



Political Communication in the Online World **Requirements and Outcomes of the Structural Change** **in Political Communication**

Research Unit 1381
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1. Outline of the Research Unit

The **diffusion of online media** – from online newspapers and search engines to blogs and video portals – has changed communication in every area of life to a degree and at a rate hitherto unknown. This is also believed to apply to politics, especially with respect to election campaigns and public participation. There is plenty of speculation around the keyword “Web 2.0”, ranging from one extreme to the other: at the one end an expectation of salvation, at the other end an expectation of doom.

It is against this backdrop that the research group intends to answer the **question** in how far political communication can be proved to change due to online media and what impact this, in turn, has on politics.

The framework for answering this question is a **model**. The center of the model is the *change in political communication* – structural changes in the communication relations between the actor groups (public, political organizations, and media organizations) with respect to social, temporal, and spatial aspects as well as with regards to content. One prerequisite is the *media change* – the extension of the media repertoire in society as a result of the use of the potentials of the Internet in public, semi-public and non-public communication. The *alteration in political communication* has a relevant impact on politics from individual, organizational and social perspectives and thus contributes to *political change*.

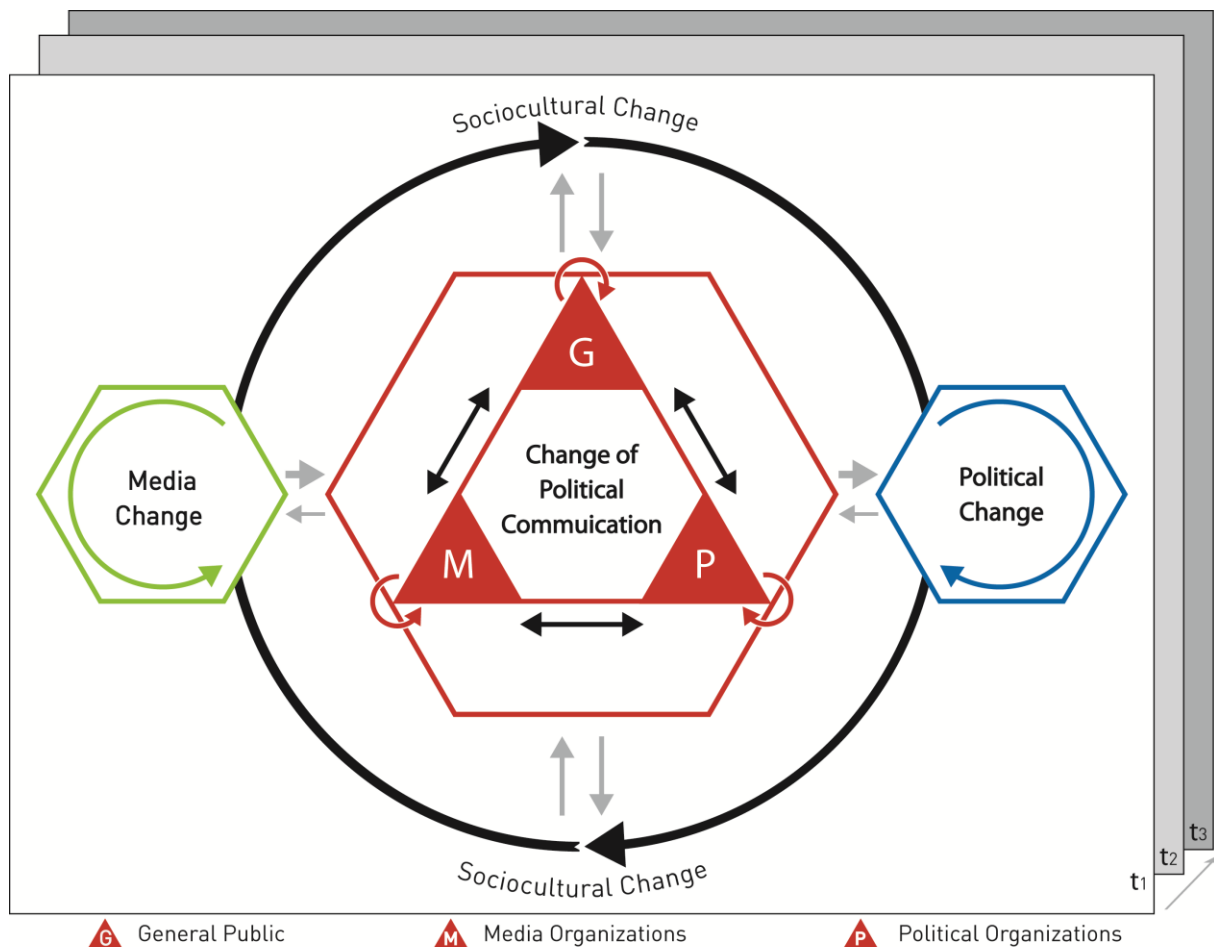


Image 1: Framework model of the change in political communication

Three **objectives** have been set by the group: (1) The investigation of the development of political communication should take the form of empirical, longitudinal studies, which result in a *multi-faceted overall picture*. This means that various analytical perspectives – those of individuals, of organizations, and of society as a whole – and different methods – in particular surveys, content analysis, and organization analysis – need to be interlinked. (2) In doing so, a number of theoretical approaches in the field of online communication will be tested and combined into one middle range theory *made up of many modules*. (3) By means of a thematically focused *network of researchers*, an *innovative form of organization* will be tested for disciplines that are divided into smaller sections such as communication studies.

