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Evaluating the EU: the influence of national institutional quality, media and interpersonal communication on EU democratic performance evaluations

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Chapter



3

**Talking about politics:
Effects of media and interpersonal
communication on EU evaluations**

“At the heart of a strong democracy is talk” (Barber, 1984, p. 174). Within theories of democracy, interpersonal communication (IPC) has consistently been viewed as a central concept (Scheufele, 2002; Schudson, 1997). However, most research on the effect of interpersonal communication has focused on the composition and characteristics of the interpersonal networks, not on the content of these conversations (Huckfeldt & Sprague, 1995; Chapter 2). Perhaps due to the complexity of everyday conversational behavior (topics, conversational partners), scholars who include interpersonal conversation in their study have been reluctant to account for tone and direction of the conversations (Southwell & Yzer, 2009). “Nonetheless, it may well be that investigation of content-related contingencies is where we need to go next” (Southwell & Yzer, 2009, p. 6). The focus on the content of media and interpersonal communication is an attempt to take that next step.

Furthermore, there has been an urge to combine media messages and interpersonal communication in effects studies. In an attempt to investigate the relationship between interpersonal communication and media exposure, Schmitt-Beck (2003) found an indirect effect of political discussion. Depending on the political preferences of one’s network, and its concordance to the media message, the media message will be reinforced or rejected by the interpersonal communication. Through this indirect effect of political discussion, the ‘meta-communicative’ function, interpersonal communication supplements the mass media (Schmitt-Beck, 2003). The more concordant media messages are to the preferences of the interpersonal network, the more likely it is that they will be taken into account.

Inconsistent findings regarding the relation between interpersonal discussion and media exposure has led some scholars to believe that additional variables might be at play. Although described by some scholars as “essential for a successful democracy” (Barber, 1984; Habermas, 1989; Fishkin, 1991), the effects of the presence of disagreement in networks of political discussion on political opinions have rarely been empirically studied (Feldman & Price, 2008). Similar to Chapter 2, I add the presence of disagreement between discussants within interpersonal communication as a potential moderator for the effect of interpersonal communication on EU evaluations. In this chapter however, I also expect a moderating effect of disagreement on the reinforcement effect of interpersonal communication on the media effects.

Both interpersonal communication and mass media communication play a central role in the development of political opinions and attitudes. In this study, I attempt to overcome the most important shortcoming I noted in the previous study, i.e. the lack of information about the content of the interpersonal communication (Chapter 2). By conducting an experiment, I can manipulate the tone of the conversation, and as such measure the effects of differences in conversational tone and content. This study contributes to the research field in three ways: first, I will explore the potential effect of tone of both media message and interpersonal communication on EU evaluations. Secondly, this article explores whether tone congruence between media message and interpersonal communication moderates the effect of political discussion and media exposure on EU evaluations. Third, I will add disagreement between discussants as a potential moderator of the effect of political discussion on EU evaluations.

Tone effects: the media hypothesis and the IPC hypothesis

Previous research has shown that the coverage of political actors plays an important role in shaping citizens' opinions about political issues (Druckman & Parkin 2005). Focusing on political evaluations, Mutz (1998) noted that the media have "the capacity to alienate people's political judgments from their immediate lives and experiences and to distance them from a politics rooted in everyday life" (p. 146). A more negative tone has often been associated with more negative opinions and even cynicism about politics (Valentino, Beckmann, & Buhr, 2001). Few attempts have been made by scholars to examine whether the tone of the coverage has an effect on attitudes towards the EU (Exceptions: Norris, 2000; Banducci, Karp, & Lauf, 2001; Peter, 2003). Peter (2003) found that the tone of coverage affected attitudes towards European integration positively in a consonant context and de Vreese and Boomgaarden (2006b) showed that a one-sided media message flow affects public support for EU enlargement. In the previous chapter, I predicted that the tone of media messages is essentially determining the direction of changes in EU evaluations among the public (Chapter 2). I found confirmation for this media hypothesis. The negativity or positivity of the tone in the consumed EU news translated into the overall evaluation of the democratic performance of the EU.

