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National Identity Building through Patterns of an International Third-Person Perception in News Coverage

Philipp Müller

Abstract

This article argues that news coverage plays an important role for national identity building in a way that it evaluates the own nation better than foreign nations (in-group/out-group bias). This notion is being transferred to the media as an element of national cultural identity. We identify analogies between national identity building through the mass media and the third-person perception, which states that people assume others to be more vulnerable to negative media influences. It is hypothesized that patterns of an international third-person perception occur in news coverage, i.e. the news media should present media influences in the own country to be weaker than in other countries. A first standardized content analysis ($N = 2204$) of newspaper coverage from the US and Germany on elections in own and other countries supports this hypothesis. Consequences are discussed and directions for future research are pointed out.

National Identity Building through Patterns of an International Third-Person

Perception in News Coverage

Introduction

Many theorists have argued that media coverage plays an important role for national

identity building (Anderson, 1983; Deutsch, 1966; Higson, 2002; Polonska-Kimunguyi

and Kimunguyi, 2011; Price, 1995; Schlesinger, 1991a, 1991b; Smith, 1991). In fact,

empirical findings support this notion: mass media coverage coins perceptions of the

own and other nations in various ways (Brewer et al., 2003; Dell´Orto et al., 2004;

Perry, 1987; Waisanen and Durlak, 1967; Wanta et al. 2004). National identities can be

regarded as an element of a person´s social identity (Tajfel and Turner, 1986). Social

identity research has shown that an essential part of collective identity formation lies

within the establishment of social borders between the own and other social groups

(Hamilton and Trolier, 1986; Tajfel et al., 1971) through social comparison processes

(Festinger, 1954). For this purpose, evaluations of in-groups and out-groups are even

often biased in a way that favours the in-group (Hinkle and Schopler, 1986). Against

this background, it can be expected that media coverage on own and other nations also

implicitly and/or explicitly contains such biased evaluations and, thus, not only

contributes to an isolated national identity building but, accordingly, also to the

delimitation of own and other nations. Biased patterns (1) of evaluation of own and

other nations within media coverage could have far reaching consequences for

international communication and would especially interfere with mutual understanding

in communication across national borders.

      This article deals with a special case of such biased portrayals of own and other

nations in the media as it looks into descriptions of the role of the media themselves.

This means that the news media are not only being considered as authors and distributers of evaluations of own and other nations but also as the category of comparison itself. This is due to the fact that the media can be regarded as part of a nation´s cultural identity which is subject of national comparison processes (Hall, 2000). Fierce and on-going discussions about cultural imperialism (Tomlinson, 1991) show that cultural elements of national identity such as language, sports, music, food or the media are of growing importance in times of a politically and economically globalizing world, in which nation states continuously lose impact (also see Blain et al., 1993: 195-196) A link between the idea of the media as an element of national cultural identity and the in-group/out-group comparative element of national identities can be found in third-person perception (Davison, 1983).

This perceptual phenomenon looks at media influences as a category of social comparison processes. It could be demonstrated in over a hundred studies (for a recent meta-analysis see Sun et al., 2008) that people tend to evaluate others´ vulnerability to negative media influences stronger than their own. Research has found that such judgments are linked to social identity building (Duck et al., 1995; Reid and Hogg, 2005). It was also demonstrated that second persons (i.e. the immediate social environment of a person) are perceived as less influenceable than more distant others (Cohen et al., 1988). This could be interpreted as a variation of the in-group/out-group bias (Hinkle and Schopler, 1986). From this notion, it is only a small step to national identities and the biased national comparisons as underlying patterns of human communication in general and, more specifically, media coverage.

It is the aim of this article to outline the analogy between national identity building in mass media coverage and third-person perception as an incarnation of social identity building. For this purpose, the article will review existing research on media coverage and national identities as well as on third-person perceptions as a matter of

social identity. It will, then, continue with an integration of both areas, also including the role of journalists and their individual third-person perceptions which are assumed to be the fundament of a similar pattern occurring in coverage. Finally, assumptions will be transferred into a first explorative empirical test of the hypotheses. A standardized content analysis is intended to investigate whether patterns resembling an international third-person perception (2) can be found in German and US newspapers´ coverage of political elections in own and other countries.

Media Coverage and National Identities

Globalization is a mega-trend of our times not only from an economic but also from a cultural point of view (see e.g. Featherstone, 1990). The world-wide web as the dominating medium of presence and conceivable future is a decidedly transnational medium which connects users around the world through global social networking platforms. Nevertheless, the news media, which can be regarded as the core of the traditional mass media, are still mainly organized in national media systems (Tunstall 2007) and are, thus, forming national publics as well. This can be problematic, for example for the unification process of the European Union which is handicapped by the difficulty of building a common transnational public sphere (Baisnée, 2007; Gerhards, 2001). However, it also indicates that the news media could still be an appropriate platform for contents that contribute to national identity building as it has been argued by several theorists (Anderson, 1983; Deutsch, 1966; Higson, 2002; Polonska-Kimunguyi and Kimunguyi, 2011; Price, 1995; Schlesinger, 1991a, 1991b; Smith, 1991).

