Do Presumed Online Media Effects Have an Influence on the Online Activities of Politicians?

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According to theoretical approaches, such as the influence of presumed media influence approach, individuals' attitudes and behaviors are affected by the influences they believe the media has on others. Politicians, for example, are thought to perform media relations activities because they ascribe great importance to the media. This has been tested regarding politicians' online activities using data from two surveys of members of Germany's national parliament, the Bundestag ($n_{t1/t2} = 194/149$). It was hypothesized that parliamentarians use Facebook and Twitter more extensively when they believe that these social media tools have a strong political influence on the public, journalists, and other politicians. However, the results indicate that parliamentarians use Facebook and Twitter regardless of whether they expect it to have an impact on other people. Therefore, politicians' online activities are determined by other reasons and not such strategic motives. Thus, although (or precisely because) the hypotheses are rejected, the findings are an important contribution to the research on politicians' motives for online communication.

Introduction

As in all other areas of society, the mass media is becoming increasingly pervasive in politics. According to the mediatization thesis (e.g., Livingstone, 2009), politicians' actions are increasingly guided by their aim to be present in the media, and political processes and activities are becoming increasingly adapted to the time horizons, selection rules, and role patterns of the media (e.g., Altheide, 2004; Kepplinger, 2002; Strömbäck, 2008, 2011). This orientation of the political class toward the media is unlikely to decline in the face of the increasing diffusion of online media. However, a change in politicians' communication behavior is possible. Indeed, the traditional mass media—the press, radio, and television—are still useful venues for gaining public attention, but online services, such as Facebook or Twitter, offer politicians better opportunities to communicate their concerns directly with the public, free from journalistic editing, and without having to meet the standards of traditional media (e.g., Parmelee & Bichard, 2012;

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Salomon, 2005). Numerous studies have shown that politicians use online media extensively (e.g., Conway, Kenski, & Wang, 2013; Golbeck, Grimes, & Rogers, 2010; Graham, Jackson, & Broersma 2014; Grant, Moon, & Grant, 2010; Hermans & Vergeer, 2013; Meckel, Hoffmann, Suphan, & Poëll, 2013; Tenscher, 2014).

Providing information online (as well as offline) requires time and cognitive effort. From the viewpoint of politicians, that effort is only worthwhile if they believe their online activities will earn them attention or acceptance from other politicians, journalists, or the public. In other words, it is expected that politicians will make extensive use of the Internet for their communications only if they are convinced that the content spread via online media strongly influences others. If this assumption is confirmed, it would indicate that politicians use online media for strategic reasons. Thus, presumed online media influences are investigated here as a possible explanatory factor for politicians' online activities, and they should indicate the extent to which strategic motives drive these activities.

In the social sciences, subjective perceptions are a recognized factor for explaining attitudes and behavior—also in the context of the perception of media and media effects (e.g., Tsfati & Cohen, 2013). Thus, this study focuses on analyzing the influence of subjective perceptions on the behavior of politicians. More specifically, this study assesses whether theoretical approaches such as the third-person effect (Davison, 1983) or the influence of presumed media influence approach (Gunther & Storey, 2003) prove to be suitable when it comes to politicians' online communication. Consequently, this article does not aim to explain the online activities of the parliamentarians in all of its complexity. Instead, it focuses primarily on the perception of the influence that online media has on others—a factor that has often been neglected in previous research in this area. Thus, the specific question is: Is the intensity of the politicians' online activities affected by whether or not they believe that online media has a high or low political impact on various groups? This question will be answered using data collected in two surveys administered to members of Germany's national parliament, the Bundestag.

This study analyzes the connection between presumed influences and online communication activities of politicians in a more differentiated way than previous research. First, presumed influences and the use of concrete online media are considered. The focus is on Facebook and Twitter, two social media tools that are frequently used by German politicians (e.g., Meckel et al., 2013). Second, it was not sweepingly asked whether the parliamentarians make use of online media but rather they were asked about the *intensity* of this use. Third, moderating effects of age and the perceived suitability of online media to obtain political information on the connection between presumed influences and online activities are analyzed. Regarding politicians, such moderating effects have not been analyzed in previous studies in this field. Thus, the present study allows for new insights concerning the question of why politicians make use of online media. This is also relevant from a democracy-theoretical viewpoint, because politicians' communication via online media is an effective way to connect with citizens.

