Why European tv news matters: a cross-nationally comparative analysis of tv news about the European Union and its effects

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The influence of the tone of EU coverage on support for European integration depends on the consonance of the entire coverage

In contrast to the preceding chapter, this chapter deals with a more substantive characteristic of EU coverage – its tone. With few exceptions (Banducci et al., 2001; Norris, 2000), the consequences of a favorable or unfavorable tone of EU coverage on opinions about European integration have not been studied. What is more, with the exception of Banducci et al.’s (2001) study, we know hardly anything about whether and how the tone towards EU representatives affects people’s opinions about further European integration. However, research has shown that especially the coverage of political actors plays an important role in shaping citizens’ opinions about political issues. A more negative coverage of politicians has often been found to be associated with more negative opinions about the political elite and more cynicism about politics (e.g., Cappella & Jamieson, 1997; Kepplinger, 1998; Valentino, Buhr, & Beckmann, 2001; Valentino, Beckmann, & Buhr, 2001). This suggests that it may be worth studying whether the tone towards EU representatives impinges upon people’s opinions about European integration. As a result, this chapter focuses on the tone of EU coverage in terms of the evaluations of EU representatives.

When dealing with the tone of coverage, a relatively old, yet strikingly under-researched concept lends itself to cross-nationally comparative investigation: Noelle-Neumann’s (1973) consonance concept. In an article that has been described as the turning point from the phase of limited effects to the rediscovery of powerful mass media (e.g., Donsbach, 1991; McQuail, 1994; Severin & Tankard, 1997), Noelle-Neumann (1973) defines consonance as "a large extent of similarity in the presentation of certain material in all the media" (p. 78). And as Noelle-Neumann (1973) explicitly states, "[c]onsonance (...) increases the effects of mass media" (p. 79). With respect to this chapter, consonance can be specified as a large extent of similarity in the evaluation of EU representatives across media. Whether evaluations are negative or positive is secondary; the emphasis lies on the fact that the media are all positive or negative. Noelle-Neumann’s basic idea is that if all media evaluate an issue or persons similarly, citizens hardly have a chance not to be exposed to that information.

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65 The terms tone and evaluation are used interchangeably in this and the following chapters.
66 Recall that by EU representatives not only EU officials are meant (e.g., members of the European Commission), but also people who are clearly associated with the EU (e.g., national ministers when they are members of the EU’s council of ministers).
According to Noelle-Neumann (1973), this presents an ideal situation for media to exert powerful effects.

A comparable idea has recently been raised by Norris (2000): "If most news about the Community [i.e., the EU; JP] is overwhelmingly negative – for example, if there is a steady stream of Euroskeptic headlines (...) – and the public takes its cues from the news media, then that plausibly could contribute towards a growing disconnect between European leaders and the public" (p. 184). Three aspects are worth considering here. First, consonance as the same tune played by the media of, for example, a particular country calls for cross-nationally comparative research, but has only been studied in single-country studies (Noelle-Neumann, 1973). If one wants to demonstrate clearly whether consonant media coverage increases media effects, one needs to show that dissonant coverage hampers media effects. Second, Norris (2000) does investigate her hypothesis in a cross-national setting, but does not integrate it in the theoretically interesting consonance concept. And third, both the consonance concept and the specific effects of evaluations in EU coverage on people's opinions about the EU are strikingly under-researched areas. Consequently, the first goal of this chapter is to link, in a cross-nationally comparative setting, Noelle-Neumann's idea of more powerful media effects of consonant coverage to the presumed impact of EU coverage on opinions about further European integration.

Intuitively, one would presume that more favorable coverage of EU representatives leads to more favorable opinions about European integration and vice versa. Equally intuitively, however, one would presume that a potential influence of the tone of coverage of EU representatives depends on sufficient numbers of EU representatives covered. Thus, a crucial question is when the tone of coverage of EU representatives begins to affect people's opinions. Norris (2000, p.183) explicitly mentions a sufficient amount of coverage to be an important condition for effects to emerge, but investigates it only implicitly by focusing exclusively on the most visible issues in her effect analysis. Moreover, Norris (2000) does not show whether the amount of coverage conditions the influence of the tone of coverage. In this chapter, it seems therefore necessary to test whether the visibility of EU representatives (i.e., the number of EU representatives covered) moderates the effect of the tone of coverage on people's opinions about European integration. It is the second goal of this chapter to investigate this.

Noelle-Neumann's (1973) reasoning about powerful media effects of consonant coverage rests upon the assumption that, in such situations, people's protective mechanism of selective perception is eliminated. In the context of coverage of EU representatives and opinions about European integration, this would mean that both EU supporters and EU opponents react in the same way to the tone of coverage if the coverage as whole evaluates EU representatives in the same way, i.e., consonantly. The concept of selective perception as a protective mechanism against media messages entails a lot of important antecedents and

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67 The consonance concept can also be investigated in comparative settings other than cross-nationally comparative ones, for example when consonant and dissonant coverage is compared at the regional level. However, Noelle-Neumann's (1973) reasoning is implicitly located at the country level. Therefore, it seems appropriate to investigate the consonance concept in a cross-nationally comparative setting.
ramifications and is difficult to investigate (for reviews, see Donsbach, 1991; Zillmann & Bryant, 1985a). Nevertheless the concept may be worth studying, as an initial attempt, in the context of media effects on opinions about European integration. Due to the general lack of research concerning media effects on opinions about the EU, even such basic notions of effect-augmenting or effect-diminishing mechanisms have not been examined. Thus, it is the third goal of this chapter to test whether EU citizens indeed lose their protective mechanism of selective perception when media coverage is consonant.

It has been mentioned at different parts of this book that the studies presented in this second part also seek to shed some new light on the conceptualization of media effects by approaching the issue form a cross-nationally comparative perspective. This chapter revisits one of the core issues of communication science, the debate about minimal (Klapper, 1960), not-so-minimal (Iyengar, Peters, & Kinder, 1982), or powerful media effects (Noelle-Neumann, 1973). More specifically, this chapter tackles the often speculated upon, but hardly investigated question of whether evaluations in the media affect opinions about the EU. Thus, at the end of this chapter, two important questions will be answered: Do evaluations in the media influence opinions about the EU? And, is there evidence of the notion of powerful mass media from a cross-nationally comparative perspective?

