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Dynamics of political information transmission: How media coverage informs public judgments about politics

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Conclusion

The common wisdom among students of political information is that “information matters.” If political information matters, then so does the *transmission* of it across the public domain. However, we still know little about the role of political information transmission in modern democracies, particularly regarding its role as an agent of *change*. In this dissertation, I provide evidence to suggest that certain types of factual information, when transmitted, can, under some conditions, influence citizens’ political judgments to a degree that is substantively meaningful. It sheds new light on important but unsettled questions as what kinds of political information matter, when or among whom this information matters, and how much it actually matters. In doing so, this dissertation aims to make a contribution to both the communication science literature on media effects and the political science literature on information effects and public opinion. In part, this dissertation also contributes to the political science literature on public opinion about European integration. In this final chapter, I present the main findings and conclusions of the research bundled in this dissertation, and consider their implications. I also discuss some important limitations of this research, and offer suggestions for future work in this domain of scholarship.

Summary of Research Findings

I started my investigation by addressing the fundamental question of whether political information matters. The study presented in *Chapter 1* used panel data to examine if acquiring information about political performance leads citizens to revise their own opinions about such performance accordingly. This study introduced the European setting of the dissertation and followed prior research in distinguishing between the utilitarian and democratic performance of the EU. I found that citizens who acquired performance-relevant information became more approving of the EU’s utilitarian performance but did not update their judgments about its democratic functioning. I also found that people with a *moderate* level of general information

about politics were affected most strongly by new facts about performance. Overall, these results support the notion that the real-world influence of factual information, if relevant, can be distinctive and powerful enough to cause change in existing judgments about politics, even if this influence is not homogeneous. This study is the first to examine such dynamics in the area of European politics.

My findings offered a clear rationale for studying the origins of performance-relevant information, to which I turned in *Chapter 2*. In doing so, I went beyond most prior research to consider the multitude of sources available to citizens in post-broadcast media environments. The study documented in this chapter examined how the likelihood of acquiring information about performance corresponds with the availability of such information specifically in those sources that citizens choose to use on a routine basis. Using a multilevel model, I found that citizens are more likely to learn facts about performance when their preferred sources offer a greater quantity of performance-relevant information. I also found that motivation moderates the influence of availability, such that strongly motivated individuals gain comparatively the most from a greater supply of information. This latter finding is consistent with the hypothesis that motivation emerges as a moderator of political learning in collective media environments with modest levels of information saturation, as is typical for cases involving routine policy events (such as mine).

Notwithstanding that individual media preferences produce variation in information availability and political learning, I also contended that learning opportunity varies above and beyond such preferences according to how widely political information diffuses across the various sources available in a collective media environment. In the study described in *Chapter 3*, I used data from nearly sixty waves of a rolling cross-sectional survey and media content analyses spanning four European countries to test this hypothesis. This study also provided an all-encompassing test of the hypothesis that motivation is a saturation-conditional moderator of political learning. A multilevel analysis revealed that the collective media environment is a remarkably powerful force in inducing information in citizens who reside in it. It also showed that motivation widens gaps in political information in low-saturation environments. In high-saturation environments, however, opportunity and motivation no longer interact; under such conditions, information gaps stabilize and, eventually, narrow. This study, then, did not only corroborate the interaction between supply and demand reported in *Chapter 2*, but also revealed the dynamic nature of this interplay.

In *Chapter 4*, I presented my final study, which was specifically designed to assess the role of political learning as a mechanism by which information transmission influences public

judgments about politics. According to the Conditional Informed Change model, people make informed updates of political judgments if relevant facts are available to them (as information transmission causes learning, which in turn stimulates updating) when they are motivated and skilled enough to do so. My results showed that people who learned from exposure did indeed use what they learned to revise their political views, and also that this indirect exposure effect was pronounced only among moderately knowledgeable individuals with an average or higher level of learning motivation. Thus, consistent with the model, information transmission really can cause movement in individual opinions about politics, but this effect appears to be confined to a subset of people who possess an adequate mix of personal traits that facilitate receptivity to new facts. This study is among the first in the field to demonstrate the dynamics of information-induced change in a real-world political and media environment. I consider the implications of my findings below.