Perceived Media Influences and Communication Activities of Politicians

Subjective assumptions about social facts are social facts themselves; thus, they have consequences regardless of whether or not those assumptions are true (Thomas theorem; Thomas & Thomas, 1928). Thus, the perceptions of political media influences have a real political significance. One approach in communication research that focuses on such processes is the third-person effect (Davison, 1983). Its perceptual component assumes that people believe media influences to be stronger on others than on themselves (*third-person perception*). This difference can affect attitudes and behaviors (*third-person behavior*). The third-person effect has been empirically tested in various contexts (for an overview, see Tal-Or, Tsfati, & Gunther, 2009); in particular, the perceptual component has been well-proven (see e.g., a meta-analysis by Sun, Pan, & Shen, 2008; with regard to political media content, see e.g., Golan, Banning, & Lundy, 2008; Lee, 2010; Rojas, 2010; Wei, Lo, & Lu, 2011). Additionally, politicians assume that the media has a stronger influence on other people than on themselves (e.g., for members of the Bundestag, see Dohle, Blank, & Vowe, 2012).[1]

While the perceptual component of the third-person effect has been well-proven, findings on the behavioral component have been inconsistent (Xu & Gonzenbach, 2008). This is also true for the field of political communication. Furthermore, the practice of using *differences* in perception as a predictor of consequences is controversial (e.g., Lo & Paddon, 2000; Shen & Huggins, 2013). For example, Schmierbach, Boyle, and McLeod (2008) argued that perceived media influence on others will suffice to have an impact on one's own attitudes and behaviors. This is in line with the logic of the influence of presumed media influence approach (Gunther & Storey, 2003). Studies that have followed this approach provide more consistent findings, thus showing that people who ascribe strong media effects to other people are affected by this perception when it comes to their own attitude or behavior (in the context of political communication, see e.g., Cohen & Tsfati, 2009; Tsfati & Cohen, 2005).

Only a few studies have focused on the perceived influences of *politicians* and the consequences of those perceptions. One exception is a survey that Cohen, Tsfati, and Sheafer (2008) conducted among the members of the Knesset in Israel. They found that the assumption of a strong media influence on voters causes politicians to spend more time on media-focused and public relations activities. Examples of these activities include the politicians' readiness to respond to journalists' inquiries or cooperate with journalists in other ways. In contrast to the presumed media influence on the public, that study found that the perceived influence on other politicians had no impact on parliamentarians' communication activities.

Perceived Online Media Influences and Communication Activities of Politicians

Cohen et al. (2008) did not consider online media in their study. However, on the Internet, politicians can assume the role of communicator and spread

information about their concerns through numerous online channels, such as weblogs, Twitter messages, Facebook profiles, or video clips on YouTube. Therefore, politicians might think they are no longer dependent on traditional journalism to gain attention because they can communicate with people immediately and directly (bypassing; disintermediation; e.g., Gellman, 1996; Salomon, 2005). The members of the German Bundestag do use those possibilities, as approximately two-thirds of the parliamentarians have a Facebook presence (Meckel et al., 2013).

Against the backdrop of the increasing significance of online media for politics, many studies have dealt with online use and online activities by politicians (e.g., Adi, Erickson, & Lilleker, 2014; Avery & Graham, 2013; Gibson, Margolis, Resnick, & Ward, 2003; Jackson & Lilleker, 2011; Koop & Marland, 2012; Ward, Lusoli, & Gibson, 2007; Wolling, Schmolinsky, & Emmer, 2010; with regard to the members of the German Bundestag, see e.g., Tenscher & Will, 2010; Zittel, 2009). Some of these studies have investigated the factors that strengthen politicians' online activities. For example, studies have found age (e.g., Tenscher & Will, 2010) and party affiliation (Jackson & Lilleker, 2011) to be relevant predictors of politicians' online activities. However, the specific *motives* for online communication are rarely studied.

Presumed media influences are not a motive per se. However, they can be interpreted as an *indicator* for (strategically) motivated activities. In other words, the presumed influence of the media is the cognitive basis for these motivated activities. Thus, if politicians communicated (in a more intensive way) via online media, when they ascribe to it a strong influence on other people, strategic considerations would be indicated. In this context, it is secondary whether politicians are actually aware of perceptions of media influence. As, for example, Tsfati (2014) argued, presumed media influences—consciously or not—shape the expectations regarding the outcome of media use, thus affecting the use of media. In addition, Wolling et al. (2010) concluded that politicians perform cost–benefit analyses and use online media under the condition that they can expect gratifications, for example, political support.