Hypothesis 1: The more positive (or negative) the tone of the media message, the more positive (or negative) one's evaluation of the EU will become.

Interpersonal communication may expose people to a different set of politically-relevant information and stimuli than they possess individually (Huckfeldt, 2001; Mutz, 2002). It plays a significant role in shaping (Huckfeldt & Sprague, 1995; MacKuen & Brown, 1987; Pattie & Johnston, 2001; Fishkin & Laslett, 2003) and changing (Mondak, 1995) individuals' opinions and political attitudes. According to Huckfeldt and Sprague (1995), networks of social relations are primarily responsible for the communication of political information and expertise among and between groups and individuals. Most studies examining the effect of interpersonal communication on political attitudes focused on the composition of the social networks surrounding the individual citizens (for an overview, see Huckfeldt & Sprague, 1995). In the previous study, I found an effect of frequent interpersonal communication within homogenous networks (Chapter 2). This effect of interpersonal communication diminished when disagreement within the network was perceived.

Instead of focusing on the composition of the social networks, this study looks at the tone of the conversation. As I am conducting an experiment, I can manipulate the tone of the media message and the interpersonal conversation. In the IPC hypothesis, I expect that the tone of interpersonal conversations, in a very similar way as the tone of media messages, will have a direct effect on EU evaluations.

Hypothesis 2: The more EU positive (or negative) the tone of interpersonal communication is, the more positive (or negative) EU evaluations will become.

One-sided versus two-sided message flows: the reinforcement hypothesis

In the extant literature, no consensus has been reached on the nature of the relationship between the effects of media and interpersonal communication on public opinion. The most widely accepted relationship is one of competition between media and interpersonal information (Lenart,

1994). Most studies following this competitive model find that, whatever the potential effects of the media, interpersonal conversation usually overrides the influence of the media (for an overview, see Lenart, 1994). The second theoretical perspective on media versus interpersonal sources uses a model of reinforcement (for an overview, see Lenart, 1994). More interpersonal conversation about media information will increase the total media impact (Chaffee & Mutz, 1988; Scheufele, 2002). In this study, I test the extent to which this effect depends on the content of both messages, and its concordance with one another.

According to Zaller (1992, 1996), attitude change occurs for some individuals as a result of the composition of messages and ideas to which they are exposed. In his model, he distinguishes one-sided information flows from two-sided message flows. In the first scenario, the content of messages provides a consistent directional bias, whereas in the second scenario, the messages contain information with a mixed evaluative content (Zaller, 1992, 1996). Zaller's model initially focused on the role of political elites (1992), which he reframed later in terms of the effects of mass communication (1996). In this study, I extend this model to the effects of interpersonal communication. Schmitt-Beck (2003) found that while media and interpersonal communication can be similarly influential on vote choice, an indirect effect can be traced as well. When voters receive cues from the mass media, they frequently talk about them with peers. Depending on the political preferences of those peers, and the concordance of those preferences to the media message, the latter will be reinforced or rejected by the former (Schmitt-Beck, 2003). Schmitt-Beck uses the political preferences of the discussants to measure concordance with the media message. In this study, I focus on the content of the conversation, not on the preferences of the network. Tone and directional bias are essential characteristics of conversations, and the analysis of content-related contingencies should be the next step forward (Southwell & Yzer, 2009). As I mentioned in the previous study (Chapter 2), gathering more in-depth information about the content of interpersonal discussions is essential to measure the impact of those conversations on public opinion more precisely. By manipulating the tone of both the media and the interpersonal message, I create situations where people are exposed to congruent (both EU positive or both EU negative) or incongruent message flows. I expect that the tone congruence between the media and the interpersonal message will determine whether interpersonal communication reinforces the effect of the media message. When the tone of the evaluative message from the media differs from the tone of interpersonal conversations, this should then lead to a diminished effect. The reinforcement hypothesis predicts a reinforcement effect of exposure to media content and interpersonal discussion in addition to the main effects of both types of communication.