Information Transmission Dynamics: Main Conclusions and Implications

The Role of Information Supply and Demand in Producing Informed Citizens

Perhaps the single most straightforward conclusion to draw from the research bundled in this dissertation is that *the likelihood that citizens acquire political information increases with the availability of that information in the media environment*. No matter how closely someone follows politics, that person is unlikely to pick up information that is absent from the media. If, conversely, availability in the media abounds, then information is easy to obtain. In other words, learning about politics can prove a rather difficult task in some contexts but quite an effortless one in others because learning opportunities vary. In part, this is because citizens self-select into information-rich or information-poor media environments by choice. In part, it is because citizens cannot help but live in collective environments with relatively high or low information saturation. Thus, whether it is actively sought or merely encountered accidentally, learning opportunity begets learning. In fact, the estimated effects of information availability that I document in this dissertation are so robust that they approach – or even surpass – the impact of important individual traits that predict political learning, including motivation.

If such a conclusion seems obvious, consider that both scholarly and popular accounts of the public's level of information often overlook how important the role of political learning opportunity really is. That citizens depend on the media for information about politics is well-recognized; that the media environment does not uniformly guarantee such opportunity is not. In research of political learning, this has typically resulted in demand-driven explanations and

mere assumptions about the presence of relevant political information. “This focus on the individual,” write Delli Carpini and Keeter (1996, p. 8), “derives in part from the assumption that the information environment within which citizens act is both adequate and reasonably equitable.” Ignoring the supply side of political information on the basis of these assumptions, most individual demand-driven models of political learning thus perceive political learning as a process that is purely psychological.¹ Yet as Delli Carpini and Keeter’s work reiterates and this dissertation confirms, these assumptions are false: the availability of political information in the media can neither be assumed to be constant nor be assumed at all (see also Althaus et al., 2011). The opportunity to acquire it, then, “is only partially and imperfectly the result of the personal abilities of individuals [but] also influenced by social, economic, and political forces that are beyond the short-term control of individual citizens” (Delli Carpini & Keeter, 1996, p. 8).² In sum, putting opportunity, next to motivation, at the forefront of explanations of why political information varies provides crucial perspective on how to evaluate evidence of what, or how much, citizens know or don’t know about politics, and learn or don’t learn from the media.

In concluding that the transmission of political information is a critical determinant of individual-level acquisition of such information, this dissertation joins a growing but still very young and modest body of work suggesting that media environments are centrally important to the study of political information and warrant much greater interest from political learning scholars than previously acknowledged (Barabas & Jerit, 2009; Iyengar, Hahn, Bonfadelli, & Marr, 2009). As Prior (2007, p. 255) notes, “[t]he media environment is barely on the map of political science. Studies that state explicitly whether and how political behavior would be different in a different media environment are few and far between.” In light of the conclusion that the media environment – or what is *available* to citizens – matters, it appears evident that the implications for the study of political information are not only substantive and normative, but also methodological. Thus, if scholars wish to verify *which* political facts are available to *whom* to account for learning opportunity, they must not assume but *analyze* the transmission of political information of the facts being modeled as conveyed through the media’s coverage

¹ One prominent example of such a model in the political learning literature is the Cognitive Mediation Model developed by Eveland (Eveland, 2001; Eveland, Shah, & Kwak, 2003).