There is also some empirical evidence for the assumption that media coverage contributes to national identity building. Textual analyses of different news contexts of, e.g., Blain et al. (1993) (sports events), Brookes (1999) (BSE/CJD crisis), Hall (2000) (audiovisual material in the GATT) and Nossek (2004) (terrorism and political violence) have shown how the news media develop a positive national self-image and encourage identification with the nation. They also significantly contribute to the solution of tensions between different intranational identities as the examples of Canada and Quebec (Antecol and Endersby, 1999) or minority language media in Europe (Cormack, 1998) show. Moreover, news media also contain information that has the potential to shape the image of foreign nations. Content analytical results show that foreign nations are often depicted in a more negative light whereas the own nation is evaluated more positively (Blain et al., 1993; Wanta et al., 2004). Domke et al. (1999) showed that news coverage not only stimulates recipients´ cognitions about the issues covered but also makes cognitions about the involved races or ethnic groups salient. Several studies (e.g. Brewer et al., 2003; Mercille, 2005; Perry, 1987; Wanta et al., 2004) could observe how depictions of foreign nations take effect for the perception of those nations in terms of agenda-setting, framing, priming or other image-formation effects. According to their findings, news coverage has an immediate influence on recipients´ evaluations of other nations. Studies which deal with media effects on the perception of the own nation, however, are very rare (e.g. Waisanen and Durlak, 1967). This is a remarkable research gap considering the large number of theorists ho have stressed such an influence.

However, the theoretical assumptions concerning media effects on national identity building strongly resemble empirical findings from group psychology. It is supposed that exposure to domestic media coverage will enhance the evaluation of the own nation and, thus, strengthen an individuals´ identification with the nation. Similar

mechanisms have been observed within smaller social groups: communicating in-group/out-group biases strengthens individual members´ group identification. (Hamilton and Trolier, 1986; Hinkle and Schopler, 1986; Struch and Schwartz, 1989). The research also states that such an effect is functional for social groups. This is why we assume that the same phenomenon should also be observable for larger social groups, e.g. for nations. In those cases, the large amount of group members of national groups calls for efficient means of communicating the in-group favouring message. It is, therefore, likely that the news media contain such messages.

Third-Person Perceptions as a Matter of Social (and National) Identities

As has been argued before, cultural factors appear to have a growing influence for national identities in times of political and economic globalization. In accordance with Hall (2000), we assume the news media to deliver a relevant contribution not only to the distribution and synchronization of national identities but also as part of the national identity itself. This leads to looking for parallels between perceptions of nations and perceptions of news media. The third-person perception (Davison, 1983) marks such an analogy. It describes a phenomenon by which perceptions of the news media, or, more precisely, of their effects, contribute to identity formation. W. Phillips Davison´s (1983) initial idea was that people estimate the negative influence of a persuasive communication on indistinct others (third persons) stronger than on themselves (first persons) and on their immediate social environment (second persons). Several studies have also found evidence for so called 'third-person effects' (Gunther, 1991; McLeod et al. 2006): third-person perceptions can influence opinions, attitudes and behaviour (e.g. Chia, 2007; Cohen and Tsfati, 2009; Gunther, 1995; Mutz, 1989).

Davison´s (1983) first observations of third-person perceptions already suggested that the phenomenon could be regarded as related to social identities. As he writes, the idea of the third-person perception came to his mind when he talked to a historian who found himself confronted with differences in the perceived influence of a propaganda leaflet among two groups of soldiers (Davison, 1983: 1). The idea then caught him again when he was discussing his perceptions of media influences on journalists and the audience with a journalist (Davison, 1983: 2). What Davison, hence, originally observed are perceived group differences and not differences between self and others. He also expressed the assumption that third-person perceptions grow along perceived social distance (Davison, 1983: 12). Meta-analyses have shown that this 'social distance corollary' (Cohen et al., 1988) is one of the strongest moderators of third-person perceptions (see Paul et al., 2000; Sun et al., 2008). There are, however, also factors which interfere with social distance, e.g. the reference group´s perceived amount of exposure to the media in question (Eveland et al., 1999).

