1.08$)—only 18 respondents (strongly) agree (9.4%; scale values 4 or 5). Yet an initiative that supports stricter control of the Internet is deemed rather relevant ($M=2.75$; $SD=1.36$)—61 respondents think that it is (very) important (31.9%; scale values 4 or 5); but there is little willingness to support such an initiative by signing a petition ($M=2.36$; $SD=1.38$)—44 respondents would (definitely) do that (22.9%; scale values 4 or 5). The mean of the index of support for censorship of online media is $M=2.32$ ($SD=1.08$).

To test the hypotheses, a four-level hierarchical regression analysis was conducted (Table 1). The index of willingness to support censorship measures was used as a dependent variable. In the first step, control variables were taken into account: age, sex (dummy coded; 0 = *male*, 1 = *female*), years of education, years as a parliamentarian, political orientation (dummy coded; 0 = *conservatives [Christian Democratic Union/Christian Social Union]*, 1 = *others*), amount of time spent using the Internet, assessment of the Internet's suitability for providing political information, estimation of the public's Internet use, and evaluation of the online media's influence on themselves.

Afterward, the index of the perceived political influences of online media on the public (second step) and the evaluation of the perceived influence (third step) were included. Finally, the interaction term of the strength and the evaluation of the perceived influence (fourth step) was added. The variables are correlated ($r=.24$; $p<.01$); to avoid multicollinearity, both variables were centered (Aiken & West, 1992).

The results of the first step of the regression ($F=11.4$, $df=137$, $p<.001$; $R^2=.44$) provide first information on which variables have an influence on the willingness to support Internet censorship: Conservative parliamentarians support the censorship of online media more than others ($\beta=-0.36$; $p<.001$), and older parliamentarians do so more than younger members ($\beta=0.24$; $p<.01$). The less suitable as a source for political information online media are assumed to be ($\beta=-0.28$; $p<.001$), the more the public is thought to use the Internet for political purposes ($\beta=0.18$; $p<.05$), and the worse the perceived political influence of online media on themselves ($\beta=-0.23$; $p<.01$), the more willing the parliamentarians are to support censorship.

Table 1
Hierarchical Regression—Influences on Support for Censorship of Online Media

	Block 1—Control variables		Block 2—Perceived influence		Block 3—Evaluation of influence		Block 4—Perceived influence*evaluation	
	β	SE	β	SE	β	SE	β	SE
Age	0.24**	0.01	0.22**	0.01	0.21*	0.01	0.22**	0.01
Years as parliamentarian	0.01	0.01	0.04	0.01	0.05	0.01	0.06	0.01
Sex (0 = male; 1 = female)	-0.02	0.16	-0.05	0.16	-0.05	0.16	-0.04	0.16
Perceived suitability of the Internet for political information	-0.28***	0.09	-0.29***	0.09	-0.28***	0.09	-0.28***	0.09
Political orientation (0 = conservative, 1 = other)	-0.36***	0.15	-0.35***	0.15	-0.35***	0.15	-0.35***	0.15
Years of education	-0.05	0.02	-0.04	0.02	-0.04	0.02	-0.03	0.02
Frequency of Internet use	0.06	0.03	0.03	0.03	0.02	0.03	0.05	0.03
Evaluation of influence of the Internet on oneself	-0.23**	0.11	-0.21**	0.11	-0.19*	0.12	-0.20*	0.12
Perceived frequency of Internet use of the public	0.18*	0.09	0.09	0.09	0.08	0.10	0.08	0.10
Perceived influence of online media on the public	-	-	0.24**	0.07	0.25**	0.08	0.27**	0.08
Evaluation of the perceived influence of online media on the public	-	-	-	-	0.04	0.08	0.02	0.08
Perceived influence of online media on the public*evaluation of influence	-	-	-	-	-	-	0.09	0.07
R^2	0.44		0.49**		0.49		0.50	
R^2 change			0.04**		0.00		0.01	

Note. All variables concerning perception and evaluation of influence on the public are centered.

* $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$; *** $p < .001$; $n = 126-129$.

Following H₁, presumed strong influences of online media on the public increase the politicians' support for censorship. In the second step of the regression ($F = 12.1$, $df = 137$, $p < .001$; $R^2 = .49$; R^2 change = $.04$, $p < .01$), this variable was a significant predictor: The more politicians assumed the public was highly susceptible to political influence through online media, the more they supported censorship measures ($\beta = 0.24$; $p < .01$). Thus, H₁ was supported.

H₂ claimed that the evaluation of the Internet's perceived political effects also had an impact on support for censorship measures. In the third step of the regression ($F = 11.0$, $df = 137$, $p < .001$; $R^2 = .49$; R^2 change = $.00$, *ns*), an increasingly negative evaluation of the effects of the Internet did not lead to an increase in support for censorship measures ($\beta = 0.04$; *ns*). Thus, H₂ was rejected.

H₃ was rejected as well. In the fourth step of the regression ($F = 10.2$, $df = 137$, $p < .001$; $R^2 = .50$; R^2 change = $.01$, *ns*), the interaction term of the perceived influence and the evaluation of the perceived influence was added. It was not a significant predictor of support for censorship ($\beta = 0.09$; *ns*). Overall, the final model displayed a good explanatory power with almost 50% shared variance (Table 1).

As many respondents refused to provide information about age and sex, the number of cases was reduced in the analysis. That is why an additional model without these two variables was calculated with a higher number of cases (Table 2). This brought about the same key results.

