

# Minimal Effects or Not YET?

Do Media Still Have a Role on Audiences'  
Political and Social Involvement?

■ DANA RALUCA BUTUROIU

[National University of Political Science and Public Administration, Bucharest]

■ LILIANA LUPESCU

[National University of Political Science and Public Administration, Bucharest]

## Abstract

*The present article aims at addressing the role played by media in influencing young people's political and social attitudes. In an era where debates about minimal media effects are arousing, we want to analyse if and how media still have a power. Thus, by means of a classic framing experiment (N=769), we tested the impact and implications of media coverage on political and social involvement. Results show that, at least for young people in Romania, media might be an attitude changing agent. However, media are not the only responsible and we urge future studies to revisit other possible influences – either individual or contextual.*

## Keywords

media effects; framing; attitudes; political and social involvement; young people

## 1. Introduction – what is political and social involvement?

Political and social involvement is often theorised as the way of acting and reacting to relevant issues which affect an individual directly and in turn generates rapid and direct personal satisfaction<sup>1</sup>. Zaichkowsky<sup>2</sup> goes further to suggest that the level of political and social involvement is determined by people's personal traits and can be also influenced by context. Involvement level is also determined by the context in which it is studied; that means that the level of involvement varies significantly depending on the issue to which it is attached when tested and as well the value that individuals give to that particular topic.

We can agree that political and social involvement is an attitude that

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1 Bruce E. Pinkleton and Erica Weintraub Austin, „Exploring Relationships Among Media Use Frequency, Perceived Media Importance ,and Media Satisfaction in Political Dissatisfaction and Efficacy,” *Mass Communication and Society* 5, no. 2 (2002): 141–63; Judith L. Zaichkowsky, „Conceptualizing Involvement”, *Journal of Advertising* 15 (1986): 4–15.

2 Zaichkowsky, „Conceptualizing ...”

can be described as the significance a particular situation has for an individual. The more significant the subject, the more involvement it generates. In our case, the level of political and social involvement was relevant because it helped us test if and how a negative message can change the level of involvement, compared to a positive one.

Political and social involvement are also important for the decision making process in the sense that a high level of involvement will determine individuals to look for information actively, to process it more closely and to make informed decisions that are more sturdy and hard to alter<sup>3</sup>. So, if the level of involvement is going up so is the need to be informed from credible, varied sources and the need to verify the information. Political and social involvement stimulates people to look for accurate information, changing the need for information from a passive one to an active one.

The overall trend of political and social involvement is in decline, still, in Romania, it had a peak in the autumn of 2014, during the presidential election, when people, and especially young people, showed a higher level of involvement, that reflected in a very high election turnout. Thus, we are determined to test if the theory of the negative message as a catalyst for social and political involvement<sup>4</sup> applies in the Romanian context. Therefore, we expect that the level of political and social involvement changes according to both the nature of the message and to its source.

## **2. Media's influence on attitudes. The case of political and social involvement**

Today, researchers are questioning the role played by media in the whole landscape of political communication<sup>5</sup>. There seem to be two groups of researchers – one that argues in favour of the idea that we are entering an era of „minimal effects“ and another that is in favour of powerful media effects<sup>6</sup>.

The supporters of minimal effects led by the media address at least three important weaknesses that media face. First, they argue that the changes in media environment from the last 5-7 years resulted in a reduction of traditional news influence to non-significant values. Second, they think that increased opportunities and choices from which audiences can choose results in selective exposure, which, in turn, leads to fragmentation and reduces actual media effects. Third, the widely open access to online news sources results in lowering the effects of traditional news media<sup>7</sup>.

By far, Bennett & Iyengar<sup>8</sup> are among the most controversial scholars that support the entrance in an era of minimal effects. Their view is very strong and

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3 Pinkleton, Austin, „Exploring...”

4 Hanlong Fu et al., „Reconsidering Political Cynicism and Political Involvement: A Test of Antecedents,” *American Communication Journal* 13, no. 2 (2011): 45.

