Extended Abstract

More competent at local level? The impact of mass media, interpersonal communication, and information processing on competence about local and national issues.

Julia Metag

Introduction

The ideal of all democratic decision-making processes is the informed voter. Communication research often assumes that processes of communication differ between local and national level and that citizens are usually more competent if they are dealing with local issues (Oehmichen & Schröter, 2011; Shaker, 2009). It is assumed that people communicate more often about local issues because they feel more affected by them and because these issues are more obtrusive which then leads to a higher competence about them (Demers, 1996; Hasebrink & Schmidt, 2012; Vetter 2011). At the same time, local mass media are often accused of their content being of inadequate quality and insufficient variety and of neglecting their watchdog function over local politics (Dorsch, 1978; Jarren, 1999; Kurp, 1994; Lang, 2003; Neller, 1999). This paper therefore addresses the question to what extent and in which way the use of different channels of communication about local and national issues affects citizens’ competence about these issues.

In addition to comparing the use and effects of different mass media for the reception of local and national issues the paper also analyzes which other strategies recipients can use to improve their competence about an issue. One strategy includes the use of interpersonal communication which is supposed to be more prominent when local issues are concerned (Krotz, 2010; Lang, 2003). The question is, how do discussion networks differ between local and national level and how does this affect citizens’ competence? Another strategy for informed opinion formation consists of systematic information processing (Eagly & Chaiken, 1993). If people are more involved at local level (Oehmichen & Schröter, 2011) they should process information about local political issues more systematically and thus be more competent about these issues. In order to understand which strategies are employed by citizens when receiving information about local and national issues this paper analyzes to what extent the communication processes and information processing strategies differ when local or national issues are concerned and how potential differences influence citizens’ competence about these issues.
Method

A standardized telephone survey was conducted in which 504 German citizens were asked about their reception and understanding of one out of three local issues and 510 citizens were surveyed about one out of three national issues. The three local issues included the construction of a wind farm in Vaterstetten (n=165), a small town in Bavaria, the construction of a bypass-road in Limburg (n=170), and the waste of public funds through building a concert hall in Bochum (n=169). The national issues consisted of the decision of the German government on the nuclear phase-out (n=170), the debate about introducing motorway tolls for cars (n=170), and the establishment of the Euro-Rescue fund (n=170). The issues were selected from the same policy field – energy, transport, and finance – so that effects could be interpreted as effects of the issue being local or national. All of the issues were salient during the time of the survey and were covered in the national and local media outlets. The population for national surveys is formed by all German-speaking citizens from 18 years of age and older. The population for the local surveys were selected through the phone numbers and are formed by all German-speaking citizens who are 18 years of age or older in these municipalities.

We strived for parallel measurement of all independent and dependent variables in each survey. Respondents’ competence about the issues serves as the dependent variable and was measured as an index of knowledge about and interest in the specific issue in order to capture the cognitive as well as the motivational component of competence. Interest was measured on a five-point scale and three factual knowledge questions were posed. The frequency of the use of different types of mass media and interpersonal communication composed the first set of independent variables. In addition to the mere frequency of interpersonal communication, characteristics of the respondents’ discussion networks were measured, including the number of people they discussed the issue with, the relationship to the last discussion partner, the frequency of discussions with the last discussion partner, the frequency of disagreement in these discussions, the last discussion partner’s competence, and the interaction of mass media and interpersonal communication. The last set of independent variables included the two information processing strategies and covered systematic information processing with two items which were merged into a factor and heuristic processing as the orientation toward parties’ positions on the issues at hand. Age, education, sex and general political involvement serve as control variables.

