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Corrupt politicians? Media priming effects on overtly expressed stereotypes toward politicians

Abstract: The present study investigates whether or not reading about corrupt politicians influences peoples' subsequent judgments toward political actors' supposed corruptness. We expected this media stereotype priming effect to be dependent on pre-existing implicit stereotypes. It was hypothesized that only those participants would show a media priming effect who already have a strong automatic association between 'politicians' and 'corrupt' in memory prior to reading a further facilitative article ("politicians are corrupt"). Conversely, people who do not have a comparable biased cognitive association should not. Data from an experiment support this hypothesis: We found pre-existing implicit stereotypes to moderate the media priming effect on explicit stereotypes, but only when the newspaper article covered the "corrupt politician" media stereotype with sufficient salience. Furthermore, the experiment showed that antagonistic media primes ("politicians are honest") did not produce a media priming effect at all. Antagonistic articles were simply not able to prime corruption-related memory traces.

Keywords: media stereotypes, priming, implicit stereotypes, corruption, politicians

1 Introduction

Research has revealed that media portrayals of social groups can contribute to the development and perpetuation of stereotypes, thereby influencing interpretations of and behavioral tendencies toward stereotyped targets (Oliver, Hoewe,

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Ash, Kim, Chung, & Shade, 2014). The vast amount of empirical evidence has investigated the effects of stereotypical media portrayals of groups defined by characteristics such as ethnicity, gender, age or sexual orientation (Harris, 2009). The present study contributes to the media stereotype literature by investigating a previously under-researched target, the "corrupt politicians"-stereotype.

Corruption of politicians is a serious global problem with detrimental consequences for democracy (Transparency International, 2004). In Austria, for example, where this study was conducted, top-ranking politicians from local to national levels have been accused of corruption. These cases received enormous news coverage. Thus, the concept of 'politicians' got frequently paired with 'corrupt' in the mass media (Olteanu, 2012). Over time, regular exposure may contribute to the development of stereotypical memory traces in so far as both concepts might become associated in citizens' minds forming a "corrupt politicians"-stereotype (see Arendt, 2012). Indeed, many citizens have rather negative perceptions of political actors (Transparency International, 2010/2011). Once developed, such biased memory traces can be re-activated by subsequent media exposure via *media priming* (Roskos-Ewoldsen, Roskos-Ewoldsen, & Carpentier, 2009). Media priming refers to the residual, often unrecognized consequences of media exposure on subsequent judgments and behaviors.

We assumed that a certain media prime (e.g., article about corrupt politicians) re-activates already existing memory traces and increases the accessibility of the "corrupt politicians"-stereotype in readers' minds. If they are asked to judge politicians in a subsequent situation, the recently activated "corrupt politicians"-stereotype is more accessible and may influence readers' judgments. We conducted an experiment. Participants read a stereotypic ("politicians are corrupt") or counter-stereotypic ("politicians are honest") article. Afterwards, they rated politicians on corruption-related attributes. We measured the effect of reading the article on the overtly-expressed "corrupt politicians"-stereotype.

1.1 Stereotyping

Media stereotypes are mass-mediated portrayals of human social groups repeatedly pairing a group concept (e.g., politicians) with specific attributes (e.g., corruption). Over time, regular exposure to media stereotypes may contribute to the development of biased memory traces, which in turn can be re-activated (i.e., primed) by subsequent media exposure (Arendt, 2013a; Mastro, 2009; Roskos-Ewoldsen, Klinger, & Roskos-Ewoldsen, 2007). Such biased memory traces

are called stereotypes (Greenwald et al., 2002). Thus, whereas media stereo-
types describe a content-related group-attribute association, stereotypes de-
scribe the corresponding association in recipients' minds.

It is important to note that current theory separates stereotyping into two
stages (Devine, 1989): Research has shown that associations can become auto-
matically activated when encountering a social group concept. This automatic
activation of specific attributes (e.g., 'corrupt' when thinking of 'politicians')
occurs irrespective of whether or not citizens perceive the specific attribute as
accurate. Such automatically activated group-attribute associations are called
implicit stereotypes (Greenwald et al., 2002). In contrast to that, in the second
stage of stereotyping citizens can decide whether or not they use this automati-
cally activated attribute for an overtly expressed judgment (e.g., when asked
the question "Are politicians corrupt?"). Such judgments are called *explicit ster-
eotypes* (Greenwald et al., 2002). Thus, it is important to differentiate the *auto-
matic activation* of stereotypical associations and the *decision to use* them for
an explicit judgment (Devine, 1989).[1]