The group includes seven **sub-projects**. Each will turn the overall question into a more specific problem by analyzing the relations between the change in political communication, media change, and political change from a specialized analytic perspective. *Integration* of the sub-projects into one research organization will be achieved

- *on the functional level* by keeping them oriented toward the central question and the central objectives;
- *on the structural level* by giving them a cognitive foundation in the form of a model framework as well as by coordinating methods, interrelating results and offering a powerful communication infrastructure;
- *in terms of processes* by establishing a working schedule that ensures that investigations are coordinated and milestones set for the research progress are observed.

While writing the proposal experience was gained on how to ensure a well-balanced relation of division of work and cooperation.

The research group is embedded in a network of **national and international cooperation**; the intensity of relations ranges from mutual information to joint applications for funding.

The **working schedule** is based on the milestones for the development of the theory: During the first three years, the theoretical approaches in the field of online communication are *tested and inventorized*. Then there will be an evaluation, followed by the second phase of integrating everything into *one theory made up of different modules*.

2. Overview of the Members of the Research Group

Member	University, Institute	Area of expertise
Adam, Silke	Universität Bern Institute of Communication and Media Studies	Communication Science / Political Communication
Brosius, Hans-Bernd	Ludwig-Maximilians-Universität München, Institute of Communication Science and Media Research	Communication Science
Dohle, Marco	Heinrich-Heine-Universität Düsseldorf, Institute of Social Sciences	Communication and Media Studies
Donges, Patrick	Ernst-Moritz-Arndt-Universität Greifswald, Institute of Political and Communication Science	Communication Science
Eilders, Christiane	Heinrich-Heine-Universität Düsseldorf, Institute of Social Sciences	Communication and Media Studies
Jarren, Otfried	Universität Zürich, Institute of Mass Communication and Media Research	Publishing and Communication Studies
Maurer, Marcus	Friedrich-Schiller-Universität Jena, Institute of Communication Science	Empirical Methods of Communication Science
Pfetsch, Barbara	Freie Universität Berlin, Institute for Media and Communication Studies	Communication Theory and Media Effects
Raupp, Juliana	Freie Universität Berlin, Institute for Media and Communication Studies	Communication Science/ Organizational Communication
Vowe, Gerhard	Heinrich-Heine-Universität Düsseldorf, Institute of Social Sciences	Communication and Media Studies

