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The Impact of Editorial Content on the Political Agenda in Germany: Theoretical Assumptions and Open Questions Regarding a Neglected Subject in Mass Communication Research

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Abstract

This paper takes the perspective of media as autonomous actors in the political process. In editorials media legitimately try to influence the agendas and decisions of the political system not only by explicitly expressing their opinions on issues and political actors, but also by assigning relevance to certain issues or subissues and framing and interpreting political events according to their editorial stance. It may be assumed that the impact of editorials on the political system depends on the degree of issue focusing and opinion consonance: If different newspapers comment on the same issues and express similar opinions, considerable pressure is put on the political system. Our theoretical considerations of the role of "media opinion" in the political process and a review of the relevant agenda-building literature indicate a research gap regarding the impact of editorials on the political agenda. The empirical project outlined in this paper intends to help closing this gap. Editorial content of the leading German newspapers between 1993 and 1998 will be related to data on statements and decisions of the political system in order to investigate under what circumstances media consonance is achieved and how the political system reacts to it.

Zusammenfassung:

Dieser Beitrag betrachtet Medien als autonome Akteure im politischen Prozeß. In Kommentaren nehmen sie ihr Recht in Anspruch, Einfluß auf die Agenden und Entscheidungen des politischen Systems auszuüben, indem sie Probleme und Akteure explizit bewerten, aber auch bestimmten Themen oder Themenaspekten Relevanz zuweisen und politische Ereignisse entsprechend ihrer redaktionellen Linie deuten und interpretieren. Man kann davon ausgehen, daß der Einfluß von Kommentaren auf das politische System vom Ausmaß an Themenfokussierung und Meinungskonsonanz abhängt: Wenn unterschiedliche Zeitungen die gleichen Themen kommentieren und ähnliche Meinungen zum Ausdruck bringen, steigt der Druck auf das politische System. Unsere theoretischen Überlegungen zur Rolle von "Medienmeinung" im politischen Prozeß und ein Überblick über relevante Arbeiten zum Agenda-Building zeigen, daß der Einfluß von Kommentaren auf die politische Agenda bisher nur ungenügend untersucht wurde. Das empirische Projekt, das hier vorgestellt wird, soll zur Schließung dieser Forschungslücke beitragen. Um festzustellen, unter welchen Bedingungen eine übereinstimmende Kommentierung entsteht und wie das politische System darauf reagiert, sollen Kommentarinhalte aus überregionalen Tageszeitungen zwischen 1993 und 1998 mit Daten über Äußerungen und Entscheidungen im politischen System in Beziehung gesetzt werden.

The Impact of Editorial Content on the Political Agenda in Germany: Theoretical Assumptions and Open Questions Regarding a Neglected Subject in Mass Communication Research[1]

Christiane Eilders

1.   Introduction

Due to the growing demand for more transparency in politics and the pressure on political actors to legitimize their decisions it has become increasingly important for political actors to generate publicity and a favorable public opinion for their concerns (Gerhards 1992: 307; Sarcinelli 1987: 27; Hug 1997: 21pp). Yet, the term "public opinion" is still contradictory and poorly defined (Fuchs/Pfetsch 1996). Instead of following the common assumption that public opinion is the aggregate of individual attitudes we proceed from the theoretically more substantial concept of public opinion as output of public communication (Neidhardt 1994: 25). Since the role of non-mediated public communication has continuously declined (Gerhards 1991: 9) the media constitute the most important subsystem of the public sphere in modern societies (Gerhards/Neidhardt 1991). Public communication, that is the open exchange of issues and opinions noticeable by a large audience, is organized and structured by the media according to professional criteria and norms. Public opinion thus becomes visible through the contributions of various actors who advance their views on certain issues in print and electronic media. These contributions may cover a variety of issues or concentrate on a few, they may represent consonant or dissonant opinions. Public opinion becomes a

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[1]   This paper is part of the larger empirical project 'editorials and public opinion' currently being prepared by Friedhelm Neidhardt, Barbara Pfetsch and the author. It outlines the state of the art regarding our research questions, some theoretical and conceptional considerations and the research design for the empirical part of the project. Also see our paper 'Pressekommentare und öffentliche Meinung', in: Schatz, Heribert/Jarren, Otfried/Knaup, Bettina (eds.), Machtkonzentration in der Multimediagesellschaft? Beiträge zu einer Neubestimmung des Verhältnisses von politischer und medialer Macht. Opladen 1997, pp. 176-187.

consistent and politically effective factor as a certain degree of correspondence develops regarding issues as well as opinions.