1.2 Pre-existing implicit stereotypes as a moderator

We assumed that pre-existing implicit stereotypes moderate the media priming
effect on explicit stereotypes: If a strong cognitive association between 'politi-
cians' and 'corrupt' already exists in memory, reading a further article describ-
ing corrupt politicians can prime these biased memory traces. There is an in-
creased likelihood that these re-activated associations will be later used for an
overtly expressed judgment. In this case, we expected a media priming effect
to occur, as could be reliably documented by previous research (Roskos-Ewold-
sen et al., 2009). However, if both concepts are not cognitively associated prior
to reading, no memory traces exist that could be re-activated. Therefore, if
there is no or only a very weak automatic association between 'politicians' and
'corrupt' in recipients' minds before reading an additional text, we did not
expect a media priming effect on explicit, overtly expressed judgments (Hy-
pothesis 1).

Another possibility to test this basic idea is to look at different effects for
facilitative ("politicians are corrupt"-article) and *antagonistic* ("politicians are
honest"-article) media primes (see Bargh, Bond, Lombardi, and Tota, 1986).

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1 For a discussion of the relationship of stereotypes with other concepts such as schemas,
see Fiske and Taylor (2013). For a unified perspective on stereotypes, self-concept, self-esteem,
and attitudes see Greenwald and colleagues (2002).

We expected both types to show different media priming effects on explicit stereotypes. Due to the fact that antagonistic primes may simply not be able to re-activate relevant "honesty"-related memory traces (because they are virtually nonexistent), we assumed a media *priming* effect only for facilitative primes (Hypothesis 2). The rationale behind this hypothesis is similar to the theory outlined above: Had individuals developed biased "corrupt-politicians"-related memory traces, an "honesty"-related article might not be able to re-activate these traces.

Repeated exposure to mass-mediated content presenting the pairing 'honest' and 'politicians' may be able to substantially increase the strength of the automatic association between 'politicians' and 'honest' in memory (see Arendt, 2012). Thus, repeated exposure may contribute to the *forming* of an "honest politicians" counter-stereotype. However, we hypothesized that a single exposure to media content is only able to *prime* already existing cognitive associations (i.e., the association between 'politicians' and 'corrupt').

2 Method

We used an experimental design with six experimental conditions. This high number of groups was necessary because we wanted to implement a media prime dose level that was strong enough to activate pre-existing implicit stereotypes, but low enough to not substantially strengthen the automatic association between 'politicians' and 'corrupt' in memory. Stated differently, we wanted our treatment to prime, not substantially form, a cognitive association. Two different dose levels (see Arendt, 2013b) were used for each prime type (antagonistic, facilitative).

All participants read a total of three newspaper articles. The first and third articles were texts with topics completely unrelated to politics or corruption (i.e., crocodile hunt, decrease in population). The second article was manipulated (approximately 300 words). Participants in the "corrupt high dose" condition got an article about corrupt politicians titled "Public Opinion Toward the Corruption of Politicians". Most importantly, the pairing "politicians" and "corrupt" was mentioned once in the headline and five times in the body of the text.[2] In addition, one specific politician accused of being corrupt was mentioned twice throughout the text. Individuals in the "corrupt low dose" condi-

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2 One 'pairing' was defined as the mentioning of 'corrupt' (or semantically similar terms such as corruption) within close spatial proximity to the concept of 'politicians'.

tion read the same article, but the pairing was mentioned only once in the headline and three times throughout the body of the text. Participants allocated to the "honest high dose" condition received a similar article (only relevant parts were changed) about honest politicians titled "Public Opinion Toward the Honesty of Politicians". The pairing of "politicians" and "honest" was mentioned once in the headline and five times in the body of the text. Furthermore, one specific politician acclaimed for honesty was mentioned twice throughout the text. Participants in the "honest low dose" condition got the same article, but the pairing was mentioned only once in the headline and three times throughout the text. See the Appendix for screenshots of the stimulus texts.

In addition, we utilized two control conditions. Control group 1 received an article about politics that did not mention corruption, honesty, or related concepts. Control group 2 only read the filler texts. This group did not read about politics. This was done in reference to previous research where the mentioning of the target concept (but not the stereotypic attribute itself) was found to be able to prime stereotypes (Dixon, 2006). Reading about politics may still prime 'corrupt' if it is strongly associated in the reader's mind. By utilizing a non-politics control condition, we avoided problems regarding the interpretation of our findings. However, control condition 1 was set as the reference condition.