5.1 What we always wanted to know about media effects, but never cared to investigate

Noelle-Neumann's idea of powerful media effects if coverage as a whole is consonant seems to be so plausible that researchers apparently did not care to empirically test it. To date, there has been little research investigating to what extent consonant media coverage indeed exerts the powerful influence it is presumed to exert. Noelle-Neumann's (1973) own empirical analyses are suggestive at best and are methodologically problematic. Content analysis and survey data were very loosely linked at the aggregate level and the content data were gathered at only one point of time while the survey data were longitudinal. Because no control measures were included, the association found may thus be spurious. Along with the fact that Noelle-Neumann did not investigate media effects when coverage is dissonant, the methodological and statistical shortcomings also seriously impede causal reasoning. In other words, Noelle-Neumann's analyses (1973) do not present adequate evidence of more powerful media effects if coverage is consonant.

The problematic methodological translation of the idea leads to a second problem. The compelling demonstration of media effects requires that the analysis be conducted at the individual level to rule out the possibility of ecological or other aggregation fallacies (Robinson, 1950; Dogan & Rokkan, 1969). Noelle-Neumann (1973) changes unsystematically between the individual and the aggregate level — she reasons at the individual level, but analyzes at the aggregate level. However, if one accepts the primacy of the individual level of analysis in studies of media effects, then the analysis of the consonance concept has to be slightly specified. It goes without saying that no individual is exposed to the

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68 This becomes most obvious in the macro-level linkage of content analysis and trend surveys while the logic of powerful media effects is explained with individual selective processes (see below).
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entire media coverage in a given country. He/she will only use particular outlets. As a consequence, the consonance of coverage has to be conceptualized as a 'surrounding', contextual factor. The basic question is whether the individually received coverage of a particular outlet exerts a stronger effect if the 'surrounding' coverage as whole (i.e., the coverage of all media in a country) is consonant. More specifically, this chapter asks whether the particular tone of coverage that individuals get from the outlet(s) they use affects opinions more strongly if the tone of the coverage as a whole is consonant with this particular tone. Thereby, this chapter focuses on the effects of television news coverage as being potentially conditional on the consonance or dissonance of the 'surrounding' entire coverage (including newspapers coverage).

A third more theoretical limitation of Noelle-Neumann's idea may come from conceptually related research on the effectiveness of propaganda and persuasive messages. The power of propaganda during World War I and II has usually only been assumed or has been inferred indirectly. Rarely, however, it has been empirically demonstrated. Furthermore, the "success" of propaganda may result from the fact that propaganda is typically received in situations of high social control, coercion, or even terror (see Bramsted's, 1965, analysis of Nazi propaganda). Empirical studies on propaganda or, more generally, on the effects of persuasive messages on opinions by and large showed that propaganda is "contingently effective rather than invariably effective" (Brown 1958, p. 306). Hovland's early studies in the US army (Hovland, Lumsdaine, & Sheffield, 1965), his studies at Yale (Hovland, Janis, & Kelley, 1953) or more recent approaches to persuasive communication, most notably McGuire's (1968, 1976) information processing theory and Petty and Cacioppo's (1986) elaboration likelihood model, all agree that media messages do not have homogeneous across-the-board effects (for review, see: Perloff, 1993). Rather, the power of media depends on a variety of situational and personal factors. More importantly, the various studies point out that people may learn the basic information present in the messages, but may not change their opinions or even behavior accordingly (Hovland et al., 1965; McGuire, 1968; for review, see Perloff, 1993).

If one transfers these findings to the idea of powerful media effects of consonant coverage, it becomes clear that such effects should not be taken for granted, particularly not when controlling for other competing influences. Although Noelle-Neumann (1973) does not elaborate on it, her idea implies that people do not only learn from the media, but that they also adjust their opinions to the tone of coverage. All this renders it even more important to establish whether there is evidence of powerful media effects on opinions if coverage as a whole is consonant as opposed to weak or no effects if coverage is dissonant. Concerning potential effects of the tone of coverage of EU representatives on opinions about European integration, this means that it is crucial to demonstrate two points. First, the tone of television coverage of EU representatives affects citizens in countries where coverage of EU representatives as whole is consonant while it has no or a very weak influence on citizens in

69 However, it should be kept in mind that, in the EU countries investigated, consonance of the coverage as whole does not originate in centrally organized control of media coverage.

70 For example, one of Noelle-Neumann's (1973) examples refers to the opinion about the recognition of the Oder-Neisse-Line as definite German eastern border.
countries where that coverage is dissonant. Second, citizens surrounded by consonant coverage adjust their opinion about European integration to the tone of coverage of EU representatives. If the coverage is consonantly positive, opinions about European integration will be more positive than when the coverage is consonantly negative. Technically speaking, I expect an interaction between the (contextual) consonance/dissonance of coverage as a whole and the tone of coverage in the outlet(s) an individual is exposed to.

The idea that consonance increases media effects does not specify how much media coverage there must be for such effects to emerge. Clearly, a minimum of coverage is required. However, do effects immediately start even at small amounts of coverage if only the coverage as a whole is consonant? Or is there, even if coverage is consonant, a certain critical mass of media coverage after which the tone of coverage affects opinions? With respect to potential consequences of EU coverage, Norris (2000) explicitly states: "The news media need to provide reasonably extensive coverage of each issue" (p. 183). Unfortunately, she does not specify what she means by 'reasonably extensive'. More importantly, because content analysis and survey data could only be linked at the aggregate level, Norris (2000) was not able to investigate to what extent differing amounts of coverage of EU issues impede or enhance the effects of the tone of coverage. Findings for example from agenda-setting research, however, suggest that the same increase in the amount of coverage can lead to different effects. In other words, effects may look very different when coverage is low as compared to when coverage is high (e.g., Brosius & Kepplinger, 1992; Neuman, 1990).