In terms of such a cost–benefit analysis, the effort of online activities appears to be worthwhile only if those activities promise to have an effect on others. However, the question as to whether online activities depend upon politicians' perceptions of media's influence has rarely been studied. One exception is the study conducted by Metag and Marcinkowski (2012), who explored whether the perceived influence of the Internet on voters and other politicians had an effect on the web presence of election candidates in Germany. Their findings showed that the candidates used different forms of online media regardless of the perceived effect of the Internet on voters (see also Marcinkowski & Metag, 2014). In contrast, the presumed influence on other politicians was—at least in some cases—a significant predictor of the use of different Web services.

In the study by Metag and Marcinkowski (2012), the questions about perceived influence focused on the Internet in general, whereas inquiries about the politicians' use of online media were differentiated by various Web services.

However, it is quite possible that correlations between perceived influences and the politicians' use of online media can only be detected if the perceived influences are also measured in a differentiated way. Furthermore, Metag and Marcinkowski (2012) asked whether candidates had used different online services during their election campaigns. They did not consider the *intensity* of candidates' online communication. However, it is conceivable that politicians create a profile on Facebook irrespective of the influence they think it has on voters, but that they only start using it *regularly* and *extensively* once they believe that it has a strong effect on voters. After all, while it takes little time to create a Facebook profile, it takes much more effort and time to maintain the profile; thus, extensive communication through Facebook is only likely to occur if an effect can be expected. Thus, it appears reasonable that politicians communicate through online media and make (particularly extensive) use of online media for self-expression when they believe those venues have a strong political influence on the public.

Moreover, journalists are active social media users and they search online for information concerning their work (e.g., Bruns & Burgess, 2012; Machill & Beiler, 2009). Hedman (2015) showed that politicians are aware that many journalists use online media. Thus, it is plausible that politicians also want to reach journalists through online media and consider them to be a relevant target group. This is supported by studies that have shown that politicians are often linked with journalists on Twitter (e.g., Verweij, 2012) and they frequently address journalists in their tweets (e.g., Graham, Broersma, Hazel-hoff, & van't Haar, 2013). In this way, politicians aim to affect the public agenda indirectly through journalists' coverage (e.g., Kiousis, Mitrook, Wu, & Seltzer, 2006; Parmelee, 2014). By expressing their thoughts about certain issues online, politicians might aim to influence journalists in the sense that politicians want journalists to pick up on their concerns and publish articles about them in the mass media (for members of the German Bundestag, see Zittel, 2009).

Finally, it is possible that politicians also try to reach fellow politicians through online media, for example, to get issues onto the political agenda, draw attention to their main political ideas and projects, gain support for their political aims, or simply to demonstrate their modernity. In a study on Israeli politicians, Cohen et al. (2008) showed that, in regard to traditional media, the perceived media influences on other politicians did not lead to more extensive traditional media relations work. However, this does not necessarily mean that this influence cannot be found regarding German politicians and online media (see the findings by Metag & Marcinkowski, 2012). Accordingly, Rolke and Metz (2006) have pointed out that members of the German Bundestag not only included voters and journalists among the major target groups of their websites, but also other party members.

Therefore, the assumed influence on journalists and other politicians might affect how extensively politicians make use of online channels. Consequently, it is assumed:

Hypothesis 1 (H1): The stronger politicians perceive the political influence of online media to be
a) on the public,
b) on journalists,
c) on other politicians,
the more extensively they use online media to spread information about their political work.

Moderators Between the Perceived Influences and Communication Activities of Politicians

H1 predicts a general effect of presumed online influences on the online communication of parliamentarians. However, it seems appropriate to differenti-ate this assumption in two ways.

First, younger politicians tend to use online media more often than their older colleagues to inform others about their work (e.g., Jackson & Lilleker, 2011; Meckel et al., 2013; Tenscher & Will, 2010). Because of the young politicians' high affinity for the Internet, cost–benefit considerations regarding online activities might be less important for them than for older politicians. Thus, older parliamentarians might need an incentive (in the form of strong influences on others) to use online media extensively, whereas younger parliamentarians take online communication for granted—irrespective of the presumed influence on others. Thus, it can be posited:

Hypothesis 2 (H2): The perception of strong political influences of online media
a) on the public,
b) on journalists,
c) on other politicians,
will more positively affect the online communication behavior of older politicians than the online communication behavior of younger politicians.