The crucial role of the media in political communication is not restricted to mediating information between the political system and the audience. They do not only serve as neutral transmitters of information but also interpret and assess the events, issues and opinions they disseminate. They take an active role in the communication process by expressing their own views and opinions and trying to influence the agendas and attitues of citizens and political actors. Opinion in the media has often been subject to criticism. It is seen as a problematic bias rather than as a legitimate expression of the media´s own views. Not the expression of opinion itself but the confounding of opinion and news is problematic. As long as opinion is marked as such the media have the right to take their own view and openly try to influence public opinion formation or even policy decisions.

This paper focuses on the role of the media as autonomous actors in political communication. Whereas we have considerable knowledge about attitudes and relevance structures of politicians and the "ordinary citizens", as well as about the media´s performance regarding their information function, only little is known about their autonomous acting in the political process, about the media´s genuine voice on the relevance of issues and events, on their interpretations and evaluations and on its impact on people´s opinions and on politics. Page is right when he points out that research has neglected this perspective and calls for a more systematic and comprehensive study of "the media as political actors" (Page 1996b). We are interested in two aspects of the role of media in the political process: First, how do the media define significant issues and what views are expressed, and second, under what circumstances are the media successful in finding resonance for their relevance assignments, interpretations and opinions in the political system? This paper will sketch the theoretical assumptions, the research questions, and the design of an empirical project on newspaper editorials that is currently being prepared at the Science Center Berlin together with Friedhelm Neidhardt and Barbara Pfetsch.

First, we will develop our notion of media as autonomous actors in the political process, then elaborate on the role of editorials and the strategies of communicating political opinion. A review of literature regarding the impact of media opinion on the political system will show a gap in research activity that our project intends to close.

2. The media as actors in political communication

In modern societies deliberation does not take place "face to face" any more, but is mediated by the mass media. Professional communicators, namely political experts and journalists rather than ordinary citizens talk to each other and to the public. They "assemble, explain, debate, and disseminate the best available information and ideas about public policy, in ways that are accessible to large audiences of ordinary citizens" (Page 1996a: 7-8). The citizens form their opinions about relevant issues, adequate interpretations and possible solutions by paying attention to the information supplied by the media and by observing the discourse between the professional communicators. The political actors themselves also need the media to observe public affairs. Thus, they do not only directly - in terms of "face to face" interaction - participate in the political process, but also collect information on issues and opinions through the media.

The dissemination of information through the mass media is an undisputed media function in modern societies (Holzer 1971: 36). It assigns media a predominantly passive role in the political process, providing a forum for a variety of political actors to express their particular views but not contributing their own view. In Germany, media are also expected to supervise and criticize the political process, which puts them in a slightly more active position (Sarcinelli 1991: 472pp; Holzer 1971: 38). Yet, this supervisory function has not lead to a clarification of the degree of media activity, respectively the role of explicit or implicit opinion in media coverage. There are two main paradigms concerning opinion in mass media research: The media are either regarded as ordinary mediating agencies for events and issues without any consideration of political bias in selection and interpretation, or they are considered as

manipulative and manipulated agencies influencing public attitudes and policy decisions without democratic legitimation (e.g. Noelle-Neumann 1977, Donsbach 1982).

Restricting the role of the media to an exclusive information agency, however, is not only a deficient description of the media but also means distorting and underestimating the legitimate active role of the media in the process of opinion formation[2]. In political communication processes the mass media are participating actors with genuine political interests and goals (Schulz 1993: 36; Page 1996b). Confounding the two aspects of media messages - the neutral dissemination and the media´s autonomous contribution - leads to the perception of media as an uncomfortably diffuse factor in political communication. The claim of neutral information dissemination and the media´s right to contribute to the political discourse as autonomous actors with their own voice thus have to be treated separately.

Through editorials the media are explicitly authorized to publicly express their opinions and by noticeably commenting on public affairs they make use of their right to present themselves as autonomous actors. In Germany, editorials do not represent individual views of single journalists, but indicate the editorial stance of a media outlet (Schönbach 1977, Hagen 1992). It can be assumed that media regard their editorials as a means to position and stabilize themselves on the audience market since editorial stance corresponds with certain political segmentations of the public. This applies in particular to national prestige newspapers whose editorial stance can be located on a left-right-scale. There are more liberal and more conservative media outlets and their distance to political parties differs considerably (Kepplinger 1985, Voltmer 1997). It can be assumed that editorials reflect the political views of the papers and serve as a forum of presentation for the media´s own view of public affairs.