Applying this consideration to the aforementioned interaction between consonance/dissonance of the coverage as a whole and tone of coverage, this means the following. Assuming that the tone of coverage of EU representatives positively affects people's opinions only in countries with consonant media coverage, it can be expected that the tone of coverage will not influence opinions about European integration if EU representatives are hardly visible in the coverage. However, the more visible EU representatives are, the stronger the effect of the tone on opinions will be. Put differently, there is no homogenous effect of the tone of coverage of EU representatives on opinions about European integration. The impact of the tone of coverage of EU representatives rather depends on the visibility of EU representatives. Greater visibility of EU representatives will boost the effect of the tone of coverage while lower visibility will rather impede this effect. Technically speaking, this presents a three-way interaction effect between the tone of coverage in the outlet(s) an individual is exposed to, the consonance/dissonance of the coverage as a whole, and the visibility of EU representatives.\(^{71}\)

The idea of increased effects through consonance derives its power from the assumption that individuals have nearly no chance to protect their opinions by selection processes when they are surrounded by consonant coverage. The omnipresence of the same enables messages to circumvent selective barriers (Noelle-Neumann, 1973, 1977a, 1977b). Noelle-Neumann's reasoning concerning the power of consonant television coverage is very

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\(^{71}\) Based on different theoretical considerations, it would also be possible to conceptualize visibility of EU representatives as first-order moderator and consonance/dissonance as second-order moderator. However, in this study the focus is on consonance/dissonance as first-order moderator.
much linked to the particular situation in Germany in the late 1960's and early 1970's with only two public-broadcasting networks and highly politicized public debates (see especially her reasoning in 1977a). Moreover, the barriers of selective processes are more complex than conceptualized by Noelle-Neumann (e.g., 1977a, 1977b) ranging from selective exposure via selective attention/perception and selective comprehension/interpretation to selective retention (e.g., Donsbach, 1991; Zillmann & Bryant, 1985b). The variety of selective barriers renders it difficult for messages to get through unfiltered. Though not with respect to traditional selection mechanisms, also Zaller (1992) has shown how important it is to take into account people's resistance to information if it is inconsistent with their predispositions.

Despite this criticism, Noelle-Neumann's basic idea nevertheless deserves attention particularly given the immense lack of research. The complexity of selective processes and their potential circumvention in situations of media consonance cannot be tested in only one study. However, as a first step it will be investigated whether the selective barrier of an individual's support for the EU is surmounted by media messages in a consonant media environment. Support for the EU is only a proxy for the more complex selective barriers described above, but studies from diverse research areas consistently document that support for politicians, parties, or political groups determines whether and how media messages are received (e.g., Moy, Pfau, & Kahlor, 1999; Valentino, 1999; Vallone, Ross, & Lepper, 1985). Given additionally the finding that people seek information consistent with their opinions (for review see: Cotton, 1985), one would expect that EU supporters are influenced by a positive tone to the EU, while EU opponents are affected by a negative tone. However, if the tone of EU coverage is consonantly negative or consonantly positive across the media, EU supporters may permanently be confronted with negative messages and EU opponents may permanently be confronted with positive messages. Therefore, one would expect that EU supporters and EU opponents do not differ in their reaction to the tone of coverage. Both EU supporters and EU opponents will display increasing support for EU integration if the tone of coverage is consonantly positive. Both groups will show decreasing support for EU integration if the tone of coverage is consonantly negative. Technically speaking, I expect that individual EU support will not moderate the cross-level interaction between the tone of EU coverage in the outlet(s) and individual is exposed to and the consonance of the coverage as a whole. In other words, there will be no significant three-way interaction between these two variables and individual EU support.
5.2 Method

**Procedure and measures**

Like the study presented in the preceding chapter, also this study draws on the content analysis conducted for the two weeks prior to the European election day and the post-election survey. Information on design and procedure of the content analysis can be found in section 2.2.1. Design and procedure of the survey are described in section 4.2.1. For the same reasons outlined in section 4.2.1, Luxembourg and Portugal could not be included in the analysis, while Belgium was split in its Flemish and Wallonian part resulting in 14 systems for analysis. This chapter draws on the analysis of the television coverage, but also refers to the analysis of the most prestigious newspapers to receive a more encompassing notion of the dissonance or consonance of the coverage as a whole in a particular country. For each country, the front-page of the most prestigious newspaper was analyzed. The front-page presents the most important part of each newspaper and gives a good overview of what a particular newspaper considers important. The most prestigious newspaper of each of the various countries was chosen because it can to some extent be considered representative of a country’s newspaper coverage and may moreover influence the coverage in other newspapers (Deary & Rogers, 1996). The newspapers analyzed are documented in Table B2 in Technical Appendix B.

**Measures – dependent and independent variables**

People's opinion towards European integration was gauged with the question "Some say European integration should be pushed further. Others say that it has already gone too far. What is your opinion?" Response categories ranged from 1 (unification has already gone too far) to 10 (unification should be pushed further). The tone of coverage of EU representatives was measured as the difference between positive and negative evaluations of EU representatives (for further information on the operationalization and validity of the measure, see section 2.2.1). Whether an actor was an EU representative, was operationalized in the same way as outlined in section 2.2.1. Both measures, the tone of coverage of EU representatives and the number of EU representatives covered, were centered around their mean to avoid multicollinearity problems in the analysis of interaction effects (Aiken & West, 1991; Jaccard et al., 1990).

Whether the coverage in a particular country was consonant or dissonant in its tone towards EU representatives, was assessed by checking, per country, the direction of the tone in three outlets – in the evening news of the most widely watched public broadcasting and commercial channel and in the most prestigious newspaper. If the direction in all of the three outlets was identical (i.e., either positive, neutral, or negative) the coverage in the particular country was defined as consonant. If only one of the three outlets deviated in its tone from the

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72 Due to the focus of the effects of television coverage throughout this book, the effects of the tone in newspaper coverage were not investigated.
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tone of the remaining two outlets (e.g., two outlets are negative, one is neutral), the coverage in the particular country was defined as dissonant (for further information, see Table B2 in Technical Appendix B).