Several variables had an influence on the support of Internet censorship. Thus, it seemed promising to examine if the impact of the presumed online media's influence is mediated through these variables. When estimating indirect effects in simple mediation models (Baron & Kenny, 1986) the perceived suitability of the Internet for political information proved to be the only variable that is a significant mediator: The stronger the perceived influence on others, the more suitable the Internet is perceived for political information ($\beta = 0.22$; $SE = 0.11$; $p > .01$). And the more suitable the Internet is perceived, the less the parliamentarians tend to support censorship ($\beta = -0.39$; $SE = 0.09$; $p > .001$). As a consequence, the perceived suitability turns out to be a suppressor variable: Controlled for the mediator, the weak bivariate correlation between presumed influences and the support for censorship (total effect; $\beta = 0.05$; $SE = 0.14$; *ns*) rises and becomes (borderline) significant ($\beta = 0.13$; $SE = 0.13$; $p = .06$).³

Discussion

Approval of censorship measures as a consequence of perceived media influences has been frequently examined. However, politicians have so far barely been considered even though they are in a position to actually implement restrictions. This study focused on politicians, namely the members of the German Bundestag. In contrast to many previous studies, this study also focused on the perceived political influence

³The coefficients differ from those reported in Table 1 and Table 2 because the mediation analysis only included three variables, whereas the regression analyses included more variables. Additionally, the mediation analysis was calculated with a higher number of cases ($n = 181$) than the regression analyses.

Table 2
Hierarchical Regression—Influences on Support for Censorship of Online Media (Without Age and Sex as Control Variables)

	Block 1—Control variables		Block 2—Perceived influence		Block 3—Evaluation of influence		Block 4—Perceived influence*evaluation	
	β	SE	β	SE	β	SE	β	SE
Years as parliamentarian	0.11	0.01	0.14*	0.01	0.14*	0.01	0.15*	0.01
Perceived suitability of the Internet for political information	-0.21**	0.09	-0.22***	0.08	-0.21***	0.08	-0.21***	0.08
Political orientation (0 = conservative, 1 = other)	-0.43***	0.14	-0.43***	0.14	-0.43***	0.13	-0.43***	0.14
Years of education	-0.05	0.02	-0.04	0.02	-0.03	0.02	-0.03	0.02
Frequency of Internet use	0.01	0.03	-0.01	0.03	-0.02	0.03	0.01	0.03
Evaluation of influence of the Internet on oneself	-0.26***	0.10	-0.25***	0.10	-0.21**	0.11	-0.22**	0.11
Perceived frequency of Internet use of the public	0.12	0.09	0.04	0.09	0.04	0.09	0.04	0.09
Perceived influence of online media on the public	-	-	0.21**	0.07	0.22***	0.07	0.23***	0.07
Evaluation of the perceived influence of online media on the public	-	-	-	-	0.07	0.07	0.05	0.08
Perceived influence of online media on the public*evaluation of influence	-	-	-	-	-	-	0.09	0.06
R^2	0.44		0.48		0.48		0.49	
R^2 change			0.04**		0.00		0.01	

Note. All variables concerning perception and evaluation of influence on the public are centered.

* $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$; *** $p < .001$; $n = 151-154$.

of online media on the public—an influence that is not necessarily deemed negative as the findings of the present study have also shown.

Following the results of the regression analyses, the perceived strength of online media's political effects on the public leads to an increasing support for censorship. However, following the results of the indirect effects analysis, an effect of the presumed influence was found only when controlling for the perceived suitability of the Internet for political information, which turned out to mediate a negative effect of presumed influence on support for censorship: The assumption that online media have a strong influence on the public is often associated with the parliamentarians' perception that online media are suitable for political information. And the more the parliamentarians perceive the Internet as suitable for political communication, the less they support censorship. This leads to the result that presumed political influences of online media both (directly) increase and (indirectly) decrease the support for Internet censorship.

Whether the influence is considered explicitly harmful is largely irrelevant though. This result adds to the current knowledge concerning the effects of presumed media influences: Apparently (controlled for the perceived suitability of the Internet) politicians start having doubts as soon as they ascribe great political power to online media—not because they perceive the influence of online media to be negative, but maybe because they consider media to be a competitor to the political system as regards public attention. To this is added that the amount of online content and the number of participants in the online communication processes are so vast, and political discussions, for example, in user comment sections, are sometimes nonobjective or polemic. This does not necessarily lead to a negative evaluation of the online media's political influence, but it can result in insecurity. However, these conclusions are speculative. Future studies should examine under which circumstances parliamentarians consider the influence problematic.

This study examined only parliamentarians' attitudes toward online censorship and parliamentarians' intentions for action. It did not examine what the politicians actually did. Besides, the items concerning a stronger control of political influence of 'the Internet' are unspecific; this could lead to the fact that the respondents referred to different content. This is why future studies should also focus on the influence of specific content.

Furthermore, it must be pointed out that a large majority of the members of the Bundestag tends to object Internet censorship. The perception of a stronger media influence increased their support of censorship at a rather low general level. So, in future studies, further variables could be added; for example, it could be differentiated between politicians who are involved with media politics and those who are not. Finally, the results are valid only for the members of parliament of a specific country. Comparative studies should examine whether the findings are also true for members of other parliaments.

Funding

This work was supported by the German Research Foundation [research group "Political Communication in the Online World," subproject 3, grant number 1381].

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