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[2]   See Schulz (1989) for a discussion of different concepts of the relation between media and reality.

3.   Relevance assignment, framing, priming, and explicit opinion

In editorials and commentary the media legitimately express their views of relevant issues, their positions on particular policy options, their opinions about certain events or actors and arguments in support of these. Relevance assignment, of course, is not restricted to the opinion section of the media. Through certain presentation characteristics - in a paper that would be headline size, article length and the position of the article - the media always communicate their assessment of issue salience. Editorials or commentaries, however, give them an additional chance to emphasize a certain issue. By selecting one issue out of the stream of events continuously taking place they signal that it is important enough to comment on it and give it extra space. Thus, additional attention is generated. Agenda-setting research indicates that the media´s relevance assignments - indicated by the frequency and prominence of presentation - corresponds with the issue salience in the perceptions of the audience. This applies to the agendas of ordinary citizens as well as to the agendas and sometimes even the concrete decisions of political actors (for reviews of agenda-setting and agenda-building research see Rogers/Dearing 1988 and Eichhorn 1996). It can be assumed that not only news coverage but editorials and commentaries as well affect the agendas of the mass media audience. Before discussing the effects media messages in general and editorials and commentaries in particular might have on various segments of society we need to consider the particular strategies of communicating opinion in editorials and commentaries.

In editorials and commentaries media not only communicate their relevance assignments for complete issues and events, they can also assign relevance to certain aspects of an issue or event by putting special emphasis on these aspects or highlighting certain actors or particular dimensions of a problem. This accentuation already implicitly indicates the author´s opinion on the subject and establishes a certain mode of interpretation. If it holds true that mass media content affects perception rather than attitudes, the instrumental accentuation of dimensions relevant to judgement can have a greater impact than explicit opinion (Kepplinger et al. 1989).

One way of implicitly expressing an opinion on a given issue is referred to as framing. The concept of framing can be traced back to Goffman (1974)[3] who sees frames as a means to organize experience by supplying the context within which a particular occurrence or event is interpreted. Frames thus enable individuals "to locate, perceive, identify, and label" occurrences within their life space and the world at large" (Snow et al. 1986: 464). The concept of framing is applied in a variety of different research areas. One of the most prominent research traditions is social movement research. Movements "frame, or assign meaning to and interpret, relevant events and conditions in ways that are intended to mobilize potential adherents and constituents, to garner bystander support, and to demobilize antagonists (Snow/Benford 1988: 198). The concept has also proved useful to explain choices under uncertainty (Kahnemann/Tversky 1984): Experiments indicated that different frames used for the same option or alternative significantly affected the decisions made by the respondents. In methodology the concept of framing can explain differential effects of question wording in surveys. Certain words or sentences in survey questions can set up a particular frame which might affect respondents´ behavior (Iyengar 1991: 11).

Framing in communication research refers to the more or less intentional use of frames for reporting an event or commenting on an event. Editors can thereby influence the interpretation and evaluation of an event. There are two main framing strategies in media coverage. "The episodic frame depicts issues in terms of specific instances, for example a homelesse person, a terrorist bombing. The thematic frame, by contrast, depicts political issues more broadly and abstractly by placing them in some appropriate context. In appearance, the thematic frame takes the form of a backgrounder report (Iyengar 1996: 62). Results of a number of experiments showed that episodic framing breeds individualistic as opposed to societal attributions of responsibility" (Iyengar 1996: 62).

The significance of framing strategies in political contexts can be explained by the fact "that people are exquisitely sensitive to contextual cues when they make decisions, formulate

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[3]   Also see Kahnemann/Tversky (1984), Iyengar (1991), Gamson (1992) and Price/Tewksbury (1995).

judgements, or express opinions. The manner in which a problem of choice is 'framed' is a contextual cue that may profoundly influence decision outcomes" (Iyengar 1991: 11). "Framing should be particularly significant as a determinant of choice when the choice problem involves politics. Political issues are typically complex, political discourse is ambiguous, and levels of public knowledge about and interest in politics are low" (Iyengar 1991: 13).