Measures – control variables

The logic of which control variables to select was the same as outlined in section 4.2.1. The basic goal is to present a model that includes all variables which have already been found to affect opinions about European integration in order to present the most rigorous conditions possible for media effects to occur. In line with this, the set of control variables includes nearly all the variables which previous research has been found to be meaningful (for a detailed reasoning, see section 4.2.1). Need for orientation and the amount of conflict in EU coverage were eliminated from the model because they pertained to the specific agenda-setting question investigated in the previous chapter. Instead, satisfaction with domestic democracy was included as control variable because Anderson (1998) has demonstrated its important role in predicting opinions about the EU. The operationalization of the various control measures is identical to the one described in section 4.2.1. Satisfaction with domestic democracy was assessed with the question "On the whole are you very satisfied, fairly satisfied, not very satisfied or not at all satisfied with the way democracy works in <your country>". The response categories ranged from 1 (very satisfied) to 4 (not at all satisfied) and were inversely coded.

Data analysis and treatment of missing values

For the analyses presented in this chapter, the same weighting procedure of the data was used as outlined in section 4.2.2. Similarly, only those respondents were selected who watched at least one or both of the two television outlets content analyzed. As a consequence, the overall sample size was 8,432 respondents (for further information, see section 4.3.2). The selected respondents were assigned the respective media measures, i.e. the tone of coverage and the number of EU representatives covered in a particular outlet. Moreover, each respondent in a particular country received a value indicating whether he/she received information in a media environment where the tone towards EU representatives was consonant (coded as one) or dissonant (coded as zero).

In order to avoid further shrinkage of the sample, missing values of the control variables were reconstructed from information available in other answers by a respondent. This procedure is described in section 4.2.1. Whenever this was no longer possible, the missing values were replaced with the mean (for metric variables) or with the most frequent value (for dichotomous variables). Missing values of variables capturing EU-related opinions were not replaced because these variables may be hard to reconstruct from other variables in the data set. Moreover, because these variables usually present key variables in the analyses of this book, artificial relationships could be created in the data set.
The expected cross-level interaction between the country-level factor consonance/dissonance and the tone of coverage an individual was exposed to creates the same problem with the estimation of the standard error as outlined in section 4.2.2. In section 4.2.2, I have already given a rationale why multi-level modeling does not make sense with the data at hand. Therefore, I follow the logic of analysis used in the preceding chapters. The hierarchy in the data set along with the statistical clustering of respondents in the countries will be taken into account by correcting the standard error with Huber (1967) and White's (1980) 'sandwich' estimator. Recall that the critical $t$-values are assessed on the basis of number of clusters (i.e., countries) minus one degrees of freedom, thus thirteen. This may lead to a slight underestimation of the significance of individual-level effects.

Probing three-way interaction effects with metric variables

Whenever one or more moderating metric variables are involved in an interaction effect, particular problems arise with post-hoc testing for significance. Aiken and West (1991) suggest a particular procedure for interaction effects with moderating metric variables. However, the procedure does not seem to be without an arbitrary moment and may, in the worst case, somewhat distort the results of the post-hoc testing. In section A3 of Technical Appendix A, it is described where the problems specifically lie and how they are tackled in this chapter. The entire post-hoc probing in this chapter follows the logic outlined there.

5.3 Results – consonant coverage affects support for European integration

The first goal of this chapter was to establish whether media effects are more powerful if coverage is consonant than if coverage is dissonant. More specifically, the tone of television coverage of EU representatives was expected to affect people's opinions about European integration only if the overall tone of coverage was consonant with the specific tone of coverage an individual receives. It was further presumed that, in this case, citizens adjust their opinion about European integration to the tone of coverage. Was there evidence of this pattern? Model 1 in Table 5.1 shows that indeed a significant interaction between the tone of coverage of EU representatives and consonance/dissonance of a coverage emerged ($b = .066, p < .05$). Plotting the two-way interaction reveals that, as predicted, the tone of coverage affected opinions about European integration positively if the overall tone of coverage within a particular country was consonant (Figure 5.1). A more positive tone of coverage of EU representatives was associated with more favorable opinions about European integration. Conversely, a more negative tone of coverage was related to less favorable opinions about European integration. Figure 1 also suggests that, when coverage was dissonant, a more positive tone of coverage was associated with less favorable opinions about European integration. Before further elaborating on these findings, it seems advisable to probe the two simple slopes of whether they differ significantly from zero.
Table 5.1: Impact of various cross-level interactions on support for European integration