Research suggests biased intergroup comparisons to have an enhancing function for the perception of the group and also for the individual self-perception (Hamilton and Trolier, 1986; Hinkle and Schopler, 1986; Struch and Schwartz, 1989). Such a self-enhancement function has also been stressed to explain third-person perceptions (David and Johnson, 1998; Gunther and Thorson, 1992; Hoorens & Ruiter, 1996; Meirick, 2005; Tal-Or and Tsfati, 2007; Zhang, 2010) which can, thus, be regarded as a special case of 'self-serving bias' (Miller and Ross, 1975) or 'illusory superiority' (Van Yperen and Buunk, 1991). Findings strongly suggest that third-person perceptions are related to the perception of social groups, group identity and self-enhancement processes. This assumption finds further support in a large body of research that shows how third-person perceptions can be empirically connected to social identity building (Duck et al., 1995, 1999; Elder et al., 2006). Taken together, these studies support the idea that third-

person perceptions can be regarded as a specific case of intergroup comparison and in-group/out-group bias.

Reid and Hogg (2005; also see Reid et al., 2007) offer an advanced model for the explanation of third-person perceptions. Based on self-categorization theory, they suggest that in-group/out-group comparisons of media vulnerability are not static but have to be predicted in view of the specific context (Reid and Hogg, 2005: 132-133): What kind of media influence is in question? How are in-group and out-group composed? Which media usage behaviour appears as 'normative' (or socially desirable) for which groups? This approach to the explanation of third-person perceptions has been referred to as the most elaborate one by now (see Schmierbach et al., 2011) as it integrates both social distance and interfering variables such as message desirability (Eveland and McLeod, 1999), out-group attributes, or perceived exposure. This way, it can also explain first-person perceptions (Duck et al., 1995). What we should learn from this model is that predictions of the strength of third-person perceptions between social groups have to consider the specific group constellation and the media content in question and infer a 'normative fit' (Reid and Hogg, 2005: 133) of media influence from this consideration.

Patterns of an International Third-Person Perception in News Coverage

So far, we have seen that 1.) news media coverage plays an important role for national identity building and serves a national self-enhancement purpose, 2.) cultural characteristics like the media are of growing importance for national identities and 3.) third-person perception, i.e. the assumption that others are more vulnerable to negative media influences than self, can be explained as a mechanism of social identity building

for self-enhancement purposes. Pulling these findings together, it can be suggested that national news coverage contains multiple evaluations of own and other nations which, in sum, favour the own nation. Regarding the media as a category of a nation´s cultural identity, it can be expected that patterns of an international third-person perception occur in news coverage, i.e. the news media should present negative media influences in the own country to be weaker than in other countries. The underlying explanation for such a pattern occurring in news coverage has to be seen in its individual and national self-enhancing effect which can be expected according to social identity research.

Predicting that news coverage contains patterns of third-person perceptions immediately leads to the role of journalists as the authors of news coverage. Nossek (2004) has shown that journalists´ and editors´ individual national identities contribute to the way they report on own and foreign nations. For our specific case, this means that journalists´ international third-person perceptions, i.e. the belief that media influences are stronger in other nations than in the own (see Willnat et al., 2002 (4)), should somehow (probably rather unconsciously) be reflected in their coverage. The evident question now is: to which degree do journalists exhibit such a perception?

Although Davison´s (1983: 2) research on third-person perceptions was initiated by an observation of journalists´ presumptions of media influences on themselves and their audience, journalists´ third-person perceptions have afterwards remained a blind spot on the research map for quite a while. However, two studies from Israel and Germany have meanwhile investigated journalists´ perceptions of media influence in comparison to representative control groups (Dohle and Vowe, 2010; Tsfati & Livio, 2008). Both studies mainly observed similarities in journalists´ and other respondents´ presumptions of the strength of media influences on the public. Only judgments about media influence on self (Tsfati and Livio, 2008) and media influences for one special topic of coverage (Dohle and Vowe, 2010) differed significantly between journalists

and the control groups. This means there is no reason to believe that journalists, despite their professional involvement with the media, should not exhibit third-person perceptions in a similar way as other people. It can, thus, also be assumed that journalists´ international third-person perceptions reflect in their coverage.

Hypotheses

The considerations made so far lead to the assumption that media coverage that mentions media influences in own and other nations should draw a more favourable image of the own nation, i.e. media influences in the own nation should be presented weaker. A first exploratory study is intended to test this notion by means of a standardized content analysis of newspaper coverage from the US and Germany on political elections in own and other countries. The selection of elections as the context of this empirical test could help with the problem that it is hard to identify positive and negative evaluations of media influences in news coverage. The mediatization of election campaigns is a phenomenon which is generally evaluated negatively in the public discourse (Mazzoleni & Schulz, 1999). One can assume that media influences which are discussed within an election setting will quite homogeneously be evaluated negatively by perceivers. Journalists could have a sense of this and should, therefore, downplay them for their own country and assume them to be stronger in other countries. To test whether patterns of such an international third-person perception occur in news coverage we hypothesize that:

H1: When media coverage contains implicit or explicit information on the strength of media influences in own and foreign nations, media influence in the own nation will be depicted as weaker than in foreign nations.