2.1 Participants

A total of 128 individuals (mostly students) recruited by students of an introductory communication research course participated in the study. Of these, 62.5% were female. The participants ranged in age from 18 to 62 ($M = 23.47$, $SD = 5.11$).

2.2 Measures

Explicit stereotype. We utilized a bipolar scale asking participants to rate politicians on five attributes on a 7-point scale ranging from 1 to 7 (honest-corrupt, trustworthy-untrustworthy, credible-noncredible, sincere-false, reliable-dubious). The measure was calculated as the mean of all five indicators ($M = 4.69$, $SD = 0.95$; $\alpha = .85$; $t(127) = 8.23$, $p < .001$, i.e., significantly different from the neutral scale midpoint [= 4]). Higher values are indicative of a stronger overtly expressed "corrupt politicians"-stereotype. Thus, as expected, the whole sample showed a rather negative view of politicians.

Implicit stereotype. The strength of the automatic association between 'politicians' and 'corrupt' in memory was measured using the computer-admin-

istered Implicit Association Test (= IAT, Greenwald, McGhee, & Schwarz, 1998). Participants had to classify words (e.g., serious, bribable, physician, delegate), which appeared in the middle of the screen, into four categories. Two of those categories were attributes (corrupt, honest), the other two were concepts (politicians, doctors). Categorization should be faster when the pairing of a concept with an attribute reflects a stronger cognitive association in memory. A validated scoring algorithm (Greenwald, Nosek, & Banaji, 2003) was used with a value of 0, which means no association. Higher values indicate a stronger automatic association between 'politicians' and 'corrupt'. Scores of around 0.2 are interpreted as small, around 0.5 as medium, and scores from 0.8 and beyond as large (Greenwald et al., 2003). In our sample, we found a moderate level of implicit stereotypes, $M = 0.37$, $SD = 0.31$, $t(127) = 13.69$, $p < .001$ (i.e., significantly different from zero). Most participants (85 %) showed a stronger automatic association between 'politicians' and 'corrupt' compared to 'politicians' and 'honest'.[3]

2.3 Procedure

Participants were welcomed by a female experimenter in a waiting room; small groups followed her to the lab. Each participant sat in front of a computer in individual research cubicles. They were randomly allocated to one of the six experimental conditions, with sample sizes ranging between $n = 19$ and 23. First, they read the newspaper articles printed on white paper, followed by the IAT. Finally, they filled out a questionnaire including explicit stereotypes.

3 Results

Preliminary analysis. Implicit stereotypes were measured after reading the newspaper texts because a measurement before reading would have made the

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3 The IAT measures the strength of the automatic association between 'politicians' and 'corrupt' compared to 'doctors' and 'corrupt'. Thus, it is a relative measure with 'doctors' as the reference group. It is important to note that the specific reference group may only alter the *absolute* values of the implicit stereotype measure. However, we were interested in the relative difference between the experimental conditions. We had chosen 'doctors' because this social group was assumed to have a weaker automatic association to 'corrupt' than 'politicians'. Moreover, we decided to use 'doctors' from a measurement point of view: If the reference group were too similar to politicians, the differences in the IAT-values may not have been sensitive enough to produce enough variability in the implicit stereotype measure. It has to

objective of the experiment too salient and might have influenced reading. This order might be a problem because *pre-existing* implicit stereotypes were considered a moderator of the explicit media priming effect. However, this order in data collection would only be a problem if the experimental treatment showed an effect on implicit stereotypes and, thus, contributed to the forming of a cognitive association. An ANOVA revealed that this was not the case, $F(5, 122) = 0.22$, $p = .96$, $\eta^2 = .01$. This allowed us to interpret the implicit stereotype measure as the strength of the automatic association between 'politicians' and 'corrupt' held prior to reading.