3. Overview of the Sub-projects

Project	Leader	Issue
TP 1	Brosius, Hans-Bernd	Political Communication on Video Portals. How do Adolescents Create and Use the Political Media Agenda on YouTube?
TP 2	Eilders, Christiane	Individuals and the Public Sphere. The Perception of Public Opinion in Online Sub-Publics and the Willingness to Speak Out
TP 3	Vowe, Gerhard Dohle, Marco	Assumed Effects – Effects of Assumptions. Causes and Consequences of the Perception of Online Media's Political Influences
TP 4	Maurer, Marcus	Digital Knowledge Gaps. Political Information Transfer and Knowledge Acquisition in the Online World
TP 5	Donges, Patrick Jarren, Otfried	Political Organizations in the Online World. Consequences of the Structural Transformation of Political Communication for the Intermediate System
TP 6	Raupp, Juliana	Media Relations Online. Political-Media Communication Networks under Online Conditions
TP 7	Adam, Silke Pfetsch, Barbara	The Impact of Challengers' Online Communication on Media Agenda-Building – A Comparison Across Countries and Issues
TP K	Vowe, Gerhard	Coordination, Communication, Cooperation

4. Abstracts of the Sub-projects

Hans-Bernd Brosius

Political Communication on Video Portals.

How do Adolescents Create and Use the Political Media Agenda on YouTube?

Research question: The project assesses the new quality of the agenda-setting function of social online portals such as *YouTube* against the traditional news media. Given that the media agenda serves as an indicator for social relevance in both “old” and “new” media outlets, we investigate the different concepts of relevance as well as the gatekeeping processes that lead to the observable *YouTube*-clip agenda and the traditional TV news agenda. As social online portals increase their share of the daily media use habits, especially of younger citizens, we will investigate the agenda-setting function against the background of the old, yet actual question how the media contributes to an informed citizenship and the functioning of democracy.

Specific aims: At the center of our research activity are a) the different issue agendas of *YouTube* and TV news, b) the different concepts of social relevance (*YouTube*) and societal relevance (traditional TV news), and c) the factors that shape the gatekeeping processes in both types (*YouTube*: collective gatekeeping process, humor seems to play a central role in defining the success and ranking of a clip; traditional TV news: professional journalistic gatekeeping process).

Theoretical approach: Theoretically, the project will be based on the agenda-setting-approach, gatekeeping, and psychological theories specifying the role of humor as important criteria to determine the social relevance of *YouTube* content.

Methodology: We will draw on a content analysis of both the *YouTube* and TV news agenda. Naturally, gatekeeping processes can only be investigated indirectly by doing content analysis, yet the factors for relevance can be inferred from the structure of *YouTube* content (diagnostic content analysis).

Hypotheses: We assume that the agenda-setting function of *YouTube* and TV news differs fundamentally, due to the different gatekeeping processes and concepts of relevance assigned to media content. Whereas the TV news agenda is dependent on the professional news production process and a concept of societal and political relevance, the *YouTube* agenda is a user-generated agenda, deriving from various collective gatekeeping processes, in which different criteria of relevance are being used. It is assumed that these media agendas deriving from these processes stimulate different forms of public discourse.

Outlook to the second period of sponsorship: A research topic such as *YouTube* is pretty volatile due to the rapid technical and user-driven developments. Unless other developments are theoretically more interesting, we will try to broaden the view by taking other types of real-time communication platforms into account and – if the results of the first period suggest it – we will undertake international comparisons in order to include cultural differences and their impact on political attitudes and perceptions of adolescents around the world.

Christiane Eilders

Individuals and the Public Sphere. The Perception of Public Opinion in Online Sub-Publics and the Willingness to Speak Out

Research question: The project assesses the impact of using social network sites (SNS) and weblogs on the perception of public opinion. It also studies the effects on participation in political discourse.