The accentuation of issues and events or even small aspects of these can also affect the judgement of a political actor. According to the concept of priming the performance of a political actor is measured against the issues or subissues previously highlighted by the media (Iyengar/Kinder 1987, Krosnick/Kinder 1990). The reception of a media report on unemployment would then have a different effect on the audience´s perception of political performance of a political actor than the reception of a report on economy. Priming - like framing effects - can also be explained with information processing theories. "According to the priming theory, when faced with a judgement or choice, people ordinarily do not take all plausible considerations into account, carefully examine and weigh all their implications, and then integrate them all into a summary decision. People typically forgo such exhaustive analysis and instead employ intuitive shortcuts and simple rules of thumb (Kahneman/Slovic/Tversky 1982). One such heuristic is to rely upon information that is most accessible in memory, information that comes to mind spontaneously and effortlessly when a judgement must be made" (Krosnick/Kinder 1990: 499).

We have already pointed out that relevance assignments for certain issues or events by the media as well as framing are not restricted to the opinion section of the media outlet. They are applied in both news coverage and editorials or commentaries. Explicit opinion, however, as opposed to the above mentioned more implicit modes of judgement, has its legitimate place in editorials and commentaries. Only there, the media are free to openly express their own views, explain their standpoint, support or criticize political positions and - last but not least - simply judge events and political actors. Considering all these forms of evaluation, it becomes clear that in editorials and commentaries the media can employ a variety of strategies in order

to express their opinions and getting the editorial stance of the particular media outlet across to their audience.

4.   The impact of media opinion on the political system

Regarding the effects of media opinion in political communication, we need to distinguish between micro- and macrolevel effect. Whereas effects on the microlevel refer to the impact of single editorials on individual recipients, macrolevel effects regard the impact of collective media opinion on public opinion formation and political processes. Taking a macrolevel perspective we are not interested in single editorials but in the universe of issues and opinions expressed in the media system. Correspondingly, regarding media effects our focus is not on individual opinion or behavioral change, but on the collective reaction to media opinion. We want to know how the political system reacts to collective media opinion.

So far, most studies of media and politics have either been concerned with the interdependence of media and politics and the *structural* effects of this relation, or they have dealt with cognitive effects and atttitude change in the audience. Compared to the large body of research on media effects in the audience the efforts to investigate the effects of media content on politics seem rather weak. Agenda-setting research, however, originally concerned with media impact on issue salience in the audience (Cohen 1963, McCombs/Shaw 1972), has broadened its focus and also deals with the media´s impact on the political agenda (Rogers/Dearing 1988, Eichhorn 1996). Rogers and Dearing distinguish this approach from the larger body of audience-oriented research: "agenda-building" or more precisely "policy-agenda-setting" refers to the assumed impact of media content on issue salience among political actors and sometimes even on policy itself. Policy-agenda-setting is not exclusively concerned with media impact. Instead, it denotes the process "through which the policy agendas of political elites are influenced by a variety of factors, including media agendas and public agendas" (Rogers/Dearing 1988: 556). Media are conceptualized as one out of many possible influences on policy.

Agenda-building research highlights only one perspective regarding the interaction between media and politics. It discusses the impact of the media agenda on the political agenda. According to the classification scheme by Rogers and Dearing it is not central to this research interest whether or not the political agenda also influences the media agenda. That question is part of the media-agenda-setting research which deals not only with the impact of politics on media content but studies all sorts of influences on the media agenda. Of course, agenda-building researchers are aware of the interactive character of the relation between media and political agendas, but do not necessarily address both sides of the interaction. Although the legitimate research interest in agenda-building might be onedirectional, an empirical analysis has to take the twodirectional processes into account. If media and political agendas are compared the causal relations between parallel agendas have to be tested very carefully in order not to simply attribute empirical correlations to a simple causal model where the media agenda represents the stimulus and the political agenda represents the response.