Hypothesis 3: When the tone of interpersonal communication and the tone of media messages is congruent, their effects on EU evaluations will reinforce one another.

The role of disagreement

Feldman and Price (2008) argued that the presence of disagreement in networks of political discussion guides the interaction between media and interpersonal communication. Despite its theoretical reputation as a requirement of a successful democracy (Barber, 1984; Habermas, 1989; Fishkin, 1991), the effects of the presence of disagreement in networks of political discussion on political opin-

ions has rarely¹ been empirically studied (Feldman & Price, 2008). Feldman and Price (2008) used political networks data to examine the moderating effect of exposure to disagreement on the effect of political discussion and media use on political knowledge within the context of the 2000 presidential primary campaign in the US. They reported a negative interaction between political discussion and disagreement in predicting issue knowledge.

In this study, however, the focus is not on the network of political discussion, but on the content of those political discussions. Most research on the effect of disagreement within interpersonal communication is done in the context of political participation. Theoretically, one might assume a positive effect from disagreement on political participation: where differences of opinion exist, people will be mobilized to represent their own point of view (Dahl, 1989). Psychological models on the other hand suggest that people, due to the conflict-averse nature of individuals, would be discouraged by the exposure to countervailing opinions (Ulbig & Funk, 1999). Recent studies have brought empirical proof for both theoretical views. Some studies have demonstrated the positive effect of exposure to disagreement on participation (Scheufele, Hardy, Brossard, Waismel-Manor, & Nisbet, 2006; Wojcieszak, Baek, & Delli Carpini, 2010), while other scholars have reported a negative effect, in part by the increased uncertainty among citizens (Mutz, 2002; Belanger & Eagles, 2007). “[... O]n the relationship between network disagreement and political participation runs the whole gamut of possible outcomes” (Pattie & Johnston, 2009, 265). One of the possible factors that can explain this variation in findings, is the form of participation being examined. Lee (2012) differentiated between position-taking and non position-taking activities. Disagreement then has a discouraging effect when position-taking activities are involved, whereas with non position-taking activities, disagreement within the interpersonal network does not necessarily affect the level of participation in a negative way. Although EU evaluations cannot be described as an activity, it does carry the position-taking aspect, and therefore, the discouragement-logic could be applicable here. When the evaluative tone of the discussant is different from the own directional bias on the subject, one is confronted with a two-sided message flow, and this ambivalence tends to reduce attitude strength and opinion certainty (McGraws & Bartels, 2005). In a way, disagreement undermines the influence of discussion (Lee, 2012). I expect that disagreement with the discussant will diminish the effect of the tone of the interpersonal communication on EU evaluations.

Hypothesis 4: The IPC hypothesis (H2) is moderated by the presence of (dis)agreement within the conversations. The more disagreement one encounters, the less effect the tone of interpersonal communication will have on EU evaluations.

Method

Design

I conducted an experiment to explore the interplay between interpersonal and mass communication in the context of European Union (EU) evaluations. 230 participants were assigned to the conditions of a 3 (positive EU message, negative EU message, no EU message) x 3 (EU positive

discussant, EU negative discussant, no discussant) design, after which their democratic performance evaluations of the EU were assessed. Each participant received a set of two articles, which they had to read. Every respondent received an article which had nothing to do with the experiment (see Appendix III.D), to ensure that the participants did not realize immediately that the experiment dealt with the European Union. The second article was either the stimulus material or the control article, depending on the condition. One third of the respondents read the control article, two third of the respondents read an article about the democratic performance of the European Union. Within this group, half of the respondents were exposed to an article about the positive assets of the functioning of the EU, the other half were exposed to an article highlighting the negative characteristics of the EU. The control article was about the movie “Twilight”. After reading the articles, the respondents were asked to participate in an online conversation. The tone of this conversation was manipulated by the research assistant, posing as another participant. The participants were told that they were talking with another participant; however, they were actually talking to a research assistant. The participants were asked to chat about three statements that were proposed by the admin. One third of the participants did not talk about the EU, two thirds of the participants did. In half of the conversations about the EU, the research assistant took a pronounced positive EU perspective, in the other half, the research assistant was pronounced negative about the EU². The discussion lasted on average for five minutes.

Questionnaire

Immediately after the experiment took place, participants were asked to fill out an online questionnaire. I incorporated the democratic performance evaluation scale along with a variety of other questions, some of which had nothing to do with the purpose of the current study.

Measures

Dependent variable. In the extant literature, democratic performance evaluations of the EU have been operationalized in several ways. Some scholars used support for integration (Janssen, 1991; Sanchez-Cuenca, 2000) to test citizens’ attitudes towards the EU. Other scholars used satisfaction with (European) democracy as their variable of interest (Anderson & Guillory, 1997; Karp, Banducci, & Bowler, 2003; Aarts & Thomassen, 2008). Attitudes towards European governance are structured along related but distinct dimensions (Rohrschneider, 2002; Scheuer, 2005). To fully capture the multi-dimensionality of EU attitudes, studies of public opinion about the EU should reflect on these different types of support. Boomgaarden, Schuck, Elenbaas and de Vreese (2011) distinguished the democratic performance dimension from four other dimensions of EU attitudes. This resulted in a scale of four items (Cronbach’s Alpha = 0.828; Explained variance = 66.047 %; Eigen value = 2.642), which will serve as the dependent variable, measuring evaluation of the EU’s democratic performance (see Desmet, van Spanje & de Vreese, 2012/Chapter 1 and 2). The first item measures the satisfaction with European democracy: How satisfied or dissatisfied are you with the way democracy works in the European Union? Respondents had to rate on a seven-point scale, ranging from ‘not at all satisfied’ (1) to ‘very satisfied’ (7). For the other three items, respondents had to indicate to what extent they agreed with the following statements: (a) The European Union functions according to democratic

principles. (b) The decision making process in the European Union is transparent. (c) The European Union functions well as it is. Again, respondents could choose between seven answer categories, ranging from ‘strongly disagree’ (1) till ‘strongly agree’ (7). By averaging the responses to these items, I created a democratic performance scale, ranging from 1 to 7.

Message exposure. As mentioned in the description of the design, participants had to read two articles. The first article was about a natural phenomenon, the second article was either the manipulation article (for two thirds of the participants) or the control article (for one third of the participants).

Interpersonal communication. For practical reasons, I chose to organize the chat conversation online. In an earlier study on the different gains model, Hardy and Scheufele (2005) found that computer-mediated interaction can replace face-to-face interpersonal discussion, while producing the same moderating effects. Regardless of the medium in which the discussion takes place, chatting about politics had the same moderating effects as face-to-face conversation. In this study, participants were randomly assigned to three conditions: one third of the participants did not talk about the EU, two thirds did, half of them were confronted with a EU positive discussant, the other half had to talk with a EU negative discussant.

Disagreement. After the online chat conversation, respondents were asked whether they perceived disagreement or not within their conversation, on a scale from 1 (no disagreement at all) to 4 (much disagreement). If they did not discuss the EU, they had to choose 0 (I did not discuss the EU at all).

Table III.1: Descriptives of the variables

	N	Min	Max	Mean	Std. Deviation
EU evaluations (DV)	269	1.00	7.00	3.6803	.93866
Article (media)	269	-1.00	1.00	.0186	.82613
EU positive article (dummy)	269	0.00	1.00	.2965	.45745
EU negative article (dummy)	269	0.00	1.00	.2808	.45008
Conversation (IPC)	269	-1.00	1.00	-.0149	.81484
EU positive conversation (dummy)	269	0.00	1.00	.2744	.44694
EU negative conversation (dummy)	269	0.00	1.00	.2871	.45311
Disagreement	269	0.00	4.00	1.7313	1.22192
Valid N (listwise)	269				

Results³

First, I look at the main effect of the article (media) and the conversation (IPC). As shown in Table III.2 (Model 2.1), the article had a significant effect on EU evaluations (H1). An EU positive article yielded more positive EU democratic performance evaluations by the participants. Similarly, as shown in Model 2.2, the conversation had a significant effect on EU evaluations (H2). A conversa-

tion with an EU positive discussant made the participants 0.374 more EU positive on a scale from 1 to 7. The effect of the conversation appears to be stronger (.374 versus .214 on a scale from 1 to 7) and more substantial (R Square change: article (.032) versus conversation (.102)) than the effect of the article.

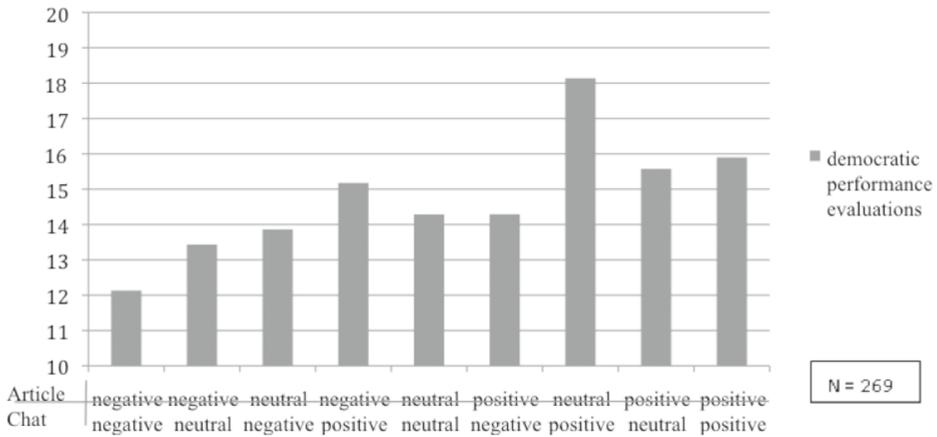
Table III.2: Effect of the article and the conversation on EU evaluations

Independent Variable	Model 2.1	Model 2.2	Model 2.3
	B (SE)	B (SE)	B (SE)
Constant	3.676 (.056)***	3.686 (.054)***	3.682 (.026)***
<u>Main Effects</u>			
Article (Media)	.214 (.068)***		.210 (.065)***
Conversation (IPC)		.374 (.067)***	.371 (.066)***
<u>Model Summary</u>			
R Square (adjusted)	.032	.102	.133
N	269	269	269

Note: levels of significance: *** = $p < .001$; ** = $p < .01$; * = $p < .05$

To get an idea of the effect of the manipulation on the respondents, I compared the estimated means of each of the nine conditions. Figure III.1 shows us that evaluations of EU democratic performance tend to be more positive in the conditions where at least one of the messages (media or interpersonal communication) is EU positive. Furthermore, the effect of interpersonal communication in all positive IPC conditions is indeed more substantial than the effect of media in all positive media conditions. The condition that differs significantly from all other conditions is the condition where a neutral article (not about the EU) was followed by a EU positive chat. The three most negative conditions (negative article and neutral chat, neutral article and negative chat, and negative article and negative chat) differ significantly ($p < 0.001$) from the three most positive conditions (positive article and neutral chat; neutral article and positive chat; positive article and positive chat). What is remarkable in Figure III.1 is the fact that the most positive condition (positive article and positive chat) does not have the most positive effect on EU democratic performance evaluations. I expected the opposite: the most positive condition should have had the most positive effect on EU democratic performance evaluations. This does not bode well for the reinforcement hypothesis (H3), which I will discuss later in this section.

Figure III.1: Estimated means of EU democratic performance evaluations after being exposed to an EU article (negative, neutral or positive) and engaging in an online EU conversation (negative, neutral or positive).