Hypotheses test. Hypothesis 1 predicted the reading of stereotypic newspaper articles pairing 'politicians' and 'corrupt' to affect explicit stereotypes, but pre-existing implicit stereotypes to moderate this effect. We used moderated multiple regression analysis to test this hypothesis (see Table 1). In a first step, we dummy-coded the experimental condition variable, which resulted in five dummy variables ($k - 1$). Control condition 1 was set as the reference group. Thus, each dummy (corrupt high, corrupt low, no-politics control, honest low, honest high) represents the effect of the respective experimental condition compared to control group 1. We entered all five condition dummies, the mean-centered implicit stereotype, and the five interaction terms (i.e., each dummy multiplied by implicit stereotypes) into the regression equation. Significant interaction terms would indicate that the cognitive association between 'politicians' and 'corrupt' prior to exposure moderated the media priming effect on explicit stereotypes. Consistent with hypothesis 1, we found a significant interaction effect, but only for the corrupt-high dose condition (see the "moderate association"-column in Table 1). The interaction term of the corrupt-low dose condition failed to reach statistical significance. This indicates that only the effect of the high dose was significantly dependent on implicit stereotypes. Thus, the moderation effect had a delayed onset.

To illustrate this moderation effect, we calculated the estimated effect sizes of the experimental conditions for individuals having "no association" ($M–SD$, i.e., estimated treatment effect at a pre-existing implicit stereotype value of 0.06) compared to those having a rather "strong association" ($M+SD = 0.68$; see Table 1). The effects for individuals having a "moderate association" are already reported ($M = 0.37$). The values of the implicit stereotype of 0.06, 0.37, and 0.69 can be considered as no, moderate, and rather strong automatic association between 'politicians' and 'corrupt', according to Greenwald et al. (2003).

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be noted that our stimulus texts did not contain any reference to doctors. Thus, the automatic association between 'doctors' and 'corrupt' should be unaffected by reading.

Table 1: Effects of stereotypic media content on explicit stereotypes for different levels of the pre-existing implicit stereotype using moderated multiple regression analysis.

| | Pre-existing implicit stereotype (strength of the automatic association between 'politicians' and 'corrupt' before reading) | | | | | |
| | no association | | moderate association | | strong association | |
Variable	β	p	β	p	β	p
Corrupt high (D1)	−.01	.94	.25	.03	.52	.002
Corrupt low (D2)	.17	.29	.02	.87	−.13	.44
Control (D3)	.04	.80	.14	.21	.24	.12
Honest low (D4)	.17	.31	.11	.32	.05	.77
Honest high (D5)	−.05	.73	.04	.74	.13	.41
Implicit stereotype			−.19	.40		
D1 × Implicit stereotype			.27	.03		
D2 × Implicit stereotype			−.16	.20		
D3 × Implicit stereotype			.10	.41		
D4 × Implicit stereotype			−.05	.63		
D5 × Implicit stereotype			.13	.38		
R^2			.16	.03		

Note: $N = 128$. The data are taken from three moderated multiple regression equations. The interaction-related coefficients for "no association" (implicit stereotype = 0.06) and "strong association" (implicit stereotype = 0.68) are not written into the table, because they are the same as in the reference model at a "moderate association" (implicit stereotype = 0.37). Thus, the effects of the corrupt/honest politicians treatment are estimated for moderator values of the implicit stereotype measure of 0.06, 0.37, and 0.68, respectively.

Most importantly, the estimated treatment effect size of the corrupt-high dose condition ("corrupt high D1" in Table 1) failed to reach significance for 'no association' individuals. In contrast, the estimated effect sizes of the corrupt-high dose condition reached significance for 'moderate association' and 'strong association' individuals, with the latter showing the strongest effect. Thus, individuals already having a strong cognitive association prior to reading gave a more negative overtly expressed judgment (compared to individuals not reading such an article). This supports hypothesis 1.

Hypothesis 2 predicted that only facilitative media stimuli show a media priming effect on explicit stereotypes. Antagonistic media content should not show an effect. To test this hypothesis, the already reported moderated multiple regression analysis was used. Supporting H2, none of the honest-related treatment groups showed an effect irrespective of pre-existing implicit stereotypes (see the honest-dummies and their interaction terms in Table 1).

4 Discussion

The present experiment investigated media priming effects on overtly expressed stereotypic judgments. It was hypothesized that reading about corrupt politicians has a consequence on subsequent judgments toward the corruptness of political actors. We argued that this media priming effect is dependent on pre-existing implicit stereotypes: Only those already having a strong cognitive association between 'politicians' and 'corrupt' should show an explicit media priming effect (compared to those who do not have a comparable biased cognitive association). We found that pre-existing implicit stereotypes moderated the media priming effect on explicit stereotypes, but only when the newspaper article covered the "corrupt politician"-media stereotype with sufficient salience (i.e., in our high dose condition). A lower dose of the "corrupt politicians"-media stereotype did not show an effect at all. Thus, the data seem to indicate that a minimum of media prime dose level is necessary to overcome an effect threshold (see Arendt, 2013b). Furthermore, the experiment showed that antagonistic media primes (honest-article) did not show a media priming effect. We argued that a higher dose of such "honesty"-related articles would be necessary to sufficiently strengthen the automatic association between 'politicians' and 'honest' in memory. However, this would contribute to the development of memory traces opposite to the widely shared corrupt-politicians stereotype (i.e., forming a counter-stereotype). It is important to note that, although very interesting and promising for future research, we did not study the development of counter-stereotypes, but focused on priming instead.