² For example, the assumption-of-supply approach ignores, as Althaus et al. (2011) point out, “the problem of selection bias in the information conveyed to mass audiences. News media tend to present a view of reality filtered by criteria of newsworthiness, the organizational routines for gathering newsworthy information, and the economic incentives of the news business. These factors systematically distort the transmission of factual information and may create a disjuncture between objective, ‘real-world’ indicators and the information that is made available to mass publics through informational media” (pp. 1065-1066). Thus, “news outlets have neither incentive nor ability to serve as reliable conveyors of social facts” (p. 1065).

of politics (Althaus et al., 2011). Moreover, adequately accounting for the role of opportunity often requires augmenting data on media coverage with survey data on source-specific media reliance (see *Chapter 2*; Barabas & Jerit, 2010; Dilliplane, Goldman, & Mutz, 2013) as well as applying advanced statistical techniques such as multilevel modeling to analytically incorporate variability in information transmission (see *Chapters 2 and 3*; Iyengar et al., 2009; Jerit, Barabas, & Bolsen, 2006).

The second major conclusion that I draw from my work is that *motivation widens gaps in political information, but only under conditions of limited information availability*. When the scope of political information availability is limited, and opportunities to learning are few and scattered across the high-choice media environment, learning is relatively difficult. Under these circumstances, strongly motivated citizens tend to increase their information lead over the more weakly interested as the former are more likely to take notice of the media's limited coverage of political events. A wider diffusion of such coverage makes relevant information encounters more likely, and therefore makes learning easier for people, even when they have little interest, thus reducing the importance of motivation as an individual requirement for making gains in information. That individual differences in motivation under certain conditions cause inequalities in political information is, to a considerable degree at least, one inevitable – yet in knowledge gap research still little explored – consequence of abundant choice in the modern media environment. With a multitude of media sources and content options on offer, citizens' media reliance behavior and political learning opportunities are bound to diverge, in part, on account of how much citizens *care* to be exposed to information about politics. In the high-choice media environment, those with little interest in monitoring political events can easily avoid political coverage, especially when such coverage remains fragmented across the news space. Yet motivation also affects learning gaps – beyond this indirect effect of diversifying individual media environments – by stimulating a more careful processing of media coverage when learning opportunities indeed present themselves to audiences. Many citizens who are not overly interested in politics still self-select into the news audience, of course; but even so, they may not be as eager to learn about political events when exposed to coverage about such events compared with their more motivated counterparts. Motivation thus plays an important double-barreled role in the process of political learning: it does not only shape opportunities to learning, but also moderates the actual impact of these opportunities.

By drawing the conclusion that citizens' individual demand for political information conditions the effects of media environments in general and information supply in particular,

this dissertation ties in well with Prior's (2007) work connecting media choice and content preferences to political involvement in the American electorate. According to one of Prior's most central conclusions, today's high-choice environment concentrates political information among those with clear preferences for news and politics over other forms of media content such as sports and entertainment. Much like Prior, I find strong support for motivation-based discrepancies in political learning following initial increases in access and availability. But unlike Prior, I also find that this assumption in some cases does not hold: when information spreads across a wider range of media sources and becomes more broadly available to people, such discrepancies disappear.³ As a whole, then, the collective media environment does at least have the potential to diminish motivation-based inequality in political information that a high media choice context facilitates. This observation, in turn, dovetails with more speculative accounts of the interactive dynamics of supply and demand suggesting that the importance of motivation as a political learning predictor varies considerably across different media systems. Given that, as recent studies by Iyengar and his colleagues (2009; 2010) suggest, the defining properties of a media system affect its supply of political information, some systems are more apt to providing such information than others. Comparing market-based and public service-oriented system cases, Iyengar et al. find public service-oriented systems to "deliver hard news more frequently than market-based systems. It follows that for citizens living under public service regimes, the opportunity costs of exposure to hard news are significantly lowered. Lowered costs allow less interested citizens to acquire political knowledge" (2010, p. 291). Under the public service system, information acquisition may not hinge as strongly on motivation as under the market-based system.