5 For example, Toshio Takeshita, „Current Critical Problems in Agenda-Setting Research,” *International Journal of Public Opinion Research* 18, no. 3 (2005): 275–96; Steven H. Chaffee and M.J. Metzger, „The End of Mass Communication?,” *Mass Communication and Society* 4, no. 4 (2001): 365–79.

6 See also, Raluca Buturoiu, „We Are Not Entering an Era of Minimal Effects – Towards a Sleeper Effect Approach,” *Revista de Comunicare și Marketing*, no. 7 (2013): 77–92.

7 Adam Shehata and Jesper Strömbäck, „Not (Yet) a New Era of Minimal Effects: A Study of Agenda Setting at the Aggregate and Individual Levels,” *The International Journal of Press/Politics* 18, no. 2 (2013): 234–55.

8 Lance W. Bennett and Shanto Iyengar, „A New Era of Minimal Effects? The Changing Foundations of Political Communication,” *Journal of Communication* 58, no. 4 (2008): 707–31; Lance W. Bennett and Shanto Iyengar, „The Shifting Foundations of Political Communication: Responding to a Defense of the Media Effects Paradigm,” *Journal of Communication* 60, no. 1 (2010): 35–39.

provocative. Mainly, they address five important points: 1) the exponential increase of available media and probable sources of information due to technological developments; 2) this increase has resulted in a continuous audience fragmentation – audiences are forced to make choices about which media they expose to; 3) this fragmentation emphasizes the importance of selective exposure – when audiences select the type of media or media content they expose to, their preferences play a decisive role – which results in what the authors name as „stratamentation“<sup>9</sup>, meaning stratification and fragmentation which take place at the same time; 4) this process leads to a decline in the amount of unadvised audiences; 5) these trends can be particularly true due to the increasing political polarization and partisan media – partisan preferences seem to be a strong predictor of media choice. In other words, all these things taken together refer to the idea emphasized by Chaffee & Metzger<sup>10</sup> that it is more important to consider the impact of people on media than the opposite.

On the other hand, there are researchers that adopt a moderate approach. This moderate view suggests that traditional news media still have substantial influence on public attitudes and behaviour, despite the multitude of changes that have taken place recently. For example, in response to Bennett & Iyengar's 2008 article, Holbert et al.<sup>11</sup> suggest that we cannot argue in favour of an era of minimal media effects. Individuals are not becoming partisan or close-minded, as Bennett and Iyengar<sup>12</sup> suggest, but they are building their attitudes as a result of more extensive elaboration. In other words, we should not talk about partisanship and selectivity, but about a very complex model of elaboration. This elaboration is based on individual preferences about information consumption and sociological and technical environment. These preferences are deeply ingrained in societal and contextual environments (i.e. regional influence) and might offer an explanation about what motivates people's ability to elaborate. In other words, the authors suggest we should not argue against media effects until we determine the degree of attitude resistance. If people have resistant attitudes, due to political, social or contextual factors, it does not mean that media do not exert an influence at all. Rather, instead of arguing pro an era without media effects, we should concentrate on possible moderators of such limited influence.

This is the context in which we want to analyse and discuss the role played by media in Romania nowadays. Our main expectation is that, at least on topics that are quite hard to be approached directly by publics, media still have a power in influencing their attitudes and behaviour. More specifically, we expect that media can significantly influence the audience's level of political and social involvement and that this influence can be addressed through framing.

### **3. Framing effects on political and social involvement**

The research and discussions on framing effects on attitudes has gained more and more ground in the last few years. Thus, previous discoveries about agenda-setting functioned as an open gate for issues regarding the influence of media frames on audiences. Iyengar<sup>13</sup> suggests that framing effects on people's attitudes are caused by subtle changes in the definition of an issue or in the way it is put on the agenda. In other words, media influence the way people come to think about

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9 Bennett, Iyengar, „A New Era...“, 717.