Specific aims: The project aims to analyze the discourse-related effects of a fragmented public sphere in the online communication. By focusing on individual perception and behavior, as well as theories of the public sphere, the project contributes to modeling the micro-macro-link.

Theoretical approach: On the macro-level, the project draws on public sphere theory. On the micro-level, spiral of silence theory and approaches that deal with audience images are addressed.

Methodology: Online surveys and content analyses are combined in order to assess the relationship between the content of individual media use, the picture of public opinion and the participation in public discourse.

Hypotheses: It is assumed that the picture of public opinion is determined by the participation in either segmented SNS and weblog publics or mass media publics and that the disengagement in the general public results in uncertainties and misjudgments. Regarding the willingness to speak out, special hypotheses on the effects of consonance between perceived public opinion, peer group opinion and individual opinion are tested. Further hypotheses address the discursive impact of opinion certainty and individual importance of issues.

Outlook to the second period of the project: Experiments will be conducted in order to determine causality in the relations identified. Further, the impact of the media system will be assessed in comparative perspective and additional online sites (e.g. Twitter) will be considered.

Gerhard Vowe / Marco Dohle

***Assumed Effects – Effects of Assumptions.
Causes and Consequences of the Perception of Online Media’s Political Influences***

The **research question** of the sub-project reads: Which political influences are implied to which online media by whom and why, and what consequences does this have on political beliefs, attitudes and behavior?

The **specific objective** of the sub-project is to make a contribution to a theory of the subjective perception of the changes in political communication, based on an investigation of the political power that is implied to online media in comparison to traditional media, and based on an investigation of the political consequences of these attributions.

The sub-project focuses on **theoretical approaches** in the field of indirect media influences (third-person effect and influence of presumed media influence approach).

The sub-projects’ **methodological core** will be a standardized panel survey. The panel consists of three groups: journalists, politicians, and other persons (neither politicians nor journalists). Additionally, detailed studies with a focus on outstanding events are planned.

The **hypotheses** concern the perception of online media influence and its consequences. They will be differentiated with regard to substantial (e.g., comparison of presumed influences of different online media), temporal (e.g., changes in the perception of online media influence), and social (e.g., differences between panel groups) aspects.

In the second period of sponsorship, the model will be tested under extended constellations, especially through comparative studies and by including additional groups (e.g., managers of public affairs).

Marcus Maurer

Digital Knowledge Gaps.

Political Information Transfer and Knowledge Acquisition in the Online World

Research question: How is political information conveyed by the mass media and political actors in online and offline information sources? How does this change over time, and what effect does this have on recipients' knowledge and opinion formation?

Specific objectives: Answering these research questions should contribute to the theory of the mediatization of political communication (analysis of information sources) and to the analysis of the resulting political consequences (knowledge acquisition).

Theoretical approach: The study connects theories of media content (theory of media logic, theory of political ambiguity, news value) and theories of media effects research (cognitive mediation model, knowledge gap, digital divide).

Methodology: The study combines a content analysis of the coverage of specific political events in several mass media and political online and offline information sources (print media, television news, politician's public speeches, media and party homepages) with a two-wave telephone panel survey before and after the event under examination.

Hypotheses: It is, for example, hypothesized that more information is conveyed in the mass media than in political sources, and that more information is conveyed in online sources than in offline sources. Which sources contribute more to political learning depends on recipients' information processing.

Outlook to the second period of sponsorship: From findings in the first period, a theoretical model is derived which shall be tested in the second period.

Patrick Donges / Otfried Jarren

***Political Organizations in the Online World.
Consequences of the Structural Transformation of Political Communication for the
Intermediate System***

Research question: To what extent do political organizations in the fields of health and environmental policy perceive a change of the media system? How have they changed their organizational structure and communicative behavior, and what political consequences will this have on the intermediate system of interest mediation in the fields of health and environmental policy?

The **specific aim** is to develop and to apply a theory of political organizations with which the consequences of the structural transformation of political communication can be analyzed for all policies.