More in general, the interaction between supply and demand plays out differently in different contexts, depending on the characteristics of supply. This observation underscores that a greater understanding of political learning processes can grow from studies analyzing the effects of opportunity and motivation *in conjunction* and *across different contexts* rather than, as is still the *modus operandi*, in isolation and in isolated contexts.

Communication and Change: Information Transmission and the Quality of Public Opinion

Greater availability of political information in the media makes it easier for citizens to monitor the political process. However, as Bullock (2011) notes, if citizens ignore facts about

³ This possibility is recognized implicitly by Prior (2007, p. 259), whose model of Conditional Political Learning "describes learning in normal times" (p. 280). Similarly, I have posited in *Chapters 2* and *3* that motivated-based gaps in political information are most likely to widen in cases involving *routine* political events; events that tend to receive only modest amounts of media coverage.

elite performance and policy “even when exposed to such facts, there is little reason to expect that facts will help them make better decisions or protect them from manipulation by political elites” (p. 496). Much of the political learning literature is founded on the premise that factual information matters, yet whether people use or, instead, neglect such information in forming and revising political judgments is, in light of the slight evidence that is available, still very much an open question. The research reported in this dissertation contributes to the debate about the monitorial capabilities of citizens in a representative democracy: it presents new evidence on the relationship between information acquisition and updating of related opinions that, unlike most prior research, is observed in a real-world setting. This evidence shows, even if not for all individuals, that people do demonstrate responsiveness to relevant facts about politics once they receive such facts from the media environment. Specifically, I conclude that *conditional on what citizens already know, their political judgments can be changed through acquisition of relevant information*. Indeed, for a significant segment of the public, the impact of relevant facts can be sizable.

Such a conclusion, while corroborating important pioneering studies by Gilens (2001) and Bullock (2011), who also found that facts can shape pertinent political judgments, appears at odds with the predominant claim in the public opinion literature that facts, relative to elites’ persuasive appeals and cues at least, are of little influence to people’s opinions (e.g., Page & Shapiro, 1992, p. 17; Zaller, 1992, p. 45). Few if any students of public opinion would oppose that elite cues can be an important force in shaping public judgments about politics, of course. However, hardly any studies have explicitly addressed the *relative* influence of cueing and factual information directly, and as the findings by Gilens (2001), Bullock (2011) as well as those in this dissertation indicate, the influence of facts may well be greater than public opinion research has often imagined it to be. If anything, these findings show that citizens, at least when relevant factual information is available to them, do *not* ignore such information – findings that are hard to reconcile with the claim that any change in people’s opinions must stem almost exclusively from cueing or some other persuasive strategy employed by political elites. Moreover, in light of the consideration that opportunity to political learning is critical to producing informed citizens (as pointed out above), one could also raise the question if the persuasive impact of the media that so many prior opinion change studies have documented might, at least in part, result from an *absence* of relevant facts in the public domain. “To the extent that party cues have large effects,” writes Bullock (2011), “it may be because citizens often know nothing else about the policies and candidates that they are asked to judge” (p. 497). Overall, the mounting evidence of informed opinion change is, from a normative point

of view, encouraging. As Bullock concludes, “[t]his is not cause for unbridled optimism about citizens’ ability to make good political decisions, but it is reason to be more sanguine about their ability to use information about policy when they have it” (p. 513).

This dissertation suggests that political information can produce change in individual opinions, but it also emphasizes that, in order to have this effect, the information itself *must directly relate to* the political judgment at hand. Indeed, it is unlikely that citizens will update their political views on the basis of information that they do not associate with those views.

Whereas much previous research in this domain of scholarship relies on measures of general political information to predict information effects on political opinions, the research included in this dissertation suggests that general information measures fail to capture such change (see also Gilens, 2001). The implication for political information effects research is that it must not only reconsider its reliance on measures of general political information, but also that it must be more precise about the theoretical relationship between the information and judgments (or other types of political outcomes) measured. This implication is also of relevance to political learning research. Many studies of learning offer little discussion of the consequential nature of the selected measures of information acquisition and how they might connect to specific behavioral outcomes (for an important exception, see Barabas & Jerit, 2009, especially pp. 73, 86). In sum, it is imperative that future work takes care in selecting both types and measures of political information as well as in explicating their relationship with the potential outcomes of acquiring the particular information under study (Druckman, 2005).