The social identity explanation of third-person perceptions suggests that perceived distance to foreign countries could moderate the strength of ascribed media influence. What has been coined social distance in the original third-person research is probably best described as cultural distance for our purpose of country comparisons. To empirically test this question, the analysis of German and US newspaper articles includes coverage from both of these nations on both of these nations and, additionally, on immediate neighbour and more distant countries. This means that cultural distance is operationalized in terms of geographical proximity. This assumption is in line with findings from news geography research which show that immediate neighbour states are most heavily reported on in foreign coverage (Wilke et al. 2012) which could be interpreted as an indicator of cultural relatedness. If distance plays a role here, the analysis should be able to identify differences in third-person perceptions between neighbour and more distant countries.

H2a: Within US news coverage, media influences in neighbour countries Mexico and Canada will be depicted weaker than in Germany and France.

H2b: Within German news coverage, media influences in neighbour country France will be depicted weaker than in the US, Canada and Mexico.

Research has demonstrated that third-person perceptions can be regarded as a quite stable phenomenon of human perception that is hardly moderated by socio-demographic, personality or cultural variables (Paul et al., 2000; Sun et al., 2008).

Transferring this finding on the international context of this study, it might be assumed that the phenomenon proposed in hypotheses 1 and 2 will be independent of media coverage´s country of origin.

RQ1: Are there differences between US and German news coverage´s evaluation of strength of media influences in own and other nations?

In search of possible third variables or covariates, we are confronted with shortcomings of the empirical approach. Some moderators third-person research usually relies upon will not be measureable in a content analysis. As mentioned above, this is the case for evaluations of desirability of the media influences in question. Perceived exposure can also not be measured as it is rarely mentioned in the coding material. Three groups of variables, however, have been measured. These are 1.) attributes of the articles which were coded (length, newspaper section, journalistic format), 2.) attributes of the media influence in question (who is being influenced by which type of content?) and, of course, 3.) country variables which have already been discussed before (source country, reference country). Message effect attributes such as whether articles mention the influence of journalistic content or advertising or whether they deal with media influences on the electorate or reciprocal effects on politicians can be seen as indicators of message desirability (Andsager and White, 2007: 31–47). Against this background, a multivariate analysis is intended to test the following research question:

RQ2: Do attributes of the article or attributes of the media influence in question influence the differences in evaluation of strength of media influence between own and foreign nations?

Method

Sample

The content analysis examines the coverage of media influences within election campaigns of different countries. The coding material stems from the US and Germany. The sample contains coverage from both source countries on campaigns in Germany and its neighbour country France, the US and their neighbours Canada and Mexico. The analysis examines quality press coverage during a four-week period around the respective election dates of the five reference countries. The articles were taken from US newspapers USA Today, New York Times and Washington Post and German newspapers Süddeutsche Zeitung, Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung, Die Welt and Frankfurter Rundschau. The aim of these selection decisions was to create a sample which would have a high probability of containing a fairly large amount of propositions on media influences. German neighbour country France was selected because it is the Germany´s largest neighbour country and, thus, the country with the highest relevance for international politics. It was assumed that these characteristics would promote an extensive and in-depth coverage of its election campaign in German media (also see Wilke et al., 2012). Quality newspapers were selected for a similar reason. It was assumed that they offer the most in-depth coverage of election campaigns which will most likely engage in analysing the reasons of success within the campaigns. As media influences can be regarded as such factors of success, it is most likely that they will become a topic of quality newspaper coverage.

Sampling was conducted in two steps. In the first step, all articles that were published in the politics, opinion, economy, and media sections of these newspapers within the respective four-week period and that mentioned the last name of at least one of the two candidates of the respective election ($N = 2204$) were extracted from online

newspaper archives. The second step of sampling simultaneously was the first step of coding. For all articles, we coded whether the role of any kind of mass media was raised as a topic at all. This was the case if, e.g., an article mentioned a televised debate between the candidates or recited a party´s advertising campaign – and not only if the article explicitly dealt with the media´s influence on the election. It was assumed that the mere reference to mass media ascribed a certain relevance for the election to them. In order to draw a very broad image, the analysis contained propositions on all kinds of mass media (newspaper, radio, television, and those parts of the world wide web that can be regarded as public communication, excluding e-mail but including social networking sites) and included propositions on journalistic content as well as advertising. Based on these criteria $n = 704$ articles contained information on the role of the mass media for the respective election campaign.