Theoretical approach: The project understands media change as an institutional change in the environment of political organizations and draws on institutional approaches in organizational theory and the theory of collective action.

The project is based on an analysis of the online media of all organizations identified as relevant. **Methodologically**, this includes a content analysis of the websites and *facebook*-profiles as well as partly standardized guided interviews of representatives of selected organizations and experts in the field.

An example of the **hypotheses** that will be proved is: Change at the level of the structure and the communication depends on the age and the internal structure of an organization.

The **second period** will broaden the focus on transnational organizations and communication processes and deepen the analysis of change on some selected examples from the first phase.

Juliana Raupp

Media Relations Online.

Political-Media Communication Networks under Online Conditions

Research question: The project explores the developments of media relations as a result of technological change. How do the structures of the political-media communication networks change under online conditions? How do the processes of interaction change between the actors?

The **aim of the project** is to develop a theoretical model of media relations based on social network analysis, which allows it to capture the structure and dynamics of the political-media communication network.

The **theoretical core** of the project is the social network theory combined with concepts of the interplay between journalism and strategic political communication.

In terms of **methodology**, a network survey is conducted among communication professionals in political organizations and among political journalists.

The impact of the technological change on media relations is examined with respect to changes in the structure of the network and the relationships between the actors. The **hypotheses** that will be examined concern variances in structural, relational, temporal and spatial aspects.

During a **second period of sponsorship**, the project aims at providing results with regards to substantial changes over time by a modified repetition of the network analysis. In addition, nation-specific variables should be added and the model could be examined in the context of comparative studies.

Silke Adam/Barbara Pfetsch

***The Impact of Challengers' Online Communication on Media Agenda-Building –
A Comparison Across Countries and Issues***

This study addresses the question of how online communication changes political communication in contemporary democracy with respect to the hopes that the Internet can grant those without access to political decision making a platform to mobilize issues and opinions and set the agenda for journalists, politicians and a broad public. Within this framework, our study focuses on media agenda-building. We assume that the democratic potential of online communication lies in spill-over of challengers' issue networks into traditional media and political debate. In particular we expect that the characteristics of challengers' online issue networks, i.e. dominant coalitions, frame strength and type of frame-sponsors, affect the likelihood of a breakthrough to traditional media. Our empirical program is to assess issue-specific online networks and analyze under what conditions their issues and frames appear in traditional print media. In the first period of the project we use two issues in environmental policy (Co2 emissions) and consumer/health policy (food safety). While these issues represent left wing challenger's causes, in the second period of the project we will choose two right wing issues and trace additionally the consequences of online issue dynamics with respect to the political agenda. The project applies a comparative research design to control for political and media opportunity structures in four countries (Germany, Switzerland, UK, US). Empirically, we use content and network analysis to assess the issue-specific debates on the Internet and in traditional news media.

Gerhard Vowe

Coordination, Communication, Cooperation

The **aims** of the sub-project “Coordination, Communication, Cooperation” are:

- to relieve the other sub-projects as much as possible from administrative work and to coordinate them if necessary
- to organize internal and external communication
- to maintain and promote cooperation between the individual sub-projects as well as between this research group and other hubs in the national and international networks of research on politics and the Internet.

This is meant to help this research group attain its objectives and keep the balance between a division of work and cooperation.

This will be **realized** mainly through means of internal and external communication, but also by supporting young researchers and introducing means of quality control.

In addition to supporting the continuing research work, this subproject will review the experiences made during the first phase and aim at developing an exemplary pattern for research organization within a discipline like communication studies, which has a working structure that is divided into small sections, during **the second funding period**.