10 Chaffee, Metzger, „The End of...“, 370.

11 Lance R. Holbert, Kelly R. Garrett, and Laurel S. Gleason, „A New Era of Minimal Effects? A Response to Bennett and Iyengar,“ *European Journal of Communication* 60, no. 1 (2010): 15–34.

12 Bennett, Iyengar, „A New Era...“.

13 Shanto Iyengar, „Television News and Citizens' Explanations of National Affairs,“ *American Political Science Review* 81, no. 3 (1987): 816.

an issue because media have the ability to structure the information before putting it forward to the audience.

Cappella and Jamieson<sup>14</sup> build a strong and effective model of framing effects on people's attitudes and behaviour. They suggest that news frames could exert a power on people's associative mental networks in such a way as to activate some pre-existing nodes, according to the issue presented. This activation leads to higher degrees of accessibility (the easiness with which pre-existing considerations are brought back to memory) and integrity (once a construct is brought back to memory, it could be easily used in future positions). Thus, once activated and integrated, media frames are likely to determine consistent changes on attitudes.

This model is particularly effective in explaining the way in which media function, but we must also take into account that it cannot be further used without mentioning its psychological roots. Framing effects in general and this model in particular cannot be addressed without references to two essential processes: accessibility and applicability<sup>15</sup>. The accessibility process refers to the fact that media information could have a strong impact only if they are easily brought back to memory. In other words, media impact depends on the extent to which the information is activated in people's memory (mostly, this process is unconscious). The applicability process refers to the idea that media exert strong influence only when they frame issues that are according to people's pre-existing considerations. Thus, based on these two processes, media frames could be labelled either as strong frames – those which are easily brought in mind and the most applicable – and weak frames – those which are easily forgotten and the least applicable. In this context, strong frames are more powerful in influencing people's attitudes as compared to weak ones.

Particularly, in what regards framing effects on attitudes, we argue in favour of the idea that the way in which media present or frame an issue significantly affects people's understanding of the issue. This is the context in which we expect that media frames (more specifically, valence frames<sup>16</sup> – positive versus negative) are significant in generating various levels of political and social involvement.

As stated in the literature, both the type of frame and its source could have an impact on audience's way of perceiving it. Among the multiple types of possible frames, we selected to test and discuss valence news frames. Boomgaarden<sup>17</sup> suggests that valence news frame have a powerful capacity to orient people's evaluations and, implicitly, to influence the direction of their attitudes. Another significant approach is that of Schuck and de Vreese<sup>18</sup> who point out that negative messages could result in increasing attention and, therefore, in a higher probability that those respective messages exert impact on people's attitudes. These approaches are in line with the prospect theory<sup>19</sup>, which states that individuals tend to be mobilized by risks rather than opportunities. Thus, we may assume that:

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14 Joseph N. Cappella and Kathleen Hall Jamieson, *Spiral of Cynicism. The Press and the Public Good* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 77–81.

15 Dennis Chong and James N. Druckman, „Framing Public Opinion in Competitive Democracies,“ *American Political Science Review* 101, no. 4 (2007): 639–640.

16 For example, Claes H. de Vreese and Hajo G. Boomgaarden, „Valenced News Frames and Public Support for the EU: Linking Content Analysis and Experimental Data,“ *Communication* 3, no. 4 (2003): 361–81; Vincent Price, David Tewksbury, and Elizabeth Powers, „Switching Trains of Thoughts: The Impact of News Frames on Readers' Cognitive Responses,“ *Communication Research* 24, no. 5 (1997): 481–506; Patti M. Valkenburg, Holli A. Semetko, and Claes H. de Vreese, „The Effects of News Frames on Readers' Thoughts and Recall,“ *Communication Research* 26, no. 5 (1999): 550–69.