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Control variables</th>
<th>Model 1 (n = 6,976)</th>
<th>Model 2 (n = 6,976)</th>
<th>Model 3 (n = 6,976)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>-.283 (.077)**</td>
<td>-.279 (.077)**</td>
<td>-.285 (.076)**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age</td>
<td>.009 (.002)**</td>
<td>-.009 (.002)**</td>
<td>-.009 (.002)**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Education</td>
<td>.044 (.018)*</td>
<td>.043 (.018)*</td>
<td>.043 (.017)*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>In labor force (1 = yes)</td>
<td>-.133 (.097)</td>
<td>-.150 (.096)</td>
<td>-.134 (.010)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Subjective social class</td>
<td>.084 (.048)</td>
<td>.092 (.046)</td>
<td>.084 (.048)*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interpersonal communication</td>
<td>-.005 (.035)</td>
<td>-.009 (.035)</td>
<td>-.003 (.035)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Party cues</td>
<td>1.208 (.218)**</td>
<td>1.180 (.224)**</td>
<td>1.207 (.219)**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Left-right position (10 = right)</td>
<td>-.056 (.027)</td>
<td>-.055 (.025)</td>
<td>-.055 (.027)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>EU support</td>
<td>1.480 (.061)**</td>
<td>1.458 (.067)**</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Satisfaction dom. democracy</td>
<td>.012 (.088)</td>
<td>.001 (.087)</td>
<td>.014 (.090)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Political interest</td>
<td>-.030 (.083)</td>
<td>-.027 (.080)</td>
<td>-.030 (.083)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Attention to EU news</td>
<td>.231 (.045)**</td>
<td>.237 (.048)**</td>
<td>.233 (.045)**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TV exposure</td>
<td>.086 (.031)*</td>
<td>.090 (.032)*</td>
<td>.086 (.031)*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Newspaper exposure</td>
<td>-.018 (.029)</td>
<td>-.013 (.029)</td>
<td>-.020 (.030)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number of TV news outlets</td>
<td>.060 (.020)**</td>
<td>.029 (.021)</td>
<td>.061 (.021)*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number of newspapers</td>
<td>-.111 (.081)</td>
<td>-.116 (.081)</td>
<td>-.110 (.081)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Visibility of EU representatives</td>
<td>.002 (.004)</td>
<td></td>
<td>.002 (.003)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Key variables</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tone of EU coverage</td>
<td>-.028 (.026)</td>
<td>-.008 (.025)</td>
<td>-.031 (.027)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Visibility of EU representatives</td>
<td></td>
<td>.003 (.005)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>EU support</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>1.465 (.076)**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Consonance</td>
<td>-.009 (.197)</td>
<td>.146 (.206)</td>
<td>-.009 (.197)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interaction effects</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tone X Consonance</td>
<td>.066 (.026)*</td>
<td>.052 (.026)*</td>
<td>.069 (.026)*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Visibility X Consonance</td>
<td></td>
<td>.004 (.008)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tone X Visibility</td>
<td></td>
<td>-.002 (.001)*</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tone X EU support</td>
<td></td>
<td>.038 (.028)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>EU support X Consonance</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>.026 (.100)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tone X Consonance X</td>
<td>.003 (.001)*</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Visibility</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tone X Consonance X</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>EU support</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Constant</td>
<td>-5.552</td>
<td>-5.300</td>
<td>-1.857</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>R square</td>
<td>.30</td>
<td>.31</td>
<td>.30</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*p < .075; **p < .05; ***p < .01; ****p < .001

Note. Cell entries are unstandardized multiple regression coefficients. Robust standard errors in brackets.

Data sources: EES 1999, Content analysis 1999 European election campaign
The post hoc probing for significance of this two-way interaction with a dichotomous and a metric variable follows the logic outlined in section A2 in Technical Appendix A. In other words, first the slope is computed, then the pertinent standard error, and by dividing the slope by its standard error, the pertinent \( t \)-value is obtained. For the simple slope, the \((b_1 + b_2Z)\) term in equation E 1.1 (see section A2 in Technical Appendix A) is replaced with the coefficients obtained from model 1 in Table 5.1. For the standard error, the variables in equation E 2 (see section A2 in Technical Appendix A) are replaced with values obtained from the estimated variance/covariance matrix of the regression coefficients (not documented here for reasons of space). This gives the following \( t \)-values (the subscript \( c=0 \) means dissonance and the subscript \( c=1 \) means consonance):

\[
\begin{align*}
t_{c=0} &= -0.0279/0.026 = -1.07 \ (n.s.) \\
t_{c=1} &= 0.038/0.01 = 3.8 \ (p<0.001)
\end{align*}
\]

Figure 5.1: Interaction effect of consonance/dissonance and tone of coverage on support for European integration

Note. To compute the values for this figure, all control variables from model 1 in Table 5.1 were set to their mean.

The statistical post-hoc probing shows that the effect of tone of coverage only significantly differs from zero if the coverage as a whole is consonant.\(^{73}\) Conversely, if the coverage as whole is dissonant, the effect is not significantly different from zero. Put differently, by

\(^{73}\) This effect remains significant even when setting the degrees of freedom to thirteen (i.e., number of clusters minus one) as was done in the original analysis in Table 5.1. However, as argued in section 4.2.2, this is at odds with the conceptualization of the effects as individual level effects moderated by a particular context characteristic.
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plotting and, more important, by statistical post hoc probing for significance, evidence has been found that the tone of television coverage of EU representatives exerts more powerful effects under conditions of consonance than under conditions of dissonance.

This leads to the second main question of this chapter – did the visibility of EU representatives additionally moderate this two-way interaction? Technically speaking, was there a significant three-way interaction between the tone of coverage, consonance/dissonance, and the visibility of EU representatives? To recapitulate, it was expected that greater visibility of EU representatives would boost the effect of the tone if coverage as a whole was consonant whereas it would basically disappear at low levels of visibility of EU representatives. Model 2 in Table 5.1 indeed indicates a significant three-way interaction between the three variables \( b = .003, p < .05 \). \(^{74}\)

In order to facilitate the understanding of the three-way interaction, first the simple slopes are computed for all combinations of the variables number of EU representatives and consonance/dissonance by replacing the variables in the term \((b_1 + b_2Z + b_3W + b_7ZW)\) of equation E 3.1 (see section A3 in Technical Appendix A) with substantive values from model 3 in Table 5.1. Afterwards, the slopes are to be plotted as suggested in the preceding section. The main goal of this plot is to visualize, across the whole spectrum of the (second-order) moderating variable (i.e., visibility of EU representatives, to what extent the slope (i.e., the influence) of the tone of coverage changes depending on the visibility of EU representatives – investigated separately for the (first-order) moderating variable, i.e., the consonance or dissonance of the coverage as a whole. We know from Figure 5.1 that, if the coverage as a whole is consonant, positive coverage of EU representatives is associated with more favorable opinions about European integration and vice versa. If the number of EU representatives covered indeed moderates this effect in line with the above mentioned expectation, the effect (shown as the slope in the figure to be plotted) should be smaller at low number of EU representatives covered and should increase as the number of EU representatives becomes larger.