In order to analyze the specific impact of EU positive and EU negative messages, I replaced the main variables by dummies⁴, as shown in Table III.3. In the EU positive condition (Model 3.1), only the EU positive conversation had a significant effect on peoples' EU evaluations. In the EU negative condition (Model 3.2), both manipulations appear to be significant ($p < .001$). The effect of the EU negative conversation (-0.486 on a scale from 1 to 7) is slightly bigger than the effect of the EU negative article (-0.438 on a scale from 1 to 7). The positive EU article condition just fails to reach conventional levels of statistical significance ($p = 0.067$); which might be due to the small N.

Table III.3: Effect of the article and the conversation on EU evaluations (dummies)

Independent Variable	Model 3.1	Model 3.2
Constant	B (SE) 3.404 (.077)***	B (SE) 3.990 (.076)***
<u>Main Effects</u>		
EU positive article (media)	.209 (.114)	
EU negative article (media)		-.438 (.115)***
EU positive conversation (IPC)	.627 (.116)***	
EU negative conversation (IPC)		-.486 (.115)***
<u>Model Summary</u>		
R Square (adjusted)	.102	.104
N	269	269

Note: levels of significance: *** = $p < .001$; ** = $p < .01$; * = $p < .05$

Next, I look at the potential reinforcement effect of the article and the conversation on EU democratic performance evaluations (H3). As displayed on Table III.4 (Model 4.1 and Model 4.2), I only tested the interaction effect for those situations where the tone of the article and the conversation was congruent (both negative or both positive). I cannot confirm the existence of a reinforcement

effect for the positive condition. On the contrary: as hinted to in the interpretation of Figure III.1, I found the opposite effect. Tone congruence between the article and the conversation had a diminishing effect on the EU evaluations. Compared to Model 3.1 (Table III.3), the effect of an EU positive conversation on EU evaluations is stronger when the participant was not exposed to a EU positive article (Model 4.1) (0.834 versus 0.627 on a scale from 1 to 7). For the negative condition, I did not find any significant effect. Tone congruence does not have a reinforcement effect on EU negative media and interpersonal communication, but neither does it diminishes the existing negative effects, as tone congruence did in the positive condition.

Table III.4: Reinforcement effect of tone congruence between article and conversation

Independent Variable	Model 4.1	Model 4.2
Constant	B (SE) 3.757 (.120)***	B (SE) 3.693 (.124)***
<u>Main Effects</u>		
EU positive article (media)	.401 (.137)**	
EU negative article (media)		-.412 (.142)**
EU positive conversation (IPC)	.834 (.142)***	
EU negative conversation (IPC)		-.460 (.141)***
<u>Interaction Effects</u>		
EU positive article x EU positive conversation	-.597 (.241)*	
EU negative article x EU negative conversation		-.076 (.243)
<u>Model Summary</u>		
R Square (adjusted)	.119	.101
N	269	269

Note: levels of significance: *** = $p < .001$; ** = $p < .01$; * = $p < .05$

When disagreement within the interpersonal communication is added to the model (see Table III.5), I find a significant effect of the moderation effect of disagreement on the effects of interpersonal communication, both in the positive ($p < 0.001$; Model 5.1) and in the negative ($p < .01$; Model 5.2) condition. This confirms the fourth hypothesis. Disagreement undermines the positive effect of positive EU conversations on EU democratic performance evaluations. Similarly, disagreement undermines the negative effect of negative EU conversations on EU democratic performance evaluations.

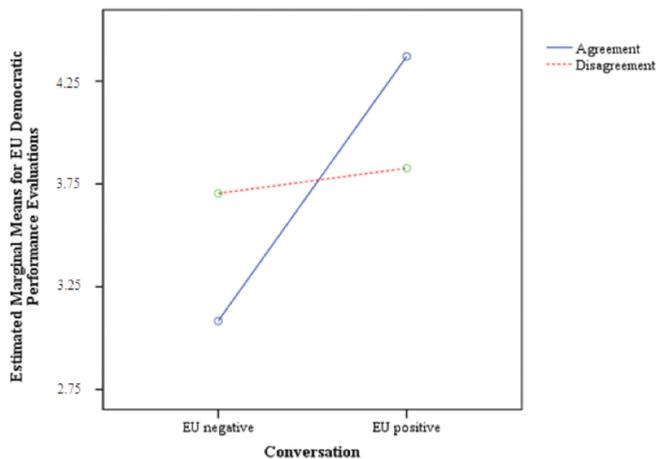
Table III.5: Effect of disagreement within the conversation on EU evaluations

Independent Variable	Model 5.1	Model 5.2
Constant	B (SE) 3.436 (.108)***	B (SE) 1.386 (.026)***
<u>Main Effects</u>		
EU positive article (media)	.174 (.111)	
EU negative article (media)		-.465 (.112)***
EU positive conversation (IPC)	1.571 (.280)***	
EU negative conversation (IPC)		-1.437 (.291)***
Disagreement	-.005 (.053)	.045 (.050)
<u>Interaction Effects</u>		
EU positive conversation x disagreement	-.394 (.115)***	
EU negative conversation x disagreement		.391 (.123)**
<u>Model Summary</u>		
R Square (adjusted)	.142	.157
N	269	269

Note: levels of significance: *** = $p < .001$; ** = $p < .01$; * = $p < .05$

The moderation effect of disagreement on the direct effect of interpersonal communication is illustrated in Figure III.2. I rescaled the disagreement item (0-4) into a dichotomous variable⁵. On the solid line, one can see the difference between the chat conditions (negative, neutral or positive), when the discussants perceived no disagreement. The positive condition differs significantly ($p < .001$) from the negative condition. On the dotted line, one can find the difference between the chat conditions when the participants perceived disagreement. When discussants disagree with one another, the difference in effect between the most negative and the most positive chat condition is no longer significant. The perception of disagreement does weaken the direct effect of interpersonal communication on EU evaluations.

Figure III.2: Moderation effect of disagreement on the effect of interpersonal communication on EU evaluation



Discussion

In this study, I experimentally tested the importance of tone congruence between media messages and interpersonal communication about the EU. Previous studies already showed the importance of combining media exposure and interpersonal communication in public opinion effect studies (Beaudoin, 2004; Eveland & Scheufele, 2005; Lenart 1994; Scheufele, 2002; Chaffee & Mutz, 1988; Gamson, 1992; Beck et al., 2002; Schmitt-Beck, 2003; Eliasoph, 1998; Scheufele 2000). Due to the complexity of everyday conversational behavior (topics, conversational partners), scholars who include interpersonal conversation in their study have been reluctant to account for tone and direction of the conversations (Southwell & Yzer, 2009). This study demonstrates the important role of tone and directional bias in these studies. Furthermore, I add disagreement between discussants to this model, as a moderator of the effects of interpersonal communication.

I started off by studying the effect of both manipulations individually. As expected, I found a tone effect of both the media message and the interpersonal conversation. The more negative the article was about the democratic performance of the EU, the more negative the participant became about the democratic performance of the EU after reading it (H1). Similarly, the more negative the discussant was about the EU democratic performance, the more negative the participant became after having this short conversation (H2). These results are quite intuitive, and form the basis of this study. People tend to be influenced by their social and media environment. The impact of online forms of political communication were not the subject of this study, however, as Boomgaarden (2012) argues, online forms of political communication might “blur the distinction between mass and interpersonal communication and may serve as an impetus for a renewed interest in integrative approaches to mass and interpersonal political communication” (p. 1).

In the research field, no consensus has been reached about the combined effect of media exposure and interpersonal communication (Mutz, 1998; Lenart, 1994; Boomgaarden, 2012). Some scholars believe that interpersonal communication neutralizes media effects, others stated that media effects are reinforced by interpersonal communication. Mixed results on this matter made some scholars believe that other variables might be determinant in this process. In the previous study (Chapter 2), I expected tone congruence between media message and interpersonal communication (Schmitt-Beck, 2003) and disagreement within the interpersonal network (Feldman & Price, 2008; Lee, 2012) to be moderators in this model. However, as I did not possess in-depth information about the content of those conversations, I was not able to show the link between the tone of the media message and the tone of the interpersonal conversation, nor to study the potential moderating role of disagreement on the effects of both interpersonal and media messages. The experimental setting enabled us to manipulate the tone of both media and interpersonal message.

I did not find conclusive evidence for a reinforcement effect of tone congruence between media and interpersonal communication on EU evaluations (H3). On the contrary, the results indicate that, within the positive condition (exposure to a EU positive article and a EU positive conversation), tone congruence diminishes the positive main effects of both on EU evaluations. Similarly, I found exposure to a neutral article, followed by a EU positive conversation, to be the manipulation with

the most positive effect on EU evaluations. Participants seemed to be more open for positive arguments on the democratic functioning of the EU when exposed to them for the first time. Were the participants in the most positive condition reluctant to be “persuaded” for the second time? Or does interpersonal communication need an “open flank” to fully reach its persuasive potential?

Turning to the fourth expectation, I confirmed the claim made by some scholars that disagreement within interpersonal communication moderates the effect of interpersonal communication (H4) (Feldman & Price, 2008; Lee, 2012; Chapter 2). When disagreement with the discussant is perceived, interpersonal communication has a less outspoken effect on evaluations of European democratic performance. People are confronted with arguments and opinions which they perceive as different from their own directional bias on the subject. The ambivalence thus created reduces their opinion certainty (McGraw & Bartels, 2005). This perception of disagreement undermines the effect of the evaluative tone of the interpersonal conversation on EU evaluations.

In this chapter I have demonstrated that content-related contingencies are worth to investigate when studying the effects of interpersonal communication on political opinions. It enables scholars to measure congruence between different types of messages in a better way. Furthermore, these results also indicate that the perception of agreement with the discussant is an important factor in this process. People seek confirmation for their own ideas when looking for new information in media or their interpersonal network. The strength of the effect of interpersonal communication on EU evaluations is largely dependent on the perception of agreement with the discussant. People seem to be more open for someone’s opinions when they have the feeling to be on the same side.

Footnotes

- ¹ Exceptions: Mutz, 2002; Price, Capella, & Nir, 2002; Huckfeldt, Johnson, & Sprague, 2004.
- ² In every conversation, both participants (respondent and research assistant) had to discuss their position on three statements, and motivate this position towards the other. The research assistant motivated his opinion in every conversation with the same arguments. In the EU positive conversations, the three statements were: (1) The EU functions well; (2) Life is possible on the moon; (3) Without the EU, our situation would be worse. In the EU negative conversations, the three statements were: (1) The EU does not function well; (2) Life is possible on the moon; (3) We are better off without the EU. In the neutral conversations, the three statements were: (1) Life is possible on the moon; (2) I like science fiction; (3) Space exploration is an interesting topic. I deliberately chose not to select three statements about the EU in the EU conversations, firstly, to keep the participants interested and involved, and secondly, to improve the personal sympathy between both discussion partners. For the second statement (about the moon), the research assistant waited for the participant to answer, and then enthusiastically agreed with his or her opinion.
- ³ I controlled for chat behavior (In a normal week, how often do you chat?), and media trust, but adding these variables to the model did not significantly change any of the results.
- ⁴ I constructed dummy variables for both the conversation and the article variable. For the article variable, I constructed “EU positive article” (0 = neutral article and negative article; 1 = positive article), and “EU negative article” (0 = neutral article and positive article; 1 = negative article). For the conversation variable, I constructed “EU positive conversation” (0 = neutral conversation and negative conversation; 1 = positive conversation), and “EU negative conversation” (0 = neutral conversation and positive conversation; 1 = negative conversation).
- ⁵ I rescaled the disagreement variable (0-4) into a categorical variable. Answers 1 (no disagreement at all) and 2 (little disagreement) were rescaled into 0 (no disagreement). Answers 3 (disagreement) and 4 (much disagreement) were rescaled into 1 (disagreement). Participant who answered 0 (we did not talk about the EU) were not included in this Figure, which explains the lower N (one third of the participants did not chat about the EU).