Measures

Within these articles, we coded up to two propositions (5) that implicitly or explicitly dealt with the influence of a medium in the respective election campaign. If, e.g., an article dealt with a televised debate but also mentioned the reactions of the press on this debate, both propositions were coded. This resulted in a total amount of $N = 796$ propositions. This means that 92 of the articles added two propositions to the proposition sample whereas 612 articles contained only one proposition. (6) For all these propositions, we coded the strength of the respective influence on a three-step-scale ranging from 0 (no influence), 1 (weak influence) to 2 (strong influence). 0 was coded if the article did not mention at all whether or how the medium it refers to could have influenced the election outcome or given the campaign a new direction or in the

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(very rare) case that an article explicitly stated that the medium in question does not have an influence in the election campaign (e.g. 'The Social Democrats tried to reach the undecided with their most recent ad – but they did not succeed.'). An article was coded as 1 if it stated that the medium in question has influenced or could only influence a small group of voters or politicians or has a diversity of different effects on different people (e.g. 'Yesterday´s debate saw no clear winner. Polls show that supporters of the two camps have reacted very differently.'). An article was coded as 2 if it assumed that the medium could have or has had a significant influence on the election outcome or the course of the campaign (e.g. 'Obama is leading polls after his good performance in the debate').

The typical third-person perception survey study operates with five- or seven-step scales. However, such a scale level turned out to be unreliable for the measurement in a content analysis. A loss of measuredness, therefore, had to be accepted for our content-analytical instrument. The covariates mentioned in the hypotheses section were also coded for each proposition of media influence which was found in the articles. Articles were coded by the same coder. Thus, reliability measures describe repeated measurement intra-coder reliability (with eight weeks in between). Except for three (7), all variables received an acceptable Krippendorf´s α (8) of $\alpha \geq .85$, with $\alpha = .8568$ for the crucial variable strength of media influence. As intra-coder reliability is the weakest form of reliability measurement (Krippendorf, 2004: 215) reliability of this most important variable has also been measured on an inter-coder basis using the same cases. Inter-coder reliability is $\alpha = .8035$ which is still an acceptable value (Krippendorf, 2004: 241-243).

Findings

H1 predicts that news coverage will depict an image of weaker media influences in the own country than in foreign countries. An analysis of mean values of the coded strength of presumed media influences points to a verification of H1. For the articles deriving from the US, H1 applies to all four reference countries. For the own country, the media´s influence in the election campaign reaches a mean of $M = 0.84$ ($SD = 0.821$, $n = 292$). For the reference countries, a considerably stronger media influence is assumed (Mexico: $M = 1.05$, $SD = 0.970$, $n = .19$; Germany: $M = 1.22$, $SD = 0.972$, $n = 9$; France: $M = 1.62$, $SD = 0.637$, $n = 26$; Canada: $M = 1.75$, $SD = 0.500$, $n = 4$). However, only the two largest differences of means between own and reference country are significant (independent sample t-test; France: $p < .001$; Canada: $p = .033$), one of which (Canada) has to be discarded due to its small number of cases. Drawing conclusions from the analysis on the basis of singular states is generally problematic due to the small amount of foreign coverage that can be found in American newspapers and, thus, the fairly small numbers of cases for all reference countries.

The analysis of the articles from Germany can help in this regard. Election coverage of the reference countries France ($M = 1.14$, $SD = 0.864$, $n = 65$), US ($M = 1.29$, $SD = 0.739$, $n = 101$) and Mexico ($M = 1.57$, $SD = 0.535$, $n = 7$) features significantly higher (independent sample t-test; France; $p = .031$, US: $p < .001$, Mexico: $p = .014$) mean scores for the presented strength of media influences than coverage of Germany itself ($M = 0.88$, $SD = 0.783$, $n = 272$). Only the German coverage on Canada marks an exception to this finding. Although the first step of sampling even resulted in more articles on Canada stemming from Germany ($n = 14$) than from the U.S. ($n = 7$) only one of these articles brings up the media´s influence in the Canadian campaign at all. Thus, Canada has to be excluded from the analysis in regard of H1. Taken together,

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the presented data supports H1 for most of the source/reference country constellations. Comparisons of own and other nations in news coverage, indeed, seem to follow the logic of third-person perceptions – at least in as far as a noteworthy coverage of foreign countries can be observed at all.

H2a and H2b introduce the distance corollary to the framework of this study. They predict that media influences in neighbour countries will be presented weaker than in culturally more distant countries. To test these hypotheses, foreign reference countries which are considered to be similar in regard of presumed cultural distance have been grouped into clusters. Reference countries Canada and Mexico have been merged to the combined group 'neighbour countries' for the source country US and to the group 'more distant countries' for the source country Germany. Reference countries Germany and France will also be referred to as 'more distant countries' from the US perspective. The US as a reference country, however, cannot be regarded as a similarly distant nation from a German perspective. Their singular status as a political superpower and their worldwide cultural influence (see Willnat et al., 2002) makes the US a special case. Another Western country like Germany will probably feel culturally and politically closer to the US than to less dominant countries like Canada or Mexico. Therefore, the US have been analysed as an own reference country category for German coverage.