Most of the work in the field of agenda-building research are qualitative studies on the basis of interviews with political actors. The politicians were asked whether or not and in what particular ways media content affects their work and how they deal with the media. Some studies are single-issue investigations of media coverage and either observations of related policy decisions or interviews on issue salience before and after the media reports. Only few studies included a variety of issues and then related these content data to a quantitative account of policy decisions. Nevertheless, the majority of these studies indicated a considerable impact of media coverage on policy makers. Cohen (1973), Gilberg et al. (1980), Cook et al. (1983), Leff et al. (1986), Protess et al. (1987), and Pritchard/Berkowitz (1993) all found empirical evidence for media influence on policymakers. Walker (1977) and Gormley (1975) also found evidence for a strong correlation between media coverage and policymaking but were not able to clarify the causal relation between the two. As far as the other studies are concerned, media coverage did not always affect the perceived issue salience, but at least resulted in concrete actions concerning the issue reported in the media. Even if political actors did not assign more relevance to an issue extensively covered by the

media, they obviously became more sensitive towards the issue and took action. This might be explained by their fear of an unfavorable public opinion. They obviously expected the media reports to generate attention and support for the concerns expressed in the media which lead them to take action regarding the reported issue. Policy decisions are not the only field were media coverage shows its potential power. The prosecution of criminals - often being subject of public discussion and particularily strong feelings among the general public - also seems to be a sensitive issue and thus well suited to generate public opinion. Pritchard´s findings of considerable media influence on the prosecution of criminals back this understanding (Pritchard 1986, Pritchard et al. 1987).

Studying media impact on policy the significance of public opinion becomes quite obvious. The political actors under study mostly had a more or less diffuse understanding of public opinion being a mixture of aggregate poll data, media opinion, and public sentiment. However, even when they want to find out about the distribution of opinions on a particular issue among the electorate, they cannot always rely on opinion surveys. Since poll data are not readily available for every issue and at all times "the news media serve as sources of information about public opinion and even serve as surrogates for it" (Kennamer 1992: 2; also see Pritchard 1992: 105; Sigal 1973, Entman 1989).

Whereas there is evidence regarding the impact of public opinion on policy in the U.S. (Page/Shapiro 1983), in Germany, only one study has systematically investigated this issue. Relating changes of opinion as indicated by poll data between 1949 and 1990 to political actions Brettschneider (1995) found a considerable responsiveness of the political system. About 60% of the cases of opinion change resulted in actions by either parliament or its individual members. This proved true especially when opinion change moved towards consensus rather than polarization (Brettschneider 1995: 177), shortly before rather than after elections, and if a policy was to be kept up rather than altered. Brettschneider suggested that media do represent a "considerable stimulation" for public policy (Brettschneider 1995: 233). Since media content was not included in the study, however, we have no indication of media influence on public policy in Germany.

Regarding the specific impact of media *opinion* - as expressed in editiorials and commentaries - there is some evidence in U.S.-studies. These studies do not deal with possible effects in the political system, but rather concentrate on ordinary citizens. Results indicate that editorials can sometimes have a strong impact on people´s attitudes and policy preferences (Page/Shapiro 1984, Page/Shapiro/Dempsey 1987, Page/Shapiro 1992, West 1991, Andreoli/Worchel 1978, Cundy 1989). Knowing how hard it is to change people´s attitudes by mass communication, it is surprising that obvious persuasive efforts could have that kind of impact. Obviously recipients assign expertise and high credibility to political commentators and adopt their views and opinions when complex situations demand comprehensive knowledge on political issues. The relatively high impact of expert opinions detected in some of those studies supports this assumption.

Whether or not editorials and commentaries are capable of exerting their influence on policymakers also, cannot be answered at this point. It does seem to be a plausible assumption, however, taking into consideration that a certain impact of media content on agendas and policy preferences of the citizens can be assumed and that political actors seem to anticipate those media effects (see the literature on the third-person-effect in Lasorsa 1992), it would only be rational for the political system to closely observe this determinant of public opinion formation (Fuchs/Pfetsch 1996: 12). Mass media content can be instrumentalized as a sort of feed-back-agency to check how the problemdefinitions and solutions put forward by politics are accepted (Fuchs/Pfetsch 1996: 13). Compared to poll data media are a highly sensitive and fast reacting system for the assessment of public sentiments. In Germany, interviews with members of the public relation departments of the government indicate that print media are a more significant source of information on these issues than electronic media. This could be due to the easier processing of paper material, but could also be explained by the fact that editorials contain more instructive information for decisionmaking (Fuchs/Pfetsch 1996: 23).

Results from surveys among political actors in Germany support the significance of newspapers for their political work and mostly confine this to the national prestige newspapers. Almost half of the federal and "country"-representatives view the national prestige newspapers as important or very important for their parliamentary work (Puhe/Würzberg 1989: 40; Herzog et al. 1990: 76). Their significance is also reflected in their frequent use by political actors. This group not only reads national prestige papers disproportionately often but also spends disproportionately much time reading them (Puhe/Würzberg 1989: 40; Herzog et al. 1990: 74). Apart from the political and economic news political actors are mainly interested in the editorials (Puhe/Würzberg 1989: 40).

The significance of the national prestige newspapers also roots in their role as opinion leaders in the German media system. According to Kepplinger (1985) journalists of different media outlets described the "Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung" (71%) and "Süddeutsche Zeitung" (69%) and to a lesser extent "Frankfurter Rundschau" (46%) and "Welt" (29%) as "very important for their own reporting" (Kepplinger 1985: 19). It can be concluded from these analyses that the effect of the national prestige newspapers exceeds the effects on their immediate audience.

Our macrolevel perspective directs the focus of this paper to the universe of opinions in the media system rather than to the editorial or commentary content of particular media outlets. Therefore it becomes relevant whether papers select and comment unanimously or whether they refer to divergent issues and express different opinions. From a macroperspective, time also becomes an important factor. If a media outlet keeps addressing a certain issue for a long period of time, the issue should not only become increasingly known among the audience but should also increasingly be considered as relevant. Also, consensus and divergencies develop over time and should become a more effective political factor as these constellations stay stable over time. We shall now discuss these macrolevel concepts in greater detail and relate them to the concept of public opinion.

5.   Focusing, consonance and persistence

When referring to public opinion a certain degree of consonance between the opinions of the ones who publicly speak is implicitly implied in the concept (Noelle-Neumann 1973). Noelle-Neumann and Mathes define consonance as "uniformity of facts and arguments which do not result from reality but from a choice made by the communicators" (Noelle-Neumann/Mathes 1987: 410). The significance of this variable results from the assumption that consonance is an important predisposition of the effects of public opinion on the political system (Neidhardt 1994). Page also highlights this aspect: "The concept of 'political actor', applied to the media or anyone else, implies observable action that is purposive (though perhaps functional rather than consciously intended) and sufficiently unified, so it makes sense to speak of a single actor. A critical question, therefore, concerns whether - or to what extent - media outlets do in fact use their publications and broadcasts in a purposive and unified fashion to pursue policy objectives" (Page 1996b: 20). Only through consonant contributions in political communication can the media be perceived as a collective actor and effectively influence the audience and the political system.

In communications literature the concept of consonance is used with regard to both issues and opinions. A distinctive analysis of the effects of editorials, however, calls for a differentiation between the correspondence of issues and opinions since it implies different assumptions about the role and effect of media opinion. In order to reflect these differences we suggest a terminological differentiation: consonance refers to the evaluative dimension. It is defined as corresponding opinions. The degree of correspondence on the issue dimension is referred to as focusing. Thus, focusing denotes a correspondence of issues, whereas consonance denotes a correspondence of opinion.

Regarding the formation of public opinion we expect that a low degree of focusing implies a fragmentation of public opinion, whereas a lack of consonance points to potential conflicts. The degrees of focusing and consonance in the media system are to be investigated empirically and will probably vary between issues. We expect that the pluralistic structure of

society and the marketing strategies of competing media outlets of binding segments of the audience through their editorial stance result in a low degree of focusing and consonance. High degrees of focusing and consonance, on the other hand, can be expected if we take into account some structural characteristics of media systems: the corresponding standardized attention criteria and interpretation strategies, the uniformity of professional and class interests, the media´s observation of each other and their reciprocal coorientation as well as the opinion leadership of the prestige media (Noelle-Neumann/Mathes 1987: 402; Kepplinger 1985: 19; Halloran et al. 1970). Empirical analysis will show which issues succeed and which opinions emerge in the media system.

Finally, regarding the political macroeffects of media opinion, we need to pay attention to the persistence of focusing and consonance in the media system over time. Only by considering the persistence over time we can find out whether "issue-attention-cycles" (Downs 1972) do in fact take place within short time periods (Funkhouser 1973) and whether the "half-life" of issues on the media agenda is shorter than the respective time period on the political agenda; a question that has serious implications for the political effects of the media (Kingdon 1984: 61-64). Noelle-Neumann also considers stability over time as an important condition for media effects. In her view media effects on attitude change of the audience cannot be accounted for by the singular reception of one specific news item. Effects rather develop through slow cumulation of repeated messages (Noelle-Neumann 1973). This idea not only regards the chances of media messages to affect the audience but also represents an important factor in the perception of the media´s voice by the political system. If issues and opinions in editorials constantly change, their effect should be relatively small. If, however, stable issue focusing and opinion consonance develop over time, we expect an increasing pressure on the political system. This pressure will be the stronger the more persistent focusing and consonance are.

6. Research questions and study design

In order to analyze the development of issues and opinions in editorials with regard to focusing and consonance and its impact on policy we need to observe the respective correspondences in a long term perspective. Only then the relation between media and politics can be assessed in terms of a chronological order of issues on either of the two agendas. We plan to analyze media opinion for a time period including two national elections (1994 and 1998). In order to observe the before- and after-election-coverage we aim at an analysis of the time between 1993 and 1998.

The main part of our study involves two-steps: In a first step we will investigate the editorial content, in a second step we will assess the actions in the political system. An empirical study of the media´s autonomous voice in political communication in Germany needs to include the issues and opinions in editorials as well as focusing and consonance between the relevant media outlets. Due to the dominant role of the national prestige press in the German media system and its significance for the political actors, the editorials of five prestige newspapers will be analyzed. The five papers are distributed across the political spectrum. "Welt" is located on the very right-hand side, "Tageszeitung" on the very left-hand side[4] of the left-right-scale. Between these poles - starting from the right - "Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung", "Süddeutsche Zeitung" and "Frankfurter Rundschau" are located (Kepplinger 1985:19pp, Hagen 1992, Donsbach/Wolling/Blomberg 1996; slightly different: Voltmer 1997.

Employing a quantitative content analysis the following questions will be investigated:

- Which issues are dealt with in the editorials, which views are expressed, and which actors are mentioned? How are they evaluated?

- How do issues and opinions in different newspapers develop over time? Which issues and actors occupy the agenda for how long in which papers? How consistent and persistent is the expression of opinion regarding specific issues and actors in different papers?
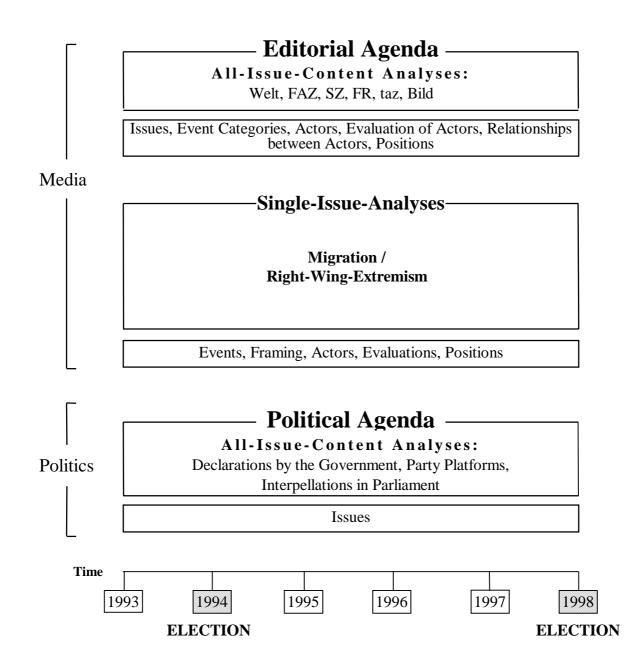
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[4] The "Tageszeitung" was not included in any of the studies referred to, but is assumed to be an opinion leader on the alternative sector (Mathes/Pfetsch 1991).

- To what extent do issue focusing and opinion consonance develop between different papers? How strong or weak are the correspondences between the different papers regarding the kinds of issues, actors and opinions, how stable are focusing and consonance over what time period?

In a second step we intend to analyze the impact of focusing and consonance by relating the editorial content with data on the resonance in the political system. For this purpose we plan to examine the statements of government and opposition in parliament as well as party programs. These data are ready for use at the Science Center and can be related with media data any time.

With these two steps of analysis we intend to close a research gap concerning the conditions of media influence - in particular the influence of media opinion - on the political system. By studying the whole array of media and political agendas across several years the analysis has to be rather coarse regarding the differentiation of issues, actors and opinions. We are aware of certain shortcomings resulting from this design: The treatment of specific events cannot be reconstructed because the vast amount of data only allows for the use of highly aggregated categories of issues, actors, and political positions. Yet, the high level of abstraction first, enables us to observe the media and political agendas over a long period of time and second, allows us - unlike many other studies - to include the complete array of issues in the study, so the relative development of different issues can be observed over time.