Results

We first ran linear regression models to analyze to what extent the frequency of the use of the different mass media and of interpersonal communication determine citizens’ competence about local and national issues and to what extent information processing strategies serve as predictors of competence comparatively. Respondents’ competence about the local issues was significantly increased by the use of mass media and interpersonal communication (ΔR²=.09, p<.001) as well as
by systematic and heuristic information processing strategies ($\Delta R^2=.03, p<.001$), with the overall model fit being acceptable ($R^2=.34$). Among the communication variables, local newspaper use ($\beta=.16, p<.001$), internet use ($\beta=.09, p<.05$), and the frequency of interpersonal communication ($\beta=.20, p<.001$) were significant predictors. Systematic information processing ($\beta=.17, p<.001$) and the use of party heuristics ($\beta=.09, p<.05$) were both significant but as the theoretical concept suggested systematic elaboration of the issues improved respondents’ competence more than the use of heuristics.

In contrast, competence about the national issues was not significantly influenced by the use of mass media or interpersonal communication. The frequency of these communication variables did not explain a significant amount of variance ($\Delta R^2=.02, n.s.$) and none of the communication items yielded a significant effect. Information processing strategies explained a considerable amount of variance ($\Delta R^2=.06, p<.001$) which was also higher than in the regression model for local issues. Systematic information processing ($\beta=.22, p<.001$) was again a stronger predictor than the use of party heuristics ($\beta=.16, p<.001$). The model fit for competence about national issues was also acceptable ($R^2=.33$). The local and the national regression models were controlled for age, education, sex, general political involvement, and the specific issue as a dummy variable in order to be able to generalize the results for all local and national issues under study.

The first comparative regression analysis reveals that local news media and personal discussion are important for citizens’ competence about political issues at local level. When national issues are concerned it is less important how often people use mass media or talk about the issue but it is far more important that they elaborate information about national issues systematically.

While interpersonal communication appeared to be more important for competence about local issues, we analyzed in a following step to what extent the specific characteristics of personal discussions such as network size or disagreement matter for respondents’ competence about local and national issues. We compared their influence on competence to the impact of systematic and heuristic information processing. For both local and national issues the specific characteristics of personal discussions were hardly significant. Admittedly, respondents’ competence about local issues (overall model fit $R^2=.31$) was significantly improved by the discussion characteristics ($\Delta R^2=.05, p<.01$) out of which, however, only the size of the discussion network served as a significant predictor ($\beta=.10, p<.05$). The influence of systematic and heuristic information processing remained stable ($\Delta R^2=.05, p<.001$). Characteristics of interpersonal communication did not improve respondents’ competence about national issues significantly ($\Delta R^2=.02, n.s.$) while information processing strategies were still important predictors ($\Delta R^2=.07, p<.001$). The overall model fit was acceptable ($R^2=.34$). The models were again controlled for the aforementioned variables. The second regression analysis supports the finding that interpersonal communication is more important for competence about local issues as only in this case network size matters.
Discussion

The study complements research on local political communication by contrasting that it is assumed that citizens are more competent when local issues are concerned while at the same time the quality and variety of local news media content is criticized. The systematic comparison of the reception of three local and three national issues revealed that communication and information processes differ at local and national level. At local level, although being criticized, the local newspaper still seem to fulfill their information task. At the same time, people use interpersonal communication as another strategy to obtain information about local issues while this strategy does not appear to be as successful at national level. The local community as a place for personal discussions does not seem to have lost its significance completely even in times of higher mobility and anonymity (Krotz, 2010). At national level, citizens are more successful in using information processing strategies to improve their issue competence. While systematic information processing is of course crucial, it is especially the use of party heuristics that allows citizens to be competent about national issues. If political parties take a clear stand on a political issues and citizens know about these positions they are more competent. This may also explain why there is no media effect for national issue competence. The effect of party heuristics could conceal the media effect because people are most likely to get information about a party’s stand on a political issue from the mass media. The study is limited regarding the comparability of the local and national issues which can be improved in future studies. It shows nonetheless that recipients use different communication and information processing strategies depending on whether local or national issues are concerned but that this is not caused by deficient information provided by local news media. The assumption that mass media are less important at local level cannot be supported in this study.

References