-- Place Tables 1 &2 about here, please --

Tables 1 & 2 summarize the results for grouped reference countries. They show that neighbour countries do indeed range lowest among the foreign countries. The mean score of media influence in the U.S. from the German perspective is (just as expected) lower than for the more distant countries. Independent sample *t*-tests show that only the

differences between evaluation of own and other nation are significant (as indicated in Tables 1 & 2). All differences between groups of reference countries remain insignificant. Thus, H2a and H2b have to be discarded. However, we find that means grow along presumed cultural distance. This finding points in the direction of H2. Future studies should, therefore, try to enlarge the number of cases and re-test the hypothesis.

RQ 1 asks whether the phenomenon observed in H1 is stable across source countries. Differences between foreign countries have turned out to be insignificant within the data. Foreign countries are, thus, being merged into a binary variable (domestic/foreign) for the test of this question. This allows us to conduct a 2 x 2 ANOVA with the two factors source country (US/Germany) and reference country (own nation/other nation) and the dependent variable strength of media influence. Results show a significant main effect of the reference country on the dependent variable ($F = 41.578$; $p < .001$; $df = 1$; *part. eta*$^2 = .050$). Besides, neither source country ($F = 0.486$; *n. s.*; $df = 1$; *part. eta*$^2 = .001$) nor the interaction between both factors source country*reference country have a significant effect ($F = 1,874$; *n. s.*; $df = 1$; *part. eta*$^2 = .002$) on the presented strength of media influences in the article. These results suggest that the observed gap between media coverage´s evaluation of media influences in own and foreign countries seems to be a very robust phenomenon across nations, at least when we compare the US and Germany.

RQ2 asks whether the observed differences between perceived media influences in own and foreign countries hold even when controlling for attributes of the article and the media influence in question. To test this question, a series of linear regression models for the dependent variable presented strength of media influence was calculated (see Table 3).. The first step considers attributes of the article (length, newspaper section, journalistic format). The second step tests the influence of attributes of the

media influence in question (influenced group of people, type of content). The third step includes the country variables which have been analysed before (source country, reference country).

-- Place Table 3 about here, please –

Results of the first model show that most of the attributes of the article do not have a significant influence on the presented strength of media influence. Only the journalistic format background report has a positive correlation with the strength of presented media influences in election campaigns. The fact that background reports tend to be more analytical than other journalistic formats might account for this finding. These journalistic pieces are the ones which will most likely search for reasons of the campaign events and election poll results and are, thus, also more likely to consider strong media influences. However, the influence of this variable diminishes in the second and third step of the regression.

Results of the second model show a strong influence of the influenced group of people on the presented strength of media influence. Newspaper coverage presents media influences on politicians to be significantly stronger than on the electorate. This finding is in line with Tsfati´s & Livio´s (2008) argument that journalists have to perceive a positive social influence of the media for reasons of "effort justification" (Aronson and Mills, 1959). By interpreting this finding we can go one step further: journalists might also have an interest in publicly depicting their social influence as positive. From a message-desirability perspective, media influences on politicians might be seen as more positively than media influences on the electorate. While the first could be interpreted as the media fulfilling their democratic function of controlling and criticising politics, the latter has a rather negative connotation from a normative point of

view (see e.g. Strömbäck 2006). It, therefore, seems plausible that the media should be stressing their (allegedly) positive influence on politicians rather than their influence on the electorate.

The third regression model, however, shows that this phenomenon is still the weaker one compared to the comparison of own and other nations. The variable reference country is by far the strongest predictor of the presented strength of media influence. In response to RQ2 it can, thus, be concluded that the influence of the reference country holds even when controlling for possible third variables or covariates. The still small proportion of explained variance of the third model, however, suggests that other third variables which have not been measured in this study might also contribute to the observed results.

Discussion

The basic premise of this article was to explore the analogy between national identity building through news coverage and third-person perception. Many theorists have emphasized the importance of the news media for national identity building and several content analytical studies have found evidence for such a contribution. What has not been studied yet is whether the news media evaluate the own country better than others. Group psychology has shown that such an in-group/out-group bias is communicatively distributed within social groups. We argued that larger social groups, like nations, will probably communicate such evaluations through media coverage. One example of the in-group/out-group bias which has extensively been studied by communication scholars is third-person perception, i.e. the biased perception of negative media influences on self and others. The idea of the article was to adapt this notion to the national identity

context by looking for depictions of media influences on political elections in different countries in news coverage. The second half of the article presented the results of a content analysis of newspaper coverage from the U.S. and Germany which was conducted as a first step towards empirically testing the approach. Findings support the basic assumption that news coverage depicts media influences in the own country weaker than in other countries. This could be interpreted as patterns of an international third-person perception occurring in news coverage.

