



ACADEMIA ENGELBERG

9<sup>th</sup> Dialogue on Science – October 13 – 15, 2010  
in Engelberg, Switzerland

**Jörg Matthes, Prof., University of Zurich, Institute for Mass  
Communication and Media Research, Zurich, Switzerland**

## **Mass Media and Public Opinion: Manipulating or Enlightening?**

Normative theories of democracy demand competent and informed citizens that have clear preferences and stand in for their rights. In short, it is expected that people know what they want and that their votes reflect their true feelings and attitudes. According to this reasoning, the mass media could exert only a minimal impact on voter preferences because voters' (strong) predispositions protect them against elite manipulation. In fact, throughout the past fifty years media effects scholars have maintained a healthy skepticism about the impact of news coverage on voting behavior.

It is generally assumed that the news media might heighten public consideration of particular issues but the power to persuade or shape political attitudes is theorized to be rather limited. However, current trends in politics – such as dwindling political engagement, the rise televised debates shortly before voting day, or the weakened state of party identification – led public opinion researchers to revisit these assumptions. Recent developments in several European countries demonstrate the high volatility of public opinion as well as the low involvement of individuals in the course of political campaigns. These conditions raise the potential of strategic communication to exert more than minimal impact.

This paper aims to reconsider the question of powerful mass media in general and the conditions of opinion formation and opinion change processes in particular. This is done from the perspective of framing research. The basic idea of the framing perspective is that the news media select some information and highlight it to the exclusion of other information. News frames define problems, provide causal attributions, give moral evaluations, and imply a policy direction.



We speak of a framing effect when individuals arrive at different positions on an issue, depending on considerations or frames highlighted in media coverage. I present data from several studies – social science experiments and real world survey data combined with an analysis of news media content – that show, in fact, that news frames can shape citizens' attitudes especially when people are uncertain about their opinions.

In light of these findings, we can neither conclude that the mass media manipulates public opinion, nor can we say that there are only minimal effects. The effects of the mass media are powerful and important. However, citizens are far more flexible in their openness to persuasion than previously thought. They hold issue-specific attitudes and their openness to political arguments varies from issue to issue, and over time. When people are open to news media frames, it can be shown that the news lead to rather informed or enlightened opinions; that is, people's opinions are based on substantive arguments conveyed by political news coverage, not on arbitrary information.

Such an "informed media impact" is even necessary for modern democracies. I close by discussing the democratic implications of some examples of "uninformed media impact", that is, when people base their political attitudes on arbitrary or irrelevant information conveyed by the news media.