As with all research projects, this study has its limitations. First, we collected pre-existing implicit stereotypes *after* participants read the articles. We argued that collecting data for implicit stereotypes before exposure might have influenced the reading process. Sorting stimulus words into categories like 'politicians' and 'corrupt' for approximately five minutes (IAT) might make the objective of the experiment too salient. We did not find a treatment effect on implicit stereotypes and thus think it valid to interpret this measure as pre-existing implicit stereotypes. Second, we were not able to predict a priori on which dose level the media priming effect should be evoked. Only the high dose condition produced a significant finding. Because we were aware of this shortcoming prior to data collection, we decided to use two dose conditions for antagonistic as well as facilitative primes to overcome this drawback. The rationale behind this strategy was to use a media prime dose level strong enough to re-activate pre-existing stereotypic associations, but weak enough to not substantially form new cognitive associations. The utilized method worked well as the data of the present experiment showed. Nevertheless, although we tried to

test our hypotheses in a deductive fashion, the lack of theoretical knowledge to the dose-dependency of the media priming effect adds an explorative component. Third, we used a student sample. Age and education may be related to the development of stereotypical associations in memory, which might influence the generalizability of the results.

Despite the limitations, the contribution of this study to prior media priming research is threefold. First, we showed that pre-existing implicit stereotypes moderate media priming effects on explicit stereotypes. Second, the effects of antagonistic and facilitative media stimuli were investigated; we found that priming of biased memory traces only occurs for facilitative media primes. Third, the present research bridges media stereotype priming research (with the dependent variable: group + attribute) and political priming research. The latter has mainly focused on evaluations of specific politicians (e.g., the president) after priming citizens by mass-mediated content. Researchers typically find that exposure to an issue in the news (e.g., corruption) increases the correlation between citizens' approval of the specific politician on this issue (e.g., how does he/she deal with corruption?) and their approval of this politician's overall performance (e.g., attitudes toward him/her). Thus, peoples' overall rating might not change because they alter their opinion about the politician's performance in a given policy field (e.g., newly formed arguments), but because the relative importance of an issue for the overall performance rating is boosted (e.g., corruption is more important when evaluating this politician, see Iyengar and Kinder, 1987). In typical political priming studies, only one concept is primed by media content (e.g., corruption). In contrast, we primed the cognitive association between two concepts (i.e., corruption and politicians). Taken together, we studied judgments about politicians under the framework of media stereotype priming. Thus, we believe that this research can contribute to our knowledge in both subfields of media priming.

5 Conclusions

Olteanu (2012) argued that news coverage of corruption can lead to positive and negative outcomes. On the one hand, a 'cold' and factual treatment of this topic might signal the strength of the existing political system: Although corruption exists, the political system is able to adequately deal with it. On the other hand, a 'hot', exaggerated and emotionalized treatment of this topic might contribute to the development of 'corruption hysteria'. This can have serious consequences for the perception of the political system. For example,

such hysteria might increase political cynicism and decrease political participation. Total silence on corruption (i.e., no media coverage on corruption), however, is ambivalent, because this can be indicative both for the non-existence of corruption and a poor political system without necessary 'self-cleaning' abilities.

The societal implication of the media priming effect investigated in the present study is thus dependent on the actual historical and cultural context. If an opinion climate is charged by a strong association between politicians and corruption as it is momentarily the case in several countries (Transparency International, 2010/2011), the media priming effect may rather trigger a hysterical response than pointing to the strength of the political system. Future research should investigate the consequences of the priming effect on outcomes such as political cynicism and participation.

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Bionotes

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Appendix

Manipulation of the treatment articles

The "honesty" (German: *Ehrlichkeit*) texts differed from the "corruption" (German: *Korruption*) texts by mentioning the target concept (honesty or corruption). Here is a screenshot of the high dose conditions:

Honest High:

Corrupt High:

We manipulated the dose by the frequency of mentioning the corruption (honesty) concept within the article:

Corrupt Low:

Corrupt High: