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FULL PAPER

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Uli Bernhard, Hochschule Hannover; Fakultät III, Abteilung Information und Kommunikation, Expo Plaza 12, 30539 Hannover; Kontakt: ulrich.bernhard(at)hs-hannover.de

Marco Dohle, Heinrich-Heine-Universität Düsseldorf, Kommunikations- und Medienwissenschaft I, Universitätsstraße 1, 40225 Düsseldorf; Kontakt: marco.dohle(at)phil.uni-duesseldorf.de

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Abstract: According to the third-person effect or the influence of presumed media influence approach, the presumption that the media has strong effects on other people can affect individuals' attitudes and behavior. For instance, if people believe in strong media influences on others, they are more likely to increase their communication activities or support demands for restrictions on media. A standardized online survey among German journalists (N = 960) revealed that the stronger the journalists perceive the political online influence on the public to be, the more frequently they contradict unwanted political views in their articles. Moreover, even journalists are more likely to approve of restrictions on the Internet's political influence, the stronger they believe the effects of online media to be. The data reveal no connections between communication activities and demands for restrictions.

Keywords: Censorship, corrective actions, influence of presumed media influence approach, journalists, online media, third-person effect

Zusammenfassung: Die Wahrnehmung, dass Medien eine starke Wirkung auf andere Menschen haben, kann gemäß dem Third-Person-Effekt oder dem Influence-of-Presumed-Media-Influence-Ansatz Einstellungen und Handeln von Individuen beeinflussen. Menschen, die starke Medieneinflüsse auf Andere wahrnehmen, stimmen beispielsweise verstärkt Forderungen nach einer Beschränkung dieser Einflüsse zu oder intensivieren die eigene Kommunikation und Partizipation, um den vermuteten Medienwirkungen entgegenzutreten. Anhand einer standardisierten Online-Befragung unter deutschen Journalisten (N = 960) wurde geprüft, ob die Wahrnehmung des politischen Einflusses von Online-Medien auch bei dieser Berufsgruppe zu solchen Reaktionen führt. Die Ergebnisse zeigen: Je stärker der von den Journalisten wahrgenommene politische Online-Einfluss auf die Bevölkerung ist, desto häufiger widersprechen sie in eigenen Beiträgen missliebigen politischen Meinungen, die über das Internet verbreitet werden. Zudem stimmen selbst Journalisten Forderungen nach einer Einschränkung des politischen Einflusses des Internets verstärkt zu, wenn sie Online-Medien eine starke Wirkkraft auf die Bevölkerung unterstellen. Zwischen den Kommunikationsaktivitäten und der Zustimmung zu Einschränkung zeigt sich kein Zusammenhang.

Schlagwörter: Corrective Actions, Influence-of-Presumed-Media-Influence-Ansatz, Journalisten, Online-Medien, Third-Person-Effekt, Zensurmaßnahmen

1. Introduction

Journalists have political influence. They set the agenda of prominent public discussions and influence people's opinions about certain questions, what people think about individual politicians, or what party they vote for. How journalists perceive their own political influence has frequently been examined – often in comparison to other groups such as politicians (e.g., Strömbäck, 2011; Strömbäck & Nord, 2006; Van Aelst et al., 2008; Van Dalen & Van Aelst, 2014; Walgrave, 2008).

Yet, thus far, little research has been conducted on how journalists act as a consequence of their perception of their own influence, even though the results of many studies show that assumptions about the effects of media on others can affect one's attitudes or behavior. For example, the perception of strong media influences on others can encourage people's communication activities and their political participation to counter the presumably strong media influences (Rojas, 2010). Additionally, this perception can result in increased demands for restrictions on media (Feng & Guo, 2012). Briefly, people can react to perceived media influences in a constructive and a repressive way.

The present article deals with the potential consequences of presumed influences. The main question is whether the perception of the media's strong political influence on other people has consequences for journalists concerning their own communication activities and their attitude toward restricting media. This topic was examined in a survey among German journalists. In addition to both reactions to presumed media influences being treated separately from each other, it was examined whether corrective communication activities and the approval of repressive measures are related.

These issues are relevant in several respects. First, journalists can contradict unwelcome political views in their own publications. Thus, journalists' communications are more influential than those of other groups of people since the latter can affect public opinion only through channels such as leaflets, letters to editors, and social networks. Second, demands for censorship by journalists are particularly controversial since journalists are usually opposed to infringements on press freedom. Thus, it would be hugely significant for communication policies if even journalists were more likely to support restrictions on media influences in reaction to perceived media influences. Third, the results of the study can help explain journalists' activities.

This study focuses on the perception of the influence of *online* media. Online media have rarely been examined in this field of research. However, a separate investigation of online media is interesting because, among other things, online communication displays specific features. For instance, although journalists still play a dominant role, they now compete with other groups who can easily participate in the communication process. It is unclear if this competition affects journalists' perceptions of the influence of online media and the consequences of these perceptions.

2. Presumed media influences and the consequences

2.1 Basic assumptions

Many studies about the consequences of perceived media effects refer to the third-person effect (Davison, 1983) and the influence of presumed media influence approach (Gunther & Storey, 2003). These concepts assume that people assess the strength of media influence on others. A central element of the third-person effect is that an individual believes the media's influence on others is stronger than it is on him or her (third-person perception). This effect is well-proven for individuals in general (Sun, Pan, & Shen, 2008) as well as for journalists in particular (Tsfati & Livio, 2008).

The perception of strong media influences on others influences individuals' attitudes and behaviors. This is also true in the specific context of political communication (for an overview, see Sun, 2013; Tal-Or, Tsfati, & Gunther, 2009; Xu & Gonzenbach, 2008). These consequences could be the result of the presumption that other people are more susceptible to influence than oneself (third-person behavior; for empirical proof in the context of political communication see, e.g., Banning, 2006; Golan, Banning, & Lundy, 2008). However, the assumption that the perception of (strong) media influences on others alone has consequences is theoretically and methodologically more plausible (Schmierbach, Boyle, & McLeod, 2008; Shen & Huggins, 2013). This is the central premise of the influence of presumed media influence approach, which has been proven empirically several times, including in the context of political communication (e.g., Cohen & Tsfati, 2009; Cohen, Tsfati, & Sheafer, 2008).

2.2 Presumed media influences and corrective communication activities

Previous studies have shown that the perception of strong political media influences (in connection with the perception that these *influences* are negative or in connection with the perception that the media *content* is hostile) can be linked to an increase in political communication activities. This increase can be explained by the fact that people try to compensate for the presumed strong and negative media influences. Citizens can oppose perceived negative media influences by intensifying their political activities, such as attending demonstrations, writing to politicians, or spreading their views in online forums, letters to editors, or private discussions. Rojas (2010, p. 343) described such activities as "corrective actions." In the context of an election campaign, he demonstrated that individuals intensify their activities as a consequence of perceiving strong media influences and of perceiving the media content as hostile (hostile media perception; Vallone, Ross, & Lepper, 1985) because they wanted their own political views to be heard in public. These activities included traditional participation activities, such as attending demonstrations, as well as increased online communication.

Bernhard and Dohle (2013) also found that the perception of strong and unwelcome media influences increased the frequency with which people spread their opinions through online media. However, the authors found no consequences for

other forms of participation, such as participating in demonstrations. Barnidge and Rojas (2014) demonstrated that perceived strong media influences (and hostile media perceptions) affect personal talk about politics. Lim and Golan (2011) focused specifically on online communication. The stronger the participants perceived the unwelcome political influence of *YouTube* videos to be on other people, the more willing the participants were to leave critical comments or to upload videos of their own.

Thus far, no studies have focused on corrective actions by journalists although they are well-suited to perform corrective communication. Journalists can publish articles of their own in widely circulated media, and thus have much better opportunities than the public to spread their political views. Online media offer many possibilities for non-journalists to influence public opinion (from blogs to social networks to online comments), but these communication channels for ordinary people have drawbacks compared to articles written by professional journalists. For instance, media content compiled by professionals usually reaches more people than online content produced by laypeople. Moreover, journalistic articles are generally believed to feature better quality content and to be more reliable than user-generated online content (e.g., Flanagin & Metzger, 2007; Melican & Dixon, 2008). Ultimately, journalistic articles are more frequently read by influential groups, such as politicians or other journalists.

Consequently, journalists have more opportunities than other groups to influence and correct public opinion. However, why should journalists assume that the media's influence must be corrected? After all, it is unlikely that journalists generally perceive media coverage as politically distorted in comparison to their own views. Such hostile media perceptions are particularly evident in specific, polarizing conflicts with involved citizens and less in terms of politics in general (e.g., Kim, 2011; Matthes, 2013). In addition, journalists evaluate media influences more positively than the population (Tsfati & Livio, 2008). Nevertheless, journalists may also come across political opinions in media with which they disagree. If they perceive that these media have a strong influence on the public, the journalists could assume that the unwanted political opinion plays a prominent role in public discourse. As a result, journalists may try to counter this influence. In this case, it is likely that they do not only act as private persons and write comments on social networks or demonstrate, for example, but instead act correctively in the form of writing journalistic articles of their own. In articles, in addition to distributing their own opinion, journalists can also explicitly contradict an unwanted opinion.

Following theoretical approaches, such as the spiral of silence, it could be assumed that individuals are afraid to speak out their opinion when the (perceived) public opinion differs from their own (Noelle-Neumann, 1980). However, single unwanted positions, which are investigated in the present study, should rarely be perceived by journalists as public opinion. Moreover, the empirical findings concerning the assumptions of the spiral of silence are inconsistent (for an overview, see, e.g., Roessing, 2011). In addition, it is plausible that journalists in particular speak out their views even though they consider themselves to be part of the minority. They presumably have a higher involvement especially regarding their discussed topics and have a deeper interest in debating political issues.

How, then, do journalists react when they come across unwanted political opinions in online media? Given the foregoing, the following hypothesis can be derived:

Hypothesis 1 (H1): The stronger and the more negative journalists perceive the political influence of the Internet to be on the public, the more frequently they contradict unwelcome political views that are spread through online media within their articles.

2.3 Presumed media influences and the approval of repressive measures

Another frequently examined consequence of presumed media influences is the increased approval of restrictions. The stronger one perceives the media's influence on others to be (or the greater the difference between the perceived influence on oneself and the perceived influence on others), the stronger one's approval of censorship measures (Feng & Guo, 2012). This applies also to presumed political influences (e.g., Dohle & Bernhard, 2014; Salwen, 1998; Wei & Lo, 2007; Wei, Lo, & Lu, 2011). The results of a previous survey of German journalists (Bernhard & Dohle, 2014) indicate that even journalists increasingly support repressive measures if the journalists perceive that the media have strong political influences on other people. Although the approval of such measures was low in absolute terms, this correlation is still surprising. Journalists usually see themselves as critical observers of politics and consider it their responsibility to give the public comprehensive information (e.g., Hanitzsch et al., 2011). For this reason, journalists should consider it important to keep coverage free from any kind of interference.

The focus of this article is the political influences of online media. There are reasons that the political influences of online media are evaluated more negatively by journalists than the influences of traditional mass media. Online media, for instance, have a much higher potential for interaction and offer users themselves opportunities to communicate publicly. Thus, the Internet poses a threat to the traditional role of journalism because the online space provides an opportunity for laypeople who do not have professional journalism qualifications to reach large audiences. Therefore, journalists are no longer the only gatekeepers of public discourse (e.g., Bruns, 2005; Deuze, Bruns, & Neuberger, 2007; Mitchelstein & Boczkowski, 2009). Furthermore, online services act as rivals in the competition for users' attention. Younger people, in particular, are increasingly turning away from traditional mass media and obtaining information from online media (e.g., for Germany: Emmer, Wolling, & Vowe, 2012). These are some of the important reasons journalists are sometimes wary of information from the Internet (e.g., Cassidy, 2007; Fortunati & Sarrica, 2011). This increases the probability of higher acceptance of repressive countermeasures.

Thus, it is assumed:

Hypothesis 2 (H2): The stronger and the more negative journalists perceive the political influence of the Internet to be on the public, the more they will demand restrictions of this influence.

2.4 Presumed media influences as a mediator

Whether journalists are working for online media or (more or less) exclusively for traditional mass media probably affects not only corrective actions or the acceptance of censorship but also the presumed influence of online media. Journalists who mainly work for online media are likely to believe these media to be more influential than offline journalists do for several reasons. First, online journalists can make their work appear more significant by attributing influence to the Internet. Otherwise, cognitive dissonance would occur (Tsfati & Livio, 2008, p. 115). Moreover, online journalists are quite Internet-savvy and are extensive Internet users. Frequent use of a medium can be associated with presuming it has a strong influence. The perception of the Internet's strong political effects, in turn, should (according to Hypotheses 1 and 2) result in more contradictions of opposing opinions and increased approval of repressive measures.

Thus, indirect effects can be expected. Journalists who mostly work for online services are likely to believe online services to have a stronger influence. This belief, in turn, will lead to more contradictions of unwelcome opinions in the journalists' own articles. In other words, the perception of the Internet's political influence will mediate the relationship between working for online/traditional media and journalists' contradictions of unwelcome political opinions. Therefore, the following hypothesis can be derived:

Hypothesis 3 (H3): Working for online media will indirectly increase journalists' contradictions of unwelcome political opinions through the mediation of their perception of the Internet's political influence.

An indirect effect should also occur with respect to repressive measures. Journalists who work mainly for online media perceive the Internet as having a stronger influence, which in turn leads to an increase in approval of repressive measures. In other words, the perception of the Internet's political influence will mediate the relationship between working for online/traditional media and journalists' approval of restrictions on the influence of online media. Therefore, the following is assumed:

Hypothesis 4 (H4): Working for online media will indirectly increase journalists' approval of restrictions on the influence of online media through the mediation of their perception of the Internet's political influence.