Research Design
Editorials and Public Opinion

Media

Editorial Agenda

A l l - I s s u e - C o n t e n t   A n a l y s e s :
Welt, FAZ, SZ, FR, taz, Bild

Issues, Event Categories, Actors, Evaluation of Actors, Relationships between Actors, Positions

Single-Issue-Analyses

**Migration /
Right-Wing-Extremism**

Events, Framing, Actors, Evaluations, Positions

Politics

Political Agenda

A l l - I s s u e - C o n t e n t   A n a l y s e s :
Declarations by the Government, Party Platforms,
Interpellations in Parliament

Issues

Time

| 1993 | 1994 | 1995 | 1996 | 1997 | 1998 |

ELECTION   **ELECTION**

In addition to that, this all-issue longitudinal study of editorials also serves methodological purposes: We want to develop a valid and cost-efficient instrument that is suitable for a long-term observation of the "media´s own voice". Compared to the total media coverage, editorials represent a relatively distinct amount of text material and are easily accessible. The analysis of editorials can therefore be a highly efficient way of assessing the editorial stance of a paper without examining the total coverage. The correlation between editorial stance in news coverage and editorials will be investigated by a control analysis. We expect the correlations to be strong and significant. To the degree that our hypothesis holds true, editorials are an adequate research object for investigating the total political positions of the media.

The shortcomings of the main part of our study mainly regard the level at which issue focusing and opinion consonance are assessed. The highly aggregated categories for issues and political positions do not permit an investigation of the degree of correspondence in commenting concrete events and expressing issue- or even event-related opinions. It is also impossible to analyze which frames are used in the presentation of particular events, and which specific aspects are highlighted in what presentation. In order to assess the degrees of focusing and consonance between different papers on a concrete level and find out whether two or more editorials refer to the same event or subissue and whether they express identical views on the same issues, events, actors and political positions, we need to concentrate on one specific issue and conduct an in-depth-analysis with issue-specific categories of subissues, events, actors and political positions. For this purpose we plan to focus on the issue of right wing extremism and migration in Germany. It relates to the prominent discussion on integration in modern societies and is currently being investigated in another project at the science center. This means an efficient reduction of work in terms of the development of subissues, events, frames and actors categories since there are already content analysis data at the science center (Koopmans 1996a, 1996b).

7. Summary and conclusion

Starting from the notion of media´s significance in complex modern societies and their primary function of neutral information dissemination, we developed the perspective of media - apart from fulfilling this undisputed function - being autonomous actors in the political process, legitimately expressing their own views and opinions on political issues in editorials and commentaries. In the opinion sections of the various media outlets the media assign relevance to certain issues or events by selecting them for commentary and thereby communicate their perception of issue salience to the audience and the political system. By emphasizing particular aspects of these issues and events and presenting them in a certain context they frame them in a particular way and thus establish a mode of interpretation that is already a political statement. Apart from these rather implicit evaluation strategies media also openly judge events and actors and take political positions. The views and opinions in editorials and commentaries represent the collective political position, the editorial stance, of the particular media outlet.

The review of literature regarding the relation between the media, the audience, and the political system in general and the impact of the media´s own voice on policy in particular indicated a significant gap in research: Although there are empirical results regarding the media´s impact on the agendas of the audience and there has been some research on the media´s impact on policy agendas, as well as a few studies on the impact of citizen´s opinion on public policy, there is no research activity on the particular influence of media opinion on policymaking. Our project intends to close that gap.

In Germany, there are five opinion-leading national prestige newspapers whose editorial stances roughly correspond with the spectrum of the political parties and can be located on a left-right-scale. Their positions have proved fairly stable across issues and time. We plan to analyze the issues and opinions expressed in the editorials of these newspapers between 1993 and 1998 and relate them to actions in the political system in order to investigate the political responsiveness towards German media opinion. Media opinion becomes more visible as the

media speak with "one voice" and thus present a unified factor in political communication. We expect a higher degree of resonance in the political system the more the different media focus on the same issues and express similiar opinions.

A political reaction to focused and consonant media content is not necessarily a negative result of the "mediatization" of politics. Considering our perspective of media as political actors it seems quite desirable that the political system reacts to the concerns of the media. One has to keep in mind, however, that the media is only one out of many other less powerful political actors taking part in the political public discourse. If one wants to judge on the impact of media on politics the relative chances of the other institutionalized and non-institutionalized political actors to voice their opinions in public debate have to be considered.

8.   Literature

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