The analysis, however, did not observe any articles that directly contained a comparison between media influences in own and other nations. It, thus, cannot be concluded that international third-person perceptions and other national comparisons are immediately present in news coverage. Rather, we have to conclude that in most of the cases such comparisons will be unconsciously present as a cognitive scheme within journalists´ minds which will lead them to evaluate the own nation well and other nations not so well in their coverage. True national comparisons become visible on an aggregate level only. But the evaluative pattern which could be observed here still has consequences for national identities. A permanent positive evaluation of the own nation and, on the other hand, negative evaluation of other nations within news coverage should have an effect on its audience. Social identity research suggests that that such an "illusory superiority" (Van Yperen and Buunk, 1991) concerning a social group will probably lead to an individual self enhancement and to a stronger identification with the nation (Brown, 1986; Hamilton and Trolier, 1986; Hinkle and Schopler, 1986; Rubin and Hewstone, 1998; Struch and Schwartz, 1989). On the intragroup level, this could lead to a stronger cohesion of the group, in this case the nation. However, on the intergroup level it could exacerbate mutual understanding and communication between members of different nations.

The strength of negative media influences is, of course, only a small piece of the whole puzzle of national identities. But investigating this aspect in analogy to the third-person perception has a value of its own as it also contributes to enhancing third-person theory. It has often been claimed that third-person research is somewhat artificial because its empirical evidence is built upon a survey situation which could provoke reply effects (see, e.g., Perloff, 1999). Observing a pattern similar to third-person perception in a content analysis of news coverage, which constitutes the outcome of real-life social behaviour, contributes to the external validity of the approach.

However, the content analysis which was used to empirically test the approach has its shortcomings and can only be regarded as a pilot study. Articles have been coded by a single coder only. There are small numbers of cases for some constellations of source and reference countries in this analysis. Also, the concentration upon two source countries leads to a lack of symmetric results. This could be an analytical problem. One might argue that the findings observed are not due to the supposed national identity explanation but due to real differences concerning media influences between the analysed countries. At least, the analysis contains symmetric results for Germany and the US which make up a large share of the data and confirm the assumptions made. Internationally comparative results on media influences in elections are rare (see Schmitt-Beck, 2012). For four Western countries, Schmitt-Beck (2003) has shown that there are, indeed, qualitative differences but that by and large the media are a similarly strong factor in all countries. This makes it highly probable that the results observed in this study cannot simply be traced back to real differences existing between the studied countries.

Nevertheless, much further research is necessary to examine the approach which was introduced with this article. The pilot study presented here was not able to find evidence for a distance corollary which could explain differences in the evaluation of

strength of media influences for foreign countries. Future studies should intend to test this question with a larger body of material. Cluster analyses could help to identify patterns of distance for a greater number of reference countries. These studies should also engage in the question of which indicators of distance are most decisive for two nations' proximity. Cultural, political, geographical or economic indicators could be taken into account.

Considering the production side of the issue, future research should also try to explore the evaluation of media influences through journalists. Which media influences are being regarded as favourable or positive and which as negative? Journalists´ answers to this question might differ from those of other people (see Tsfati & Livio, 2008). This is decisive in order to determine whether strong or weak media influences are the more favourable option for the own country. Not only for this purpose does it seem appropriate to add journalists´ surveys about their presumptions on media influences in own and other nations to the body of empirical evidence. Such surveys could clarify the relationship between journalists´ individual perceptions and their coverage. Is it a journalist´s national identity which brings him or her to evaluate own and other nations in his or her coverage according to the pattern observed here? Or do journalists merely understand the favouring of the own nation as a service to their domestic audience?

The literature review identified a remarkable gap concerning media effects studies in a national identity context. Additional research should, therefore, also aim at empirically lining the effects of national-identity patterns in news coverage. How do individuals react when they are exposed to messages that favour their nation with regard to media effects? And – the other way round – how do individuals react that are exposed to messages that evaluate their nation negatively? Do the findings from social identity and self-enhancement research also apply to national identity building through news coverage? Exposure experiments should be conducted to shed light on this question.

Notes

(1) This article uses the broader term 'pattern' instead of 'frame' which is much more common in communication research today to describe structural patterns of media content. However, framing means to 'select some aspects of a perceived reality and make them more salient in a communicating text, in such a way as to promote a particular problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation, and/or treatment recommendation for the item described' (see Entman 1993: 52). The components of media content that this article deals with cannot be understood as results of a purposeful and intended selection process but rather have to be regarded as results of an unconscious pattern of human perception, information processing and communicative presentation of social reality, namely of the perception of own and other nations. Therefore, using the term 'pattern' seems more appropriate than 'frame' which would suggest intentionality.

(2) The term 'third-person perception' will be used throughout the article to emphasize the connection to this line of research – although, what this article deals with are rather nation than person perceptions.

(3) For an overview on the concept which has been dealt with under many different names, see Hoorens (1993).

(4) The study of Willnat et al. (2002) is the only one so far that has asked respondents to evaluate media influences in own and other countries. It could not find significant differences between own and other countries. This finding, however, has to be evaluated against the background of the specific constellation of the survey as has been claimed by Reid and Hogg (2005). Respondents form Asia and Europe were asked to evaluate the negative cultural influence of US television in their own country and in other countries of the same continent. What respondents, thus, had to evaluate were threatening influences on their own national identity from outside. As perceived threats from the outside seem to enhance the stability of social groups (Janis, 1963; Rothgerber, 1997), it would, from a national identity perspective, not have been plausible if they were evaluated stronger for other countries than for the own. Thus, the findings from this study cannot be regarded as a falsification of third-person perceptions on an international level. Negative media influence that stems from inside a country should still be evaluated stronger for foreign nations.

(5) In a first exploration of the coding material showed that no articles were found which contained more than those two propositions.

(6) Having several cases in the sample which are not completely independent (because they pairwisely derive from one article) is not ideal for statistical tests which assume an independent sample. However, as the majority of the sample ($n = 612$) is, in fact, independent the statistical tests performed do assume an independent sample nevertheless.

(7) Exceptions are the following variables: journalistic format ($\alpha = .7939$), influenced group of people (electorate vs. politicians, $\alpha = .8283$), and most important political topic of the article ($\alpha = .5784$). The latter variable was excluded from analysis.

(8) Krippendorff´s α was computed based on $n = 60$ articles (selected by chance) using the SPSS matrix proposed in Hayes and Krippendorff (2007).

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Tables

Table 1

Patterns of a Third-Person Perception in US Coverage of Election Campaigns

Reference countries	*M*	*SD*	*n*	*ΔM*
Own country	0.84	0.821	292	
Neighbour countries (*Mexico, Canada*)	1.17	0.937	23	-0.33
More distant countries (*France, Germany*)	1.51	0.742	35	-0.67***

Notes: Reference countries grouped. Values are means on a scale from 0 (no influence) to 2 (strong influence). Error probability of the differences of means (two-tailed, equal variance assumed) in independent sample *t*-tests are: * $p \leq .05$, ** $p \leq .01$, *** $p \leq .001$ (all two-sided tests). $N = 350$.

Table 2

Patterns of a Third-Person Perception in German Coverage of Election Campaigns

Reference countries	*M*	*SD*	*n*	*ΔM*
Own country	0.88	0.783	272	
Neighbour country (*France*)	1.14	0.864	65	-0.26*
Superpower (*US*)	1.29	0.739	101	-0.41***
More distant countries (*Mexico, Canada*)	1.38	0.744	8	-0.50

Notes: Reference countries grouped. Values are means on a scale from 0 (no influence) to 2 (strong influence). Error probability of the differences of means (two-tailed, equal variance assumed) in independent sample *t*-tests are: * $p \leq .05$, ** $p \leq .01$, *** $p \leq .001$ (all two-sided tests). $N = 446$.

Table 3

Linear Regression Analyses of Possible Third Variables

Parameter	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3
Step 1: attributes of the article			
Length of article	.033	.034	.055
Section (1 = cover)	-.042	-.014	.029
Section (1 = politics)	.035	.067	.133
Section (1 = opinion)	-.063	-.035	.007
Section (1 = media)	.001	.017	.057
Format (1 = news piece)	.153	.133	.073
Format (1 = background report)	.220**	.215**	.157*
Format (1 = feature)	.042	.023	-.004
Format (1 = comment)	.144	.138	.132
Format (1 = ironical comment)	.037	.023	.009
Format (1 = portrait)	.039	.032	-.001
Step 2: attributes of the media influence in question			
Influenced group of people (0 = politicians; 1 = electorate)		-.141***	-.148***
Type of content (0 = advertising; 1 = journalistic)		.028	.009
Step 3: country variables			
Source country (0 = USA; 1 = Germany)			.025
Reference country (0 = own; 1 = other)			.218***
n	796	796	796
Adjusted R^2	.015	.034	.081

Notes: dependent variable: evaluation of strength of media influence (0 = no influence; 1 = moderate influence; 2 = strong influence). Values are standardized *β*-estimates from linear regression analyses. * $p \leq .05$, ** $p \leq .01$, *** $p \leq .001$.