17 Hajo G. Boomgaarden, *Framing the Others. News and Ethnic Prejudice*, 2007, 53.

18 Andreas R. T. Schuck and Claes H. de Vreese, „When Good News Is Bad News: Explicating the Moderated Mediation Dynamic Behind the Reversed Mobilized Effect,“ *Journal of Communication* 62 (2012): 57–77.

19 Daniel Kahneman and Amos Tversky, „Prospect Theory: An Analysis of Decision under Risk,“ *Econometrica* 47, no. 2 (1979): 263–92.

H1: If an individual is exposed to a negative message, his/her level of political and social involvement will be higher as compared to one exposed to a positive message.

At the same time, the source of the message could moderate the direct impact of media on people's attitudes. More specifically, messages from reliable sources are more persuasive than those from unreliable sources – which means that their impact is different. High credibility sources facilitate the way in which the message reaches its audience, whereas low credibility sources may block the influence media exert through frames. Thus, we may assume that:

H2a: If an individual is exposed to messages from reliable sources, his/her level of political and social involvement will change significantly

H2b: If an individual is exposed to messages from unreliable sources, his/her level of political and social involvement will not change significantly

## **4. Research methodology**

### **4.1 Research objective and questions**

Our research has two main objectives: The first objective is to investigate the effects generated by valence media exposure and the second one is to analyse the impact of reliable versus unreliable media sources. Thus, the research questions that guided our research are:

RQ1: How does a positive news frame from a reliable source influence the level of political and social involvement?

RQ2: How does a positive news frame from an unreliable source influence the level of political and social involvement?

RQ3: How does a negative news frame from a reliable source influence the level of political and social involvement?

RQ4: How does a negative news frame from an unreliable source influence the level of political and social involvement?

### **4.2 Method**

In order to analyse media effects on political and social involvement, we conducted a classic survey experiment among young people, namely Romanian students. As a stimulus material, we chose the issue of the present economic situation in Romania. More specifically, we tested the impact of both positive and negative coverage of the present economic situation on people's attitudes, namely on political and social involvement. The choice for the economic situation in Romania is motivated by the idea that economic and political topics in general are expected to attract people's attention. Moreover, the importance that people attach to this kind of topics seems to be higher as compared to other topics.

### **4.3 General design**

We randomly assigned participants to one of two conditions, which represented two alternative versions of a popular generic news frame, the „economic consequences“ frame<sup>20</sup>. More specifically, one frame pointed out that the economic situation in Romania is good (positive frame) and the other one pointed out that the economic situation in Romania is bad (negative frame). The use of alternative versions of the economic frame enables us to test the influence of valence frames.

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20 Andreas R. T. Schuck and Claes H. de Vreese, „Between Risk and Opportunity: News Framing and Its Effects on Public Support for EU Enlargement,” *European Journal of Communication* 21, no. 1 (2006): 5–23; Holli A. Semetko and Patti M. Valkenburg, „Framing European Politics: A Content Analysis of Press and Television News,” *Journal of Communication* 50, no. 2 (2000): 93–109.

Also, the external validity in our study is high, since both the positive and the negative economic frames are present in real media coverage in Romania today.

Our design required participants to be assigned to one from 5 possible frame exposure scenarios: positive news frame from a reliable/unreliable source, negative news frame from a reliable/unreliable source and no-exposure/control group (participants did not receive any news frame). Thus, this procedure left us with an overall of 5 experimental conditions.

#### 4.4 Sample

The participants in our study were 769 Bachelor and Master Students from the College of Communication and Public Relations, NUPSPA, Bucharest. They were randomly chosen to participate in this study. The choice for students as participants in our study is motivated by the results from other research studies, which suggest that younger citizens have less stable attitudes than older ones and may not be so politically sophisticated since they have less economic and political experience. We therefore expect that young people's attitudes will be particularly affected by media coverage, either in a positive or in a negative way<sup>21</sup>.