5. Curricula Vitae

Curriculum Vitae **SILKE ADAM**

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02/2010 Assistant professor for political communication and director of the Institute of Communication and Media Studies at Universität Bern
2008-2010 Postdoctoral researcher in the DFG research group *The Transformative Power of Europe: The European Union and the Diffusion of Ideas* (Otto Suhr Institute of Political Science at Freie Universität Berlin)
2001-2009 Research assistant at the Institute of Communication Science/Media Policy at Universität Hohenheim

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CURRENT AND PREVIOUS POSITIONS

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2000 Visiting professor at the University of Haifa, Israel
1997 DAAD visiting professor at the University of Missouri, USA
1994-1995 Assistant professor at the universities of Munich (LMU) and Mainz
1990-1994 Research assistant at the Institute of Media Studies and Communication at Johannes Gutenberg-Universität Mainz
1989-1990 Postdoctoral fellow at the universities of Alabama and Rhode Island, USA
1983-1988 Research assistant at the Institute of Media Studies and Communication at Johannes Gutenberg-Universität Mainz
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CURRENT AND PREVIOUS POSITIONS

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CURRENT AND PREVIOUS POSITIONS

2009 - Professor of communication science at Ernst-Moritz-Arndt-Universität Greifswald
2008-2009 Assistant professor of publishing and communication science at Universität Zürich, field of expertise: political communication
2008 Assistant professor at the Institute for Media and Communication Science at Freie Universität Berlin
2005 Visiting Professor at the Institute of Publishing and Communication Science at Universität Wien
2004-2005 Lecturer at the Faculty of Communication Science at Universität Salzburg
2001-2008 Senior assistant at the IPMZ – Institute of Mass Communication and Media Research in Zurich
1998-2001 Assistant at the IPMZ in Zurich
1996-1998 Research assistant at the Hans Bredow Institute for Media Research at Universität Hamburg
1995-1996 Research assistant at the Institute of Journalism at Universität Hamburg

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CURRENT AND PREVIOUS POSITIONS

2011 - Professor of communication and media studies at Heinrich-Heine-Universität Düsseldorf
2007-2011 Professor of communication science (field of expertise: political communication) at Universität Augsburg
2006-2007 Assistant professor of communication science at Universität Augsburg
2002-2006 Academic consultant at the Hans Bredow Institute for Media Research at Universität Hamburg
2001-2002 Senior researcher at the Social Science Research Center Berlin with DFG habilitation scholarship (including three months as a visiting researcher in San Diego, CA, USA)
1996-2000 Senior researcher at the Social Science Research Center Berlin, Department for General Public and Social Movement
1990-1995 Junior researcher at the Department of Communication Science Munich, field of work: empirical communication research
1990-1991 Junior researcher at the German Youth Institute Munich, Department for Youth and Politics

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2008-2009 Assistant professor of journalism at the IfKW at Ludwig-Maximilians-Universität München
2006-2007 Assistant professor of communication theory/media usage and media effects research at Freie Universität Berlin
2003-2011 Academic assistant (C1) at the Institute of Media Studies and Communication at Johannes Gutenberg-Universität Mainz
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2006-2007 Visiting fellow at the Minda de Gunzberg Center for European Studies, Harvard University (MA, USA)

2001-2008 Professor of communication science at Universität Hohenheim

1997 Fellow at the Joan Shorenstein Center on the Press, Politics and Public Policy, J. F. Kennedy School of Government, Harvard University (MA, USA)

1994-2001 Senior Researcher at the Social Science Research Center Berlin (WZB), Research Unit „Public Sphere and Social Movements“

1993-1994 Assistant Professor at the Faculty of Social Sciences at Universität Mannheim

1991-1992 Postdoctoral fellow at the Center for German and European Studies at the Georgetown University, Washington, D.C.

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- 2004-2006 Fundraising and accomplishment of the DFG project *Demoskopie in der Politikvermittlung (Political Polling)*; visiting lecturer at the universities of Zurich, Fribourg and Paris XII
- 2000-2003 Research assistant at the Institute for Media and Communication Studies at Freie Universität Berlin, head of the German line of the international programme *Master in European Public Relations*
- 1997-2000 Dissertation fellowship of the State of Berlin
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