Figure 5.2 shows the simple slopes (i.e., the influence of the tone of coverage) conditional on the number of EU representatives covered, separately for consonant and dissonant coverage. Note that the values representing the number of EU representatives are values centered around the sample mean because the computations in the regression analysis and the subsequent computations of the slopes and standard errors were based on such values. Thus, zero indicates the average number of EU representatives across all outlets in the analysis. Negative values indicate that the number of representatives was below the sample mean, positive values indicate that the number of EU representatives was above the sample mean. As expected, the influence of the tone of coverage was very close to zero if the coverage as a whole was consonant and if EU representatives were hardly visibly. However, the impact of the tone of coverage becomes stronger, as the visibility of EU representatives becomes larger.

\[^{74}\] The original two-way interaction between tone and consonance becomes slightly weaker when including the three-way interaction between tone, consonance, and visibility (Model 2, Table 5.1). However, the reduction of the effect size is not strong enough to call the original two-way interaction spurious.
increased. This suggests that greater visibility of EU representatives augmented the effect of the tone of coverage towards EU representatives while low visibility diminished it.

![Figure 5.2: Influence of tone of coverage on support for integration as conditional on consonance/dissonance and visibility of EU representatives](image)

However, it should be taken into account that this pattern was not significant across the whole spectrum of the moderating variable visibility of EU representatives. To probe each slope for significant difference from zero, the pertinent standard errors were computed using equation E 4 (see section A3 in Technical Appendix A). Dividing each slope shown in Figure 5.2 by its standard error gives the t-values. As can be seen in Figure 5.2, the positive influence of tone of coverage on opinions on European integration was significant only in an area between -26 and + 64. Within a certain area of the visibility of EU representatives,

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75 The various t-values of the slopes being conditional on the two moderating variables are visualized in Figure B1 in Technical Appendix B.

76 This is based on a critical t-value of +/- 1.96 at 6,952 degrees of freedom and thus an alpha level of .05. Two cautionary remarks are in order here. First, the critical t-value would be +/- 2.16 when setting the degrees of freedom to thirteen (number of clusters minus one) as done in the overall analysis in Table 5.1. The range within which visibility of EU representatives moderates the effect then extends from -25 to + 52. However, this procedure does not appropriately take into account the conceptualization of effects as individual-level effects (see 4.2.2). Second, Jaccard et al. (1990) point out that the computation of multiple t-tests (one for each simple slope) introduces the problem of inflated type-I error rates across the multiple tests. This can be alleviated by using the Bonferroni correction, i.e., dividing the alpha level of .05 by the number of tests performed. Given that there were 38 different values of the moderating variable visibility of EU representatives, 38 t-tests were performed resulting in an alpha level of (.05/38) or roughly .001 (for reasons of visualization, Figure 2 presents the slopes across the whole range of the visibility variable although only 38 values indeed occurred). Note that, in the case of the Bonferroni correction for 38 t-tests, the significant area extends only from -18 to + 22. However, Jaccard et al. (1990, p. 89, footnote 3) themselves note that this approach is conservative. Moreover, it should be taken into account that there is not only a type-I error, but also a type-II error in empirical research. Given that, in this book, interaction effects are more rigorously tested than it is usually done and given the little existing knowledge about the subject of this book, the chance of a type-II error should not be forgotten when
increasing visibility of EU representatives boosted the 'positive' effect of tone of coverage of EU representatives on support for European integration if the media coverage was consonant. In other words, if the entire coverage was consonant in its coverage of EU representatives and if the number of EU representatives covered was neither very low nor very high, greater visibility of EU representatives boosted the impact of the tone of coverage of EU representatives on opinions about European integration while lower visibility reduced this impact. The more (the less) EU representatives were covered, the more (the less) strongly both a positive and a negative tone shaped people's opinions about European integration (note that the interpretations refer to simple slopes with a positive sign). When the tone was negative and a lot of EU representatives were covered, the impact of the tone of coverage on opinions was stronger (i.e., opinions were less favorable) than when the tone was negative but when not so many EU representatives were covered. Conversely, when the tone was positive and a lot of EU representatives were covered, the impact of the tone of coverage on opinions was stronger (i.e., opinions were more favorable) than when the tone was positive but when few EU representatives were covered. Note that outside the specified area, the number of EU representatives did no longer significantly augment or diminish the impact that the tone of coverage exerted on opinions about European integration. As one can see in Figure 5.2, at very low or very high numbers of EU representatives, the extent to which the tone of coverage impacted upon opinions about European integration no longer depended on the visibility of EU representatives. This suggests a floor- and a ceiling-effect for the moderating influence of visibility of EU representatives on the interaction between the tone of coverage and the consonance/dissonance of the entire coverage.

With respect to dissonant coverage, a positive effect emerged (roughly) below the mean number of covered EU representatives and a negative effect occurred above the mean. However, given that, for dissonant coverage, no significant effect of the tone of coverage was found in the analysis of the original two-way interaction, it seems pivotal to have a look at the significance of the simple slopes. Figure 5.2 also shows that the visibility of EU representatives moderated the impact of the tone of coverage on opinions about European integration if coverage as a whole was dissonant and the numbers of EU representatives exceeded 53.\(^{77}\) Put differently, if coverage was dissonant, high numbers of EU representatives increased the negative effect of the tone of coverage on opinions about European integration. This is, a positive tone was associated with a less favorable opinion while a negative tone was associated with a more favorable opinion.

The third goal of the chapter centered upon the question of whether the protective mechanism of selective perception is circumvented when coverage as a whole is consonant in their tone towards EU representatives. More specifically, it was expected that EU supporters and EU opponents would not differ in their response to the tone of coverage. As model 3 in Table 5.1 shows, there was no significant three-way interaction between the tone of coverage, consonance/dissonance of coverage, and individual support for the EU \(b = -.035, n.s.\). The deciding about additional corrections of the results.

