Values of German media users: 1986-2007

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1 Introduction

How people behave within a society is, to a large degree, the product of conventions and norms. Both are actualizations of the society’s values that function as guideposts of what is considered desirable and appropriate in a variety of settings. Since values are at the core of what defines a society, it is no surprise that they are central constructs in a variety of disciplines, such as sociology, political science, or ethnology. And they are studied regularly in other fields as well, where scholars are interested in why people buy certain products but not others, how personalities develop, or in what ways one cultural group differs from another—to name just a few questions for which values are part of the answer.

With regard to media and values, scholarly and especially public attention has been drawn to the possibly dangerous effects of mass media on people’s values. When Luhmann (2002) discusses how value change across generations takes place, he aligns the impact of mass media with that of disrupting experiences such as wars. He credits mass-media effects as the leading drive behind value change.

While Luhmann refers to the term “value change” in a neutral way, others, scholars and laymen alike, express strong fears about this phenomenon. Currently, two of the most popular fields of this discussion deal with sexually explicit and violent content on different and often “new” screen media (and rightly so, following the overviews in, e.g., Harris & Bartlett, 2009; and G. G. Sparks, Sparks, & Sparks, 2009). “Older” media seem to be exempt from this discussion. But when they were newly introduced to audiences, virtually all media were seen as potentially dangerous, in need of regulation or inadvisable for the malleable souls and minds of, e.g., children, women or the uneducated (for an overview, see e.g., Schoenbach, 2001; Wartella & Reeves, 1983). However, the amount of reliable scientific evidence for such effects on values (as opposed to attitudes or behavior) is minimal.

But research on media audiences covers more than the possible effects of media exposure. The “active audience” paradigm focuses on how media users’ traits and qualities lead to different uses of media. With regard to values, a long-
A substantiated function of media use is to find reinforcement for one’s values (Vidmar & Rokeach, 1974). This notion seems widely accepted and can be illustrated by a scene in the British comedy show “The IT Crowd.” Nerd par excellence Moss, having attended a flamboyantly gay musical, exclaims, “Every value I’ve ever held has been questioned.” And, to show that this first visit to a theatre will not be his last, he adds, “And I’m loving it.” The comic effect of the scene arises both from the absurd performance he has watched and his unlikely response. Who, except quirky Moss, would relish having their values put into question and return for another go? Although people may purposefully and for good reasons choose to read controversial books, watch movies or attend live performances they know to be in conflict with their values, this is probably exceptional. Usually, people prefer contents that are in accordance with their own beliefs and values. In a recent experimental study, Iyengar and Hahn (2009; see also Johansen & Joslyn, 2008) found that party preference of media users is a good predictor for choice of conservative versus liberal news. People’s political orientations and preferences thus have an impact on their media use, due to what Sunstein (2007), among others, characterizes as people’s need for comfort. Likewise, it seems obvious that people’s values resonate, in one way or another, with their choice of media channels.

Thus, the relationship between values and media is located between two theoretical poles: On the one hand, media allow people to satisfy a range of different needs (often subsumed under the uses-and-gratifications paradigm), among which is the need to find support for one’s views and opinions about the world. So, values come first. But media have often been described as windows onto otherwise unknowable areas outside one’s own lifeworld. They teach people about values relevant in contexts that transcend the bounds of their everyday lives. This leads to the second, effect-oriented perspective on values and media, which sees individual values as the result of socialization processes to which mass media are important contributors. Media show people what values are acceptable or prone to heated debate, media use thus prepares for a number of situations or encounters in complex societies.

Following the first perspective, one would expect to find that values determine what media offerings an audience chooses or otherwise avoids. The second viewpoint highlights the fact that what media someone uses impacts their values. How these two perspectives can be combined is a central question of the present study.