Even though what citizens know about politics more generally may, in and of itself, be less consequential for judgments in specific areas of political life, the research reported in this dissertation corroborates earlier work suggesting that general political information *moderates* the influence of reception of new domain-relevant facts (Gilens, 2001). As Delli Carpini and Keeter (1996) remark, the range of factual information about politics stored in memory “helps citizens make sense of the political world by providing them with a basis for evaluating new information” (p. 235). Yet while there is little disagreement that general political information is a centrally important moderator in the process of informed opinion change, so far it remains unresolved if that makes those with low, high, or moderate levels of general information most inclined make informed opinion updates. Gilens (2001), for example, finds that the impact of domain-specific facts is greatest for the best informed individuals, whereas I find the strongest information effects among the moderately informed. The future research program implied by these inconsistent findings is a broad exploration of the possible factors that lurk behind them. One such factor could be the *type* of judgment and information studied as the dependent and

independent variable, respectively. If, for example, people who are well-informed by general standards hold a greater store of previously obtained considerations about elite performance than they do about a specific policy, their performance judgments may well be more durable than their preferences on that policy. And perhaps processing policy-specific information is cognitively more demanding – and hence, requires a higher level of political sophistication – than performance-relevant information. Such a research program may also explore the extent to which other individual characteristics closely associated with general political information, such as a person's need for cognition (Bullock, 2011) and strength of party affiliation (Gaines, Kuklinski, Quirk, Peyton, & Verkuylen, 2007), condition the influence of factual information on political judgments.

This dissertation does not just speak to the question of whether information matters, but also offers new insights into what information matters under what circumstances. At the same time, I also show that the short-term impact of political information, while considerable, is more modest than a large body of extant cross-sectional research suggests (see Levendusky, 2011, especially Figure 1, p. 44). Whereas analyses based on cross-sectional data are bound to exaggerate information effects, the panel data I rely on allow me to estimate these effects with notably greater precision (Bartels, 2006; Levendusky, 2011). Thus, while information is of greater consequence for how citizens reason and behave than some public opinion scholars presume, I find that, from a perspective of opinion stability, its potential to actually *change* citizens' political opinions is, at least in the short run, modest. Of course, in the long run, the cumulative effects of information acquisition may well be profound. Future longitudinal studies must explore, therefore, whether sustained political information gains can indeed change the political judgments of individual citizens in a fundamental way over extended periods of time.⁴

The overall conclusion of this dissertation is that *transmission of political information can, if indirectly and conditionally, lead citizens to update their opinions about politics*. This dissertation, then, provides evidence of a relationship between information transmission and citizen responsiveness. While future work must further our understanding of this relationship (see below), this dissertation stipulates an essential role for political information availability in processes of learning and opinion change. Of course, none of this is meant to suggest that citizens cannot be blamed for political ignorance or meant to play down citizens' individual

⁴ Another, related, possible direction for future research is an exploration of the persistence of information effects over time (see also Gilens, 2001, p. 385).

duty to be politically informed (which they clearly have). But as Page and Shapiro (1992, p. 393) recognize,

The point is not merely that the public doesn't care about some issues or is inattentive. Rather the *availability* of key facts about certain public policies may be low. [If so] the public may have no way... to know what is going on... and may, therefore, have no way to enforce its will and ensure responsiveness. (Emphasis in original)