\(^{77}\) If the Bonferroni correction for the alpha level is used (see above), these simple slopes are no longer significant. This also applies to when the degrees of freedom are set to thirteen.
originally found impact of the tone of coverage in consonant media environments applied to
EU supporters and EU opponents alike. Although, in general, EU supporters were clearly
more favorable towards further EU integration than EU opponents (see the strong effect of
EU support in model 1 and 2), EU supporters and EU opponents reacted in the same way to
the tone of coverage in a consonant media environment: the more positive the coverage, the
more favorable (or less unfavorable) the opinion about further European integration.
Conversely, the more negative the coverage was, the more unfavorable (or less favorable) the
opinion about integration turned out to be.

5.4 Discussion – a long return

Nearly thirty years after what is considered a turning point in media effects research – the
return to the concept of powerful mass media – there is now some first empirical evidence of
the power of media in consonant media systems. Moreover, there is no initial evidence to
support the presumption that the tone of media coverage shapes opinions about the EU.
Admittedly, a study linking content analysis and survey data in 13 European countries (14
systems) is facilitated by the current technological infrastructure. Nevertheless, it is striking
that our return to one of the key concepts of powerful media influence has taken such a long
time and that a potential impact on opinions about the European Union has been so often
referred to and so rarely been investigated.

When push comes to shove

A particular tone in the coverage may shove people's opinions about European integration
into a certain direction, but the people are only pushed in this direction when the media are
consonant. Of course, this does not, in the thirteen countries of the sample, imply coercion or
indoctrination. Nevertheless, it seems to be difficult for citizens in countries with consonant
media coverage to escape from the omnipresent, steady, and unidirectional tone of this
coverage. Moreover, as presumed by Noelle-Neumann (1973), there was evidence that EU
supporters and EU opponents reacted in the same way to the tone of coverage. Whereas their
protective mechanism of selective exposure and selective perception may be strong enough to
resist being shoved in a certain direction, they may lack power to resist being pushed in this
direction. No matter what people generally think about the EU, they are by and large equally
susceptible to the tone of coverage – a more positive tone leads to more favorable opinions
and a more negative tone leads to less favorable opinions about European integration.

This finding is simple and may run counter to results based on more complex models
of media effects advanced throughout the past decades. However, just because Noelle-
Neumann's (1973) basic idea has never been adequately tested, it might be that we have lost
track of simple, but parsimonious explanations of media effects. To avoid any
misunderstandings, neither the findings nor the reasoning presented here advance a crude
stimulus-response model. The emphasis is on the conditions (like consonance) under which
media messages affect opinions more easily. As the results have shown, there is no evidence
whatsoever that a positive or negative tone always and everywhere results in a positive or
negative opinion about European integration – it simply depends on, for example, the consonance of coverage. Moreover, there may be much more complex processes involved than what could be captured with the measure of individual EU support that lead people to accept or reject media messages. However, that said, the findings also tentatively suggest that media effects research might not only benefit from refined and complex individual-level concepts of media effects, but also from paying attention to the bigger picture of communication – for example the consonance of coverage.

There are several aspects of the investigation of consonance and the circumvention of selective perception that need to be addressed briefly. First, the consonance or dissonance of the coverage as a whole was operationalized with only three outlets. This does not rule out that the remaining outlets within a particular country were dissonant. However, it should be taken into account that the most important news bulletin of the most widely watched public and commercial channel and the most prestigious newspaper were content analyzed. It is unlikely that other news outlets belonging to the same channel or network deviate from the outlet analyzed. Moreover, the public and the commercial channel selected represent the television landscape and its coverage characteristics fairly well (Hans-Bredow-Institut, 2002; European Journalism Centre, 2002). As to the representativity of the most prestigious newspaper, research has documented a process called intra-media agenda-setting (Dearing & Rogers, 1996). Prestigious newspapers set the agenda and presumably also the tone for other outlets. In sum, it would have been desirable to include more outlets per country in order to determine the consonance or dissonance of the entire coverage. However, in a study comprising thirteen systems, this quickly collides with the feasibility of a study.

A second shortcoming of the effect analysis may concern the fact that the design does not provide internally valid evidence that the tone of coverage indeed changes the opinions about European integration. A baseline measure gauged before the assessment of the media coverage would have been helpful. Strictly speaking, the findings allow only to talk about an association between the tone of coverage and opinions about European integration. This is a common problem of cross-sectional field studies and of non-experimental designs. To gain internally valid evidence, experiments are most appropriate, but it is nearly impossible to investigate macro-level variables like the consonance of the coverage as a whole in experiments. In other words, not only the classic tradeoff between internal and external validity is involved when discussing how to investigate the key issues of this chapter most adequately. What is more, such discussions inevitably have to center upon questions of how cross-level interactions can be investigated without sacrificing too much causal rigor. It would be beyond the scope of this chapter to elaborate upon this issue. Moreover, it should be taken into account that there is neither a strong tradition of studying the interplay of variables at different levels of analysis nor any proper research of the consonance-powerful media effects idea. A lot of effect studies rely on media exposure measures instead of linking survey data to the actual content recipients receive. In this respect, this chapter presents conceptually and methodologically an advancement to previous research although future studies clearly need to tackle the aforementioned problems of internal validity.
A third deficit of this chapter may relate to the investigation of whether individuals' selective exposure and perception is circumvented when the coverage as a whole is consonant. I have pointed out above that individual support for the EU can only be considered a proxy for the more complex selective mechanisms involved in the exposure and attention to and interpretation and retention of media messages. Even if one accepts this caveat, one may ask to what extent the result of lacking differences between EU supporters and EU opponents in the effects of the tone of coverage really proves the circumvention of selective mechanisms. It may simply be that support for the EU is a weakly developed and incoherent opinion accompanied by a lack of knowledge about EU affairs. This combination, in turn, may only serve as a weak protection against opposing messages.