2.5 The interrelation between corrective communication activities and approval of repressive measures

Corrective communication activities and approval of repressive measures were presented as separate concepts. Although both are possible reactions to presumed strong and negative media influences, corrective actions (e.g., Barnidge & Rojas, 2014; Lim & Golan, 2011; Rojas, 2010) and censorship demands (e.g., Dohle & Bernhard, 2014; Salwen, 1998; Wei et al., 2011) have been investigated separately in previous studies. One exception is the study conducted by Bernhard and Dohle

(2013), in which both reactions were taken into account. The authors showed that the stronger and more negative the respondents perceived the political influence of newspapers on the public to be, the more the respondents spread their opinion about a highly controversial building project in Germany using online media. In addition, there was a correlation between the perception of the influence of the Internet and demands for stricter Internet regulation. Whether there is a correlation between the two adopted measures was not examined in this study. Nevertheless, corrective actions and demands for censorship might be linked. On the one hand, it is plausible that the two reactions are correlated positively. Individuals who perceive media influences as being strong and highly problematic could take or support as many countermeasures as possible, developing a "double strategy": Demands for stricter censorship of the media and the distribution of their own political opinions would complement each other. Applied to the present case, this means that the more frequently journalists contradict opinions in their articles, the more the journalists will demand restrictions on online media.

However, another scenario is also plausible. Journalists who often contradict opinions in their own articles could deem that action a sufficient measure for opposing perceived media influences. Consequently, the journalists might agree less with censorship measures that are problematic from a democratic theory point of view and conflict with their journalistic self-image. Thus, there would be a negative correlation between corrective communication activities and approval of repressive measures: The more frequently journalists contradict opinions in their articles, the less they will demand restrictions on online media.

Both scenarios are theoretically plausible. As there are no empirical findings that speak for or against one of the two scenarios, the following open research question is formulated:

Research question 1 (RQ1): How are corrective communication activities and approval of repressive measures related?

3. Method

3.1 Data collection and sample

In spring 2013, a standardized online survey was conducted among German journalists in cooperation with the *Deutscher Journalisten-Verband* (DJV, German Federation of Journalists) and the *Deutsche Journalistinnen- und Journalisten-Union* (dju, German Union of Journalists). The study was based on a 2012 survey of German journalists (Bernhard & Dohle 2014). The journalist associations contacted members via email and asked them to participate. As an incentive, one Euro was donated to the non-profit organization *Reporters Without Borders* for every participant. A total of 1,228 people responded to the survey. Of these respondents, 268 respondents who described themselves as working primarily in public relations were excluded from the study, and thus, the sample was made up of 960 journalists. There is no information about the response rate because it is

not clear how many journalists are members of both associations and thus received the email twice.

The sample is not representative of the population of German journalists (on the problems with representative surveys among journalists in Germany, see Malik, 2011), which must be taken into account when interpreting the findings. However, concerning several central variables, there were minor differences with the population of journalists determined by Weischenberg, Malik, and Scholl (2006): 65 percent of the participants were male, and 35 percent were female (population of German journalists: 37% female). The majority had high degrees of formal education: 20.5 percent had university entrance qualifications (population: 28%), while 71.9 percent stated their highest qualification was a university degree (population: 69%). The age of the respondents varied between 22 and 88 years (M = 49.13; SD = 12.52; population: M = 41 years). Most respondents worked primarily for newspapers (37.4%; population: 35%) or magazines (15.7%; population: 20%); 13.4 percent and 12.4 percent worked for television and radio, respectively (population: 15%; 17%). The rest worked for other media or news agencies. Almost half (45.2%) of the journalists stated that they covered mainly politics (population: 15%); 36.9% said they mainly worked on economic topics, 40 percent reported on culture, 12.9 percent covered sports, and about 20 percent mainly reported on scientific topics.[1] A 55.4 percent majority worked as freelancers (population: 25%), while 44.6 percent were permanently employed.

3.2 Measures

Presumed media influence. One item measured how strong the respondents believed the Internet's political influence on the public to be: "When thinking about the Internet, how strong do you consider its political influence, namely, the influence on the German public?" This was measured on a 5-point scale[2] (1 = *no influence* to 5 = *very large influence*; M = 3.29; SD = .92).[3] Additionally, the evaluation of the Internet's political influence on the public was measured: "When thinking about the Internet, how positively or negatively would you consider its political influence, namely, the influence on the German public?" (1 = *very positive* to 5 = *very negative*; M = 3.15; SD = .80).[4]

1 Multiple responses were possible. The survey was deliberately not limited to journalists who cover political topics exclusively, because journalists from outside the politics section might also have opportunities to express their political views. Journalists with a different focus could, for instance, comment on economic, cultural, or sports policies.