#### 4.5 Stimulus material

The stimulus material consisted of one news article per condition. Each article contained one version of an economic consequences frame, namely the present economic situation in Romania is good or bad. Thus, articles varied both in their arguments their evaluative direction and their source as well. Specifically, we manipulated an article about the economic and political issues in Romania, placing attention both to the economic situation itself and to the fact that politicians are responsible for the actual economic setting in which Romania is. Given the design of the study, it was better to use constructed rather than actually published news materials, since the use of real news coverage could have minimized the commensurability across conditions<sup>22</sup>. We chose this issue because it can be logically presented in terms of economic consequences and we adjusted the news articles as to be in line with the common layout and style of daily Romanian news coverage. We kept the basic core information within each news article identical, while some paragraphs in the story pointed out alternative economic facets of Romania's present situation. We chose two types of sources: one reliable – analysts from Financial Times, and the other unreliable – Dorin Cocoş. Financial Times is a well-known British publication which has a very high credibility, whereas Dorin Cocoş is a Romanian businessman, whose name appears on some reputed criminal case files (i.e. Alro or Microsoft).

#### 4.6 Measures

Our dependent variable, political and social involvement, was measured with a scale adapted from a larger study, conducted between 2006 and 2012 by researchers from Wabash College Indiana, USA<sup>23</sup>. There were ten items on a five-point scale, with higher scores indicating higher levels of political and social involvement (N = 759: M = 3.33, SD = 0.54, Cronbach  $\alpha$  = 0.796).

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21 Maud L. Adriaansen, Philip van Praag, and Claes H. de Vreese, „Substance Matters: How News Content Can Reduce Political Cynicism,” *International Journal of Public Opinion Research* 22, no. 4 (2010): 433–57; Claes H. de Vreese and Matthijs Elenbaas, „Media in the Game of Politics: Effects of Strategic Metacoverage on Political Cynicism,” *Press/Politics* 13, no. 3 (2008): 285–309.

22 Sophie Lecheler and Claes H. de Vreese, „What a Difference a Day Makes? The Effects of Repetitive and Competitive News Framing Over Time,” *Communication Research* 40, no. 2 (2013): 156.

23 Political and Social Involvement (2010), <http://www.liberalarts.wabash.edu/study-instruments/#political>, accessed on December 10, 2014.

## 5. Findings

We expected that if an individual is exposed to a negative news frame his/her level of political and social involvement will be higher. Similarly, if an individual is exposed to a positive news frame, his/her level of involvement will remain the same as before exposure. We used an Independent Sample T Test in order to analyse the levels of political and social involvement between the groups. Our research shows that there are some significant differences in the level of political and social involvement of those exposed to a negative news frame as compared to those who were not exposed and the negative direction of the message functions as predicted ( $t(294)=-2.223$ ;  $p<.05$ ). Negative messages do result in a slight increase of involvement. On the other hand, results on positive news frames do not statistically significant differences between the groups exposed to media and non-exposed ones. Thus, hypothesis 1 cannot be supported.

We also expected that if an individual is exposed to messages from reliable sources, his/her level of political and social involvement will change significantly. On the other hand, if an individual is exposed to messages from unreliable sources, his/her level of political and social involvement will not change significantly. We tested the influence of source credibility on attitudes with the same Independent Sample T Test used earlier, and we see that messages from reliable sources have a strong impact on the level of political and social involvement, as predicted. Though, there are not statistically significant differences due to exposure to positive news frames. Thus, only hypothesis 2a can be supported.

## 6. Discussion and implications

The most important result of our study is that media still have an impact on people's attitudes. Thus, we can conclude, that at least in Romania nowadays, young people can still be influenced by the media. Moreover, due to our results, we may assume that we are not entering an era of minimal effects, but future studies should consider some questions:

Are media the only responsible for low levels of involvement among young people? Is it true mainly for ex-communist countries?

Does age play a role here? What about education?

Does the strategic (regional) position play a role?

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