It is undisputable that media have socially integrative functions in complex modern societies. They are among the most important factors facilitating or even
enabling cohesion and integration that transcend individual lifeworlds (Habermas, 1981; Vlasic, 2004). Media provide information on topics relevant to otherwise hardly reachable groups of people and entertainment that is enjoyed by mass audiences. In sum, mass media have the potential to create links between large, anonymous, and scattered groups of people through shared experiences. In this process, the contents through which integrative effects are achieved reflect cultural values on a daily basis, and these values may even be a decisive factor in the integration of large societies (Vlasic, 2004). This is why some fear the loss of power that traditional media are experiencing due to the autonomy that the Internet allows (see, e.g., Schoenbach, 2007; Sunstein, 2007). With a quasi-infinite number of niches for any special interest, taste, or opinion about the world, a more and more fragmented audience could fall apart, and bonds that were formerly created through common media use could become frail.

But how important are values in users’ choice of media—compared to other criteria? First of all: To what degree are audience members aware of differences in the value patterns of various media offerings? These questions have remained unaddressed by virtually all scholars in the field of values research. Most scholars outside communication research do not even mention mass media in their theory or research. And within our discipline, no systematic studies of values and media use exist, either from the perspective of socialization by value-carrying media, or with regard to the role values may play in selection behavior.

The most fine-grained attempt to answer some of these questions to date has been Besley’s (2008) approach of linking relatively rough measures of media use to personal values. His study highlights three problems for such an undertaking: First, the relationships between values and media use are mediated by numerous third factors. And two opposing causal relationships probably overlay each other (values lead to media use and media feed back on users’ values). This makes it hard to come to reliable conclusions about the exact direction and strength of the relationship between the two concepts. Second, and more importantly, Besley alludes to developments over time in both values and media effects that are impossible to study with existing cross-sectional data. Such dynamics can be expected both on the individual level (in a developmental perspective) and the societal level (commonly referred to as “value change”). And finally, it is unclear whether there is any significant difference of values in the media Besley studied, since content analyses are missing.

The difficulties encountered by Besley put into relief some of the major challenges of studying relationships between values and media. First of all, theories have to be checked for appropriate ways to approach such a subject of
study. Here the interdisciplinary character of communication research comes to the forefront. Values are a prime example of why and on what different levels communication and media relate to very different theoretical traditions. On the intraindividual level, psychological models of motivation and behavior (including media use) can help understand why and to what extent media use should depend upon values. From an interindividual standpoint, socialization and integration are core concepts pertaining to the media’s potential to teach and actualize values within a mass society.

Next, taking into account these different theoretical approaches, under what methodological conditions can values and media use be studied adequately? Ideally, fine-grained measures of media use should be combined with results from content analyses. And, of course, this should be approached through a panel design that would allow different causal relationships or even feedback loops to be discerned. Lastly, would it not be preferable to study the development of values in children and young people? And to apply the most sophisticated indicators for individual values, possibly checking their validity through experiments requiring value-related decisions and choices? Then, what about value change on the societal level?

While these considerations fall beyond the scope of a single research project, I have attempted to answer a number of open questions: What is the role of media in a theory of the acquisition and transformation of personal values? What values are related to what traits of mass media? What is the relevance of media outlets as opposed to specific contents? And lastly: How do changes in the media landscape and in values affect relationships between audience values and media use?

A mere 26 years ago, Spates (1983) wrote “Values exist, but we do not yet know how they work” (p. 43). I hope to shed some light on this subject. Chapter 2 of this thesis gives an overview of the scattered, yet voluminous literature on values and media. It shows that mass-media theory and research have presented sufficient evidence to include the media into theories of values, their appropriation and change. This study argues for an integrative theory of the socialization of values that counts media among the agents usually examined in the study of values. In my own empirical work, I rely on secondary analysis. Using large representative surveys, I concentrate on how personal values relate to media and genre preferences, whether there is a concurrence with values as presented in preferred media, and how these relationships change over time, while both values and the mediated offer undergo transformations.