2 This measurement does not fulfil the criteria for an ideal metric scale. Despite that, this variable and other variables with a similar measurement were considered suitable for use in regression models.

3 The presumed political influence on the public from online news sites, *Facebook*, *Twitter*, *YouTube*, weblogs, and party webpages was measured using similar questions. Averaging these items to an index (α = .74) and using it as a predictor for demands for censorship and corrective actions, the results are very similar to the findings described in the following section.

4 The evaluation of the influence of television and press on the public was also measured (M = 2.78; SD = .85). Thus, the data support an assumption outlined in the theoretical section: Journalists evaluate online influences more negatively than influences of traditional media.

Corrective communication activities. The frequency with which journalists contradicted other people's political views spread through online media was measured using the following item: "How often have you actually contradicted a political opinion that you did not agree with in an article of your own?" (1 = *never* to 5 = *very often*; *M* = 2.15; *SD* = 1.22). The item itself does not clearly indicate that this is about unwanted political views on the Internet. However, this section of the questionnaire was introduced with an explanation that the questions deal with immediate reactions to opinions on political questions that are spread via the Internet.

Approval of repressive measures. The following question captured the respondents' attitude toward repressive measures regarding the Internet: "How much do you agree with the following statement?: The political influence of the Internet should be restricted" (5-point scale; 1 = *absolutely disagree* to 5 = *absolutely agree*; *M* = 1.81; *SD* = 1.05).[5]

Work for online media. The journalists were asked how much of their professional work was for Internet services (1 = *none or a very small proportion*, 2 = *about a third*, 3 = *about half*, 4 = *about two thirds, 5 = more than two thirds*, 6 = *work for online media only*). For the analyses, a dichotomous variable was generated, aggregating the latter five possible answers: 44.2% of the journalists interviewed worked at least partly for online media, while the rest worked almost exclusively for traditional media.

Control variables. In addition to age, sex, level of education, and the main topics covered (45.2% of the respondents stated that they report mainly on politics; 54.8% did not check "politics"), additional control variables were measured: interest in politics (1 = *not at all* to 5 = *very strongly*; *M* = 4.44; *SD* = .73), the perceived reach of the Internet regarding political information (1 = *is used by very few people* to 5 = *is used by very many people*; *M* = 3.48; *SD* = .94), and the perceived suitability of the Internet for political information (1 = *not at all* to 5 = *very much*; *M* = 3.96; *SD* = .95). Furthermore, the journalists were asked the average number of hours per day they used the Internet (*M* = 3.77 hours; *SD* = 2.41).

4. Results

To test H1 and H2, two hierarchical regression analyses were calculated. Opposing unwelcome opinions through one's own articles and approval of repressive measures served as dependent variables. In the first step of the regressions, the control variables were used as predictors: age, sex (0 = *male*; 1 = *female*), level of education (in years), work areas (0 = *traditional media only*; 1 = *[also] for online media*), major topics of coverage (0 = *other topics*; 1 = *politics*), interest in politics, use of the Internet (hours per day), presumed reach of online media, presumed suitability of online media for political communication, and evaluation of the perceived political influence of online media. In the second step, the Internet's

5 This item was measured in the questionnaire after the perception of influence. Willingness to censor could therefore be influenced by the estimate of the influence. However, such priming effects are unlikely because between both variables a number of other items had to be answered.

presumed influence on the German public and the evaluation of the perceived influence were taken into account. Finally, the multiplication terms for the presumed strength of the influence and its evaluation were added.[6] The results are shown in Table 1.

According to H1, presuming a strong and at the same time negative political influence of the Internet on the public would increase the frequency with which journalists use their own articles to oppose unwelcome political views spread through online media. The data did not confirm this: The interaction term of the presumed strength and the evaluation of the influence is not significant (β = 0.02; *ns*; see Table 1, middle column). However, the stronger they believed the Internet's influence on to be the public, the more frequently the journalists contradicted other people's online views in their articles (β = 0.09; $p < .05$). The evaluation of the presumed influence is irrelevant (β = 0.01; *ns*).

According to H2, the perception of strong and negative Internet influences should lead to increased approval of restrictive measures. According to the findings, this assumption must be rejected as the interaction term is not significant (β = 0.02; *ns*; see Table 1, right-hand column). However, the Internet's presumed political influence on the public is a significant predictor of the support for restrictions on the Internet's influence (β = 0.11; $p < .01$), but not the evaluation of the influence (β = 0.03; *ns*).

Moreover, the frequency of journalists' corrective actions rises in proportion with their interest in politics (β = 0.10; $p < .01$). Additionally, journalists who mainly cover political topics (β = 0.09; $p < .01$) or work for online media at least part of the time (β = 0.09; $p < .05$) contradict other people's opinions more frequently in their own articles than other journalists. The frequency of a journalist's own Internet use (β = 0.11; $p < .01$) is positively correlated with corrective actions.

Regarding repressive measures, primarily older (β = 0.09; $p < .05$) journalists who are less interested in politics (β = -0.15; $p < .001$) and believe the Internet is ill-suited for information about politics (β = -0.11; $p < .01$) demand censorship measures.

The variables explain to only a small extent the approval of contradictions of unwelcome political opinions ($R^2 = .06$; $p < .001$) and restrictive measures ($R^2 = .07$; $p < .001$).

6 The variables for perceived influences and their evaluation were standardized in order to facilitate the interpretation of the results.

Table 1: Hierarchical regressions – Effects on contradictions of unwelcome political opinions and on the approval of repressive measures

	DV: Contradictions of unwelcome opinions (n = 866)	DV: Approval of repressive measures (n = 878)
	β	β
Block 1		
Age	-.01	.07*
Sex (0 = male; 1 = female)	.04	.02
Years of education	.06	-.06
Working areas (0 = traditional media; 1 = online media)	.09*	-.01
Major topics of coverage (0 = other topics; 1 = politics)	.09*	-.05
Interest in politics	.09*	-.16***
Use of the Internet (hours/day)	.11**	-.05
Presumed reach of the Internet	.02	.06
Presumed suitability of the Internet for political information	.01	-.11**
R^2	.05***	.06***
Block 2		
Age	.00	.09*
Sex (0 = male; 1 = female)	-.04	.01
Years of education	.07	-.06
Working areas (0 = traditional media; 1 = online media)	.09*	-.01
Major topics of coverage (0 = other topics; 1 = politics)	.09**	-.04
Interest in politics	.10**	-.15***
Use of the Internet (hours/day)	.11**	-.05
Presumed reach of the Internet	-.01	.03
Presumed suitability of the Internet for political information	.01	-.11**
Evaluation of the Internet's influence on the public	.02	.04
Presumed Internet's political influence on the public	.09*	.11**
R^2 *change*	.01*	.01**
Block 3		
Age	.00	.09*
Sex (0 = male; 1 = female)	-.04	.01
Years of education	.07*	-.05
Working areas (0 = traditional media; 1 = online media)	.09*	-.01
Major topics of coverage (0 = other topics; 1 = politics)	.09**	-.04
Interest in politics	.10**	-.15***
Use of the Internet (hours/day)	.11**	-.05
Presumed reach of the Internet	-.01	.03
Presumed suitability of the Internet for political information	.01	-.11**
Evaluation of the Internet's influence on the public	.01	.03
Presumed Internet's political influence on the public	.09*	.11**
Presumed influence*evaluation of influence	.02	.02
R^2 *change*	.00	.00
Total R^2	.06***	.07***

Notes: The variables of perception and evaluation of influence are standardized. DV = dependent variable; * $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$; *** $p < .001$.

H3 and H4 assumed that the perceived strength of the Internet's political influence acts as a mediator between journalists working for online media and (1) their tendency to argue with online opposition and (2) their demands for repressive measures. To test hypotheses 3 and 4, a path model was calculated. Work for online media served as an exogenous variable, while the approval of censorship measures and the frequency of contradictions were the endogenous variables. The perceived strength of the Internet's influence was considered a mediator.[7]