Zaller (1992) has pointed out that political awareness (or knowledge) presents an important prerequisite for people to become, in the first place, aware of the fact that information contradicts their predispositions. And only if people are aware of an inconsistency between information and their predispositions will they subsequently resist the information. Indeed, a consistently high number of don't-know answers along with low levels of knowledge about the EU and awareness of its institutions in Eurobarometer surveys (e.g., Anderson, 1998; Janssen, 1991) may be seen as evidence of the fact that many EU citizens may lack sound, elaborate cognitions about the EU that could protect them. Moreover, Saris (1997) has shown in a survey experiment that people's opinions about EU politics can easily be swayed with simple manipulations of the information provided in survey questions. In sum, although the findings in this chapter seem to confirm Noelle-Neumann's (1973) idea of the circumvention of individuals' selective mechanisms in consonant media, it cannot be ruled out that the specific topic of this investigation was conducive to the results. Therefore, future research should try to test the mechanism with issues where citizens can be expected to display more elaborate cognitive protection.

When evidence comes to speculation

The finding that the tone of coverage of EU representatives affects citizens' opinion about further European integration dovetails with an emerging, yet small, strand in research on media effects on opinions about the EU. Although with different thematic orientations, both Norris (2000) and Banducci et al. (2001) have reported evidence of the tone of EU coverage affecting people's opinion on EU matters. Interestingly, both studies emphasize that the effects depend on particular conditions – sufficient visibility of EU issues in Norris' (2000) study, elite opinion as contextual variable in Banducci et al.'s (2001) investigation. This chapter integrates these two findings by demonstrating that the interaction between a contextual variable, the consonance of the coverage as a whole, and the tone of coverage to which individuals are exposed depends itself on the visibility of EU representatives. It is worth noting that a floor effect occurred for very low numbers of EU representatives covered while a ceiling effect was obtained for very high numbers of EU representatives. Apparently, the effect of the tone of coverage cannot be diminished by virtually invisible EU representatives nor can it be boosted by very visible EU representatives. If coverage as a whole was dissonant, a negative effect of the tone of coverage occurred at very high numbers
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of EU representatives. Two aspects should be kept in mind. First, the simple slopes found were only marginally significant at better than the 5% level. Second, no effect occurred for dissonant coverage with respect to the two-way interaction between tone and consonance/dissonance of coverage as a whole. Therefore, this effect should be regarded with some caution.

However, the fact that, within a certain area, higher numbers of EU representatives boosted the effect of the tone of coverage in consonant media environments may have curious, yet important implications for the future communication policy of the EU. It has been shown in the second chapter that, in most of the EU countries, the overall tone towards EU representatives is slightly negative (see particularly Figure 2.6). Further, in consonant media systems, a more negative tone of coverage leads to less favorable opinions about European integration. Ironically, if this effect augments with more visible EU representatives, it can be concluded that the communication deficit of the EU (e.g., Meyer, 1999) may not necessarily be bad for the future of European integration. In other words, if public support for European integration is to be secured, a communication policy that aims at a general increase of media visibility of EU representatives may be counter productive, particularly in countries whose media tend to a consonantly negative coverage of the EU. Without a doubt, EU citizens must have the chance to inform themselves adequately about EU matters via the media, particularly on television. However, this desirable request may, in some countries, come at the cost of declining public support for the European enterprise – another form of the dialectic of enlightenment, if you will.

This chapter has focused on the coverage of EU representatives. Although the amount of coverage of EU representatives is much lower than the amount of coverage that top domestic politicians receive, effects on citizens' opinion about European integration could be detected. This suggests that media effects research may benefit from considering the particular coverage of political actors as predictors of more general opinions about politics. Many scholars have described the increasing personalization of politics for various countries (e.g., Kaid et al., 1991; Kindelmann, 1994; Schönbach, 1993; Mazzoleni, 1996). Therefore, it seems pivotal to check whether this affects more general opinions about politics. Research that does so usually focuses on questions of citizens' trust in politics and politicians (see especially more recent research in the framing paradigm, e.g., Cappella & Jamieson, 1997; Valentino et al., 2001). However, the findings of this chapter suggest that the effects of the coverage of political actors might have greater ramifications than previously documented in research.

In conclusion, this chapter suggests that simple conditions may enable media to exert powerful effects. In this respect, the context may be as important as the individual. Moreover, in research on the EU, let's not forget the media. We may now enter a stage where what we always assumed about media effects, but never cared to investigate, may be empirically documented.
5.5 Summary

This chapter centered upon the question of whether support for European integration is affected by the tone of coverage of EU representatives. More specifically, it was investigated whether this influence was moderated by the consonance or dissonance of the coverage as a whole. There were three main findings:

1. If the media in a particular country evaluated EU representatives consonantly, then these evaluations positively affected people's opinions about further European integration. If the media in a particular country evaluated EU representatives dissonantly, then no effect of the coverage emerged.

2. If the evaluation of EU representatives was consonant and if the number of EU representatives covered was neither very low nor very high, greater visibility of EU representatives boosted the impact of the tone of coverage of EU representatives on opinions about European integration while lower visibility reduced this impact. Simply put, the effect of both positive and negative evaluations on people's opinion about European integration became stronger as the number of EU representatives covered increased.

3. There was no evidence that cognitive selection mechanisms protected EU citizens from the influence of consonant media coverage. When the coverage is consonant, media seem to exert a powerful influence.

In this and the preceding chapter, it could be shown that both formal and substantive characteristics of the 1999 European election campaign influenced people's opinions about European integration. In line with the basic strategy of treating country characteristics as moderators of effect patterns, it turned out that the effect patterns depended on country characteristics. Put differently, there were no homogeneous effects in all EU countries. Effects depended on the specific country context, for example polarized elite opinion and consonant media coverage. The basic strategy employed in this book for analyzing media effects also sheds new light on prominent approaches in media effects research, agenda-setting and the consonance concept.

In the following two chapters, I will turn to the effects of the coverage described in the third chapter. The next two chapters will explore largely unknown territory: the effects of performance depictions of the EU and, especially in Chapter 7, fears of European integration. Moreover, I present a slightly more sophisticated link between media coverage and opinions taking into account results from cognitive psychology about memory decay.