Limitations and Suggestions for Future Research

This dissertation utilizes the politics of the European Union (EU) as the context for its research. The main purpose of doing so is not to focus on EU politics as a case in substantive terms, but instead to analyze the dynamics of information transmission and the relationships implied by the Conditional Informed Change model (see Figure 0.1 of the *Introduction*). I did, of course, broadly consider the substantial relevance of this case in *Chapter 1*; a chapter that not only serves as an introduction to the overall research context of the dissertation, but also aims to contribute to ongoing debates about public opinion in relation to the EU and European integration. I recognize, in addition, that the conclusions drawn above have clear implications that also pertain specifically to the EU itself. However, because the remaining studies carried in this dissertation apply this one particular case to speak to questions of broader concern and seek to inform the political communication literature more generally, I must, accordingly, mention the European context as a potential limitation to the generalizability of the findings presented in these studies (and the conclusions derived from them). Regarding the contextual constraints of my research, I also note that several studies in this dissertation investigate the hypothesized effects in the wake of a single and specific political event: an EU summit in late 2008. At the same time, it is important to keep in mind that, while the parameters may vary from one context to the next, the Conditional Informed Change model captures and incorporate much of the variability – including that of an essential contextual component: information availability – and allows for the dynamics of information transmission to play out differently in different cases. Naturally, these dynamics are bounded by the context in which they emerge, if only because each case involves different objective realities, facts of variable relevance and substantive significance, and potentially diverging public perceptions of these realities and facts (see also below).

Furthermore, in analyzing how media coverage informs citizens' political judgments, this dissertation limits its focus to one particular type of judgment, namely evaluations of elite performance. As I stated in the *Introduction*, it is important to study if and to what degree new information can influence performance judgments, because the quality of such judgments are of clear democratic significance (see Delli Carpini & Keeter, 1996). Moreover, thus far only very few studies have examined the relationship between performance-relevant information and related opinions (see Gaines et al., 2007). Of course, the Conditional Informed Change model was not designed to pertain to performance judgments only, but can be applied in studies of other key political outcomes. One clear example of such an outcome are individual policy preferences, the more typically studied type of judgment in this literature (Barabas & Jerit, 2010; Bullock, 2011; Gilens, 2001; Kuklinski, Quirk, Jerit, Schwieder, & Rich, 2000). Overall, research that explores the theoretical and empirical connections between *domain-specific* types of political information and judgments is only just emerging. It is up to future research to not only expand this literature, but also empirically test the Conditional Informed Change model in a variety of different settings and domains of political life.

Lastly, I mention the exclusion of *online* media sources as a potential limitation. In the research included in this dissertation, I draw on data from media content analyses and surveys that measure relevant coverage in, and individual reliance on, television and newspaper sources only. As I stated in the *Introduction*, I focus on these media both because European citizens consistently rank them as their most important sources of information about the EU *and* because this approach parallels that of key political learning research that incorporates media content data (Barabas & Jerit, 2009; Iyengar et al., 2009; Jerit et al., 2006). But even though the resulting selection of media sources considered is broad and heterogeneous, the exclusion of internet sources means that I leave out a sub-domain of the information environment that has radically expanded the media content options available, and one that allows citizens to encounter – or avoid – political information with much greater efficiency (Prior, 2007). While documenting learning opportunities online may pose methodological challenges, future work must seek to integrate these opportunities with those offered by both television and print media in order to more comprehensively account for the role of the high-choice media environment in political learning processes.

Revisiting the Conditional Informed Change Model

Beyond addressing these more general limitations, future studies may also refine and extend the Conditional Informed Change model in several important ways. First, the concept

of opportunity, which I operationalize as the availability of relevant information, has a more multifaceted character than this generic operationalization suggests. Accordingly, the way we measure opportunity in political learning research can be further specified in order to pinpoint with greater precision *what* dimension of opportunity (or combination of dimensions) makes learning about politics easier. As an example of a pioneering study within this research program, Barabas and Jerit (2009) “unpack” the availability variable to distinguish among the volume, breadth (see also *Chapter 3*), and prominence of political information.⁵ But we can go further. Learning opportunities present themselves in the media environment across both space and time. The spatial opportunity dimension (i.e., “breadth”) matters given its potential to turn a fragmented media environment into a roadblock for political information. However, since media coverage of most political events emerges and vanishes over short periods of time, the *duration* of learning opportunity may well be an equally, if not more, important facilitator of information acquisition (see also Zaller, 2003, p. 121). Furthermore, availability is but one measurable translation of opportunity; the way information is *packaged and presented*, too, likely affects how easily citizens can learn (Delli Carpini & Keeter, 1996, pp. 179, 347). The stylistic features of media coverage, and more generally the question of *how* the media cover politics, is in need of greater scholarly attention in political learning research (see Jerit, 2009; see also Kuklinski, Quirk, Jerit, & Rich, 2001).

Second, future studies must extend the Conditional Informed Change model to include alternative paths of mediation between political information transmission and opinion change. In its current design, the model has gone a long way to making tight theoretical connections among information availability, information acquisition, and political judgments. However, information acquisition is just one of several paths through which media coverage can affect public opinion. While parts of my research rest on the assumption that the media’s coverage of the political events examined here was of a primarily informational nature,⁶ much of what the media report about politics and policy debates, of course, conveys both informational *and* persuasive communications, often within a single media message. In these situations, survey data make it nearly impossible to distinguish the effect of learning the informational elements of messages from learning those that are persuasively oriented. Even though, as I underlined earlier, there are clear advantages of observing individual citizens in a real-world information environment (Barabas & Jerit, 2010; Kinder, 2007), a natural setting cannot help us isolate the

⁵ One of Barabas and Jerit’s (2009, p. 82) most interesting findings suggests that “one of the most effective ways to raise awareness of important political developments may not be to increase the number of stories, but to make sure that whatever the level of coverage, stories appear prominently in the news.”

⁶ Auxiliary content analyses provide evidence that lend credibility to this assumption.

mediating role of information acquisition from these other possible mediating influences on people's political opinions. In order to do so, scholars must turn to experimentation (Bullock, Green, & Ha, 2008; Bullock & Ha, 2012). An experimentally tested multiple-mediator model would also allow for a direct assessment of which of these judgment-relevant message factors embedded in political communication – informational or persuasive – is *most* consequential (see Bullock, 2011).

Third and finally, the impact of information acquisition on opinion updating, presently specified as direct in the model, may itself be mediated by citizens' own *interpretations* of the information acquired. Because my research is silent about the meaning citizens attribute to the information they acquire about real-world political events, its approach to studying the effects of information assumes, like most prior research, that "facts speak for themselves." However, as Gaines et al. (2007, p. 957) point out, citizens "must still interpret them, that is, determine the significance of these facts for political judgments." Indeed, the significance of any given piece of factual information likely depends on citizens' reading of its relevance relative to the political judgment at hand as well as on the criteria citizens apply when weighing the precise content of the acquired information (see also Gilens, 2001, p. 391). While, in many cases, this leads citizens to arrive at uniform interpretations, especially when the facts seem indisputable, in many other cases their interpretations may vary. The proposition that information affects opinions through interpretations also opens the door to positing a role for political elites or the media as *providers* of interpretation as well as for ideological or partisan affiliations as moderators of the information-interpretation relationship. This raises the question of whether interpretations can interfere in the relationship between political learning and opinion updating. Much more research is needed to identify the circumstances under which interpretations indeed get in the way between information acquisition and responsiveness.

Meanwhile, this dissertation has presented several important new insights into the role of the media environment – or more specifically, the *transmission* of political information – as an agent of change in citizens' political judgments. It has emphasized the role of opportunity in producing informed citizens, it has specified the circumstances under which citizens' own motivation does and does not cause inequality in political information, and it has explored the contextual and individual conditions that promote "informed change" in public opinion about politics.

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