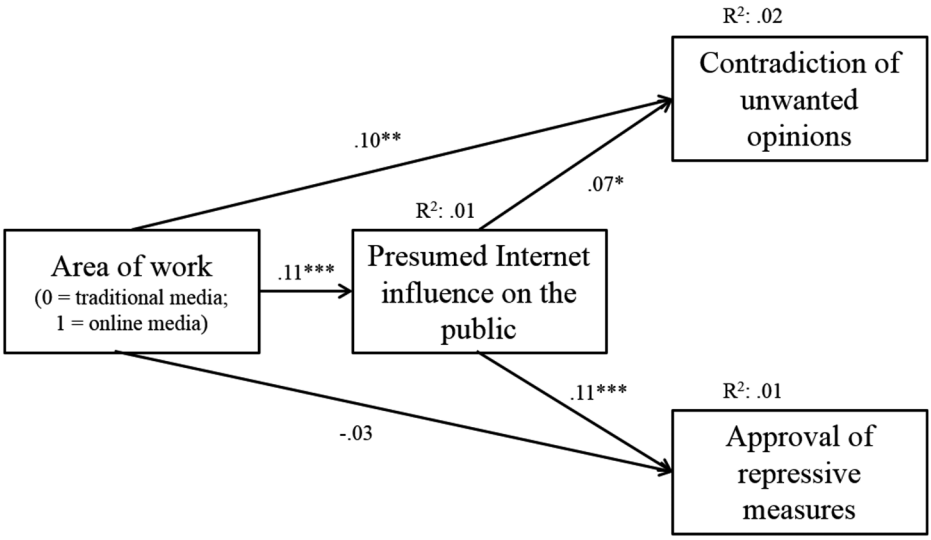
The results shown in Figure 1 confirm a finding from the regression analyses, even when accounting for the mediator variable: Journalists who work for online media contradict political opinions spread through the Internet more frequently than their colleagues who work for traditional media alone ($\beta = 0.10$; $p < .01$). Moreover, the perceived media influence is a significant mediator (indirect effect: $\beta = 0.01$; $p < .05$). Online journalists presume the Internet has stronger political influences than offline journalists do ($\beta = 0.11$; $p < .001$). This in turn leads online journalists to contradict opposing political views more often in their own articles ($\beta = 0.07$; $p < .05$). Consequently, H3 can be accepted.

Moreover, Figure 1 shows that – as in the regression models – journalists' work for online media has no direct effect on their support for demands for censorship ($\beta = -0.03$; *ns*). However, as expected, there is a significant indirect effect ($\beta = 0.10$; $p < .01$): Journalists who work at least part-time for online media perceive stronger political online influences on the public ($\beta = 0.11$; $p < .001$). This in turn results in increased approval of the statement that the political influence of online media should be restricted ($\beta = 0.11$; $p < .001$).[8] Thus, H4 can be accepted.

7 The relevant statistical values indicate a good model quality (e.g. Hu & Bentler, 1999): $\chi 2 = 0.65$ ($df = 1$, $p = .42$); comparative fit index (*CFI*) = 1.00; root mean square error of approximation (*RMSEA*) = .00.

8 The indirect effect was bootstrapped with 5,000 replications (e.g., Hayes, Preacher, & Myers, 2011).

Figure 1: Path model. Presumed influence of the Internet as a mediator between area of work and contradiction of unwanted opinions and approval of repressive measures



Note: Standardized regression coefficients; $n = 934$; * $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$; *** $p < .001$.

RQ1 asked about the relationship between corrective communication activities and the approval of repressive measures. To answer this question, a partial correlation analysis was calculated that included all control variables. The analysis revealed no relevant connection between the two variables ($r = -.03$; *ns*). Both reactions thus appear to be independent.

5. Discussion

How do journalists react when they perceive that the Internet has a strong and negative political influence on the public? This question was examined using a sample of German journalists. One central result is that the perception of strong political influences of online media on others leads journalists to use their own articles to argue with opposing political opinions spread via the Internet. This argumentative tendency can be interpreted in terms of corrective actions to influence public opinion according to one's own view. One argument for this interpretation is that the survey questions dealt explicitly with arguments about opinions that one did not agree with. It is self-evident that such views will be thought to have an unwanted effect on others that must be corrected. This is why (in this case) the manner in which journalists evaluate the Internet's general political influence is irrelevant to how frequently they argue in their articles against opposing political opinions. Remarkably, presumed media influences affect not only the roles of journalists (Tsfati & Livio, 2008) but also the *content* of their articles.

These articles can shape the opinion of many people. Whether journalists work for online media has a direct effect of increasing their argumentativeness regarding opinions spread online. One explanation could be that online media journalists probably use the Internet more often and are more active in social networks; therefore, these journalists are more likely to let unwelcome opinions spread online bother them. Moreover, working for online media also has an indirect effect of increasing such arguments, mediated by the presumed strength of the Internet's influence.

The present study showed that journalists react not only constructively but also repressively toward presumed media influences. The stronger journalists perceive the political influence of online media on the public to be, the more they support demands to restrict this influence. It is remarkable that this reaction was found in the case of journalists, who are usually very skeptical about limitations on their freedom. However, the perception of strong online influences results in a *relative* increase in approval, which remains at a low level in absolute terms.

Another notable discovery is that a correlation between perceived influences and approval of censorship demands was found in connection with *political* media influences that do not necessarily have a negative connotation. In this context, the strength of the perceived influence alone increased the approval of restrictive measures. The evaluation of the influences was irrelevant. This is in line with the findings of Bernhard and Dohle (2014), who worked with a different sample. One possible explanation for the results of the two studies is that journalists might have a generally critical attitude toward any influences they perceive as strong or *too* strong. It appears to be of secondary importance that the journalists were dealing with influences that they exert themselves.

Online journalists are not more critical about restricting the Internet's influence than their colleagues who work only for traditional media. Support for repressive measures was roughly on the same low level in both groups of journalists. One possible reason is that skepticism regarding the Internet, which was found in offline journalists in the past, is no longer relevant to demands for repressive measures. Instead, working for online media has an indirect effect of increasing demands for censorship, mediated by the presumption of the Internet's stronger political influences.

Also noteworthy is the finding that journalists who are strongly interested in politics accept repressive measures in a less intensive way than those who are not as interested. At the same time, politically interested journalists oppose more in terms of corrective actions. One reason could be that politically interested journalists tend to participate more in political discourse and at the same time are more aware that a limitation on online media's political influence is delicate in terms of democratic theory.

Overall, the findings illustrate that the perception of strong online influences can have slightly inconsistent consequences. On one hand, journalists increase their demands to restrict the influence of one public communication sector as a consequence of such perceptions. On the other hand, the journalists use public communication and, in a way, their own influence to counter (unwelcome) presumed influences from others. The present study revealed no correlation between

these two measures. However, further studies must examine whether these findings are generalizable. Such studies might proceed more differentiated than here. Information from the present study, for example, cannot determine *whose* influence in the online sphere the journalists would like to restrict. It appears plausible that they did not have their fellow journalists in mind but instead citizen journalists or user-generated content. Moreover, it is also conceivable that journalists who work for quality media primarily plead for limitations on the influence of tabloid journalism.

The findings also make clear that merely perceived influences can have consequences for journalists' actual behavior, even in the content of their articles. This result has theoretical consequences: Theories aimed at explaining journalistic activities should also take presumed influences on other people into account (Tsfati & Livio, 2008). Thus far, subjective perceptions have only been considered in the form of, for instance, the role conceptions of journalists, journalists' audience images (e.g., DeWerth-Pallmeyer, 1997; Loosen & Schmidt, 2012), and the perceived external influences on journalism (e.g., Hanitzsch et al., 2010; Hanitzsch & Mellado, 2011).

Therefore, the perception of online media's political influences on the public has consequences on attitudes and behavior even in the case of journalists. However, perceived influences can only partly explain journalists' corrective communication activities and approval of restricting the influence of online media. The control variables do not add much explanatory power to the models, either. Journalists' attitudes toward restrictive measures and the frequency with which they contradict unwelcome opinions in their articles largely depend on other factors. For example, regarding the journalists' approval of influence restrictions, other studies indicate that a person's conservative or authoritarian attitude could be the decisive factor (e.g., Hense & Wright, 1992). Another probable predictor could be one's perception of low media literacy and thus the presumably greater need to protect the public.

The fact that presumed media influences have only a low explanatory power in the present study, however, does not necessarily mean that presumed influences are an irrelevant factor for journalists' attitudes and behavior. Instead, the weak effects might have other causes. The small effects concerning corrective actions are possibly due to an inadequate measurement. In other studies, corrective actions were usually measured with several items (e.g., Bernhard & Dohle, 2013; Rojas, 2010). In the present study only one item was used. The explanatory power of perceived media influences might be greater at differently formulated items. In addition, control variables that were not considered, such as the perceived hostility of the online opinion climate, might have allowed deeper insights into the relationship between presumed media influences and corrective actions. Moreover, the weak explanatory power of the models could be because journalists are constrained by editorial restraints that could alleviate the influence of the journalists' own position on the article (e.g., Donsbach & Patterson, 2004).

The present study has additional limitations. The sample was not fully representative of the population of German journalists. In particular, many freelancers participated in the survey as well as journalists who report mainly on political

issues. The latter is reflected in a high level of political interest in the sample. It is unknown if the respondents' high interest in politics is as pronounced among all German journalists or how this interest influenced the results. Approval of repressive measures might be more pronounced in a sample with less political interest, while fewer corrective actions might be observed. It is further problematic to generalize this study's inferences to journalists in other countries. Still, the replication of a large extent of the findings about support for restrictive measures from Bernhard and Dohle's (2014) study indicates that the results described here have a certain robustness.

Moreover, it is problematic to distinguish between offline and online journalists. Today, most of the content produced by journalists who work for traditional news outlets appears online. Thus, the question of how much of journalists' professional work was for Internet services might be outdated.

Finally, presumed influences were measured in a very general way. The respondents were asked to estimate the Internet's political influence. "The Internet" encompasses a huge range of phenomena. Thus, it is unclear what exactly the respondents had in mind when they evaluated the Internet's influence on other people. Cognitive pretests conducted with non-journalists within the context of this study revealed that many people label the influences of different online media generally as "Internet influences." Nevertheless, presumed influences of online media should be examined in more detail in future studies.

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