Second, a very similar relationship might exist regarding the perceived suitability of online media for obtaining political information.[2] Thus, politicians that perceive online media as a suitable medium to inform about political issues should use the Internet extensively to disseminate information about their work. For those politicians, presumed strong influences on others should represent a smaller incentive for using those venues—as the perception that an online channel is (very) suitable to get political information might suffice to spread information via this channel—than for politicians who think that online media are poorly suited to obtain political information. Thus, it is assumed:

Hypothesis 3 (H3): The perception of strong political influences of online media
a) on the public,
b) on journalists,
c) on other politicians,

will more positively affect the online communication behavior of politicians who perceive online media to be unsuitable as sources for political information than the online communication behavior of politicians who perceive online media to be suitable as sources for political information.

Method

Procedure and Sample

To test the hypotheses, two standardized surveys of the members of the German Bundestag, Germany's national parliament, were conducted in spring 2012 ($=t_1$) and in spring 2013 ($=t_2$). On both occasions, no election campaigns or other significant events were under way that could lead to an extraordinary increase in online communication. On the one hand, the survey was repeated to obtain a broader empirical basis. On the other hand, given the dynamics of the use of online media, the second survey would highlight any changes in parliamentarians' active use of online offers over time. It is unknown whether such increasing use is affected by the benefit politicians hope to gain from these activities.

Through a letter addressed to them personally, all 620 parliamentarians were invited to participate in the survey. The questionnaire and a stamped return envelope were enclosed in the sent package. Two weeks after the invitation by mail, a reminder via email was sent to each parliamentarian. The email included a link to an online questionnaire, which was identical to the questionnaire that had been sent by mail, thereby offering the parliamentarians another way to participate in the study. Four weeks after the first reminder, the parliamentarians were once more asked via email to participate.

In 2012, 194 parliamentarians participated in the survey (response rate: 31.3 percent; this is a common response rate for surveys among members of the Bundestag; e.g., Tenscher & Will 2010; Weßels, 2003), most of whom responded by mail. In 2013, 149 parliamentarians participated (response rate: 24.0 percent). With respect to important features (sex, age, and party affiliation), neither sample was biased with reference to the entire Bundestag (see Deutscher Bundestag, 2012). In 2013, however, a disproportionate number of social democrats participated in the survey, while conservative parliamentarians were underrepresented (see Table 1). Only 46 parliamentarians participated in both waves, thus the samples do not sufficiently overlap to allow substantial comparisons to be made at the individual level.

Measures

Presumed Media Influences. In both surveys, the politicians were asked how strongly they believed the Internet in general, Facebook or other social network sites, and Twitter[3] to politically influence the public, journalists, and other politicians (by means of one item for each group; 1 = *no influence* to 5 = *very large*

Table 1. Sample Compared With the Entire Bundestag

	Sample 2012	Sample 2013	Entire Bundestag
Sex			
Female	28.1	29.5	32.9
Male	71.9	70.5	67.1
Age			
Born 1950 or earlier	25.8	23.8	21.3
Born 1951–1960	29.0	33.8	34.0
Born 1961–1970	29.0	25.4	27.6
Born 1971–1980	14.8	15.4	15.2
Born 1981 or later	1.2	1.5	1.9
Party affiliation			
Christian Democratic Union/Christian Social Union	38.6	29.2	38.2
Social Democratic Party	23.9	30.1	23.6
Free Democratic Party	17.4	18.1	15.0
Alliance 90/The Greens	7.0	6.9	11.0
Left Party	13.0	15.3	12.3

Notes: All information given in percentage terms; Sample: $n_{t1/t2} = 194/149$; entire Bundestag: $n = 620$.

influence; see Table 2 for results). By Facebook and Twitter, two well-known online services were considered, which are suitable for politicians to spread political information. They are indeed frequently used by German politicians (e.g., Meckel et al., 2013). Compared to the time when previous studies on politician's use of Facebook and Twitter were conducted (e.g., Metag & Marcinkowski, 2012) they even have become more significant. Although Facebook and Twitter share some similar features, they are different from each other in many aspects: for example, in public debates, Twitter is often referred to as a medium for social elite groups, whereas Facebook is used by broad groups of society. Furthermore, Twitter is a microblogging service, whereas Facebook is a social networking site providing many more functions. Because of these differences, the reasons for making use of these offers for informing about one's own political work might differ. Other online services could not be taken into consideration, as the questionnaire would have been too voluminous.

Table 2. Mean Estimates (Standard Deviations) of Presumed Political Influences of Different Online Media/Services

	Presumed political influences on …					
	… Public		… Journalists		… Other Politicians	
	2012	2013	2012	2013	2012	2013
Internet	3.37 (0.82)	3.29 (0.79)	3.85 (0.82)	3.95 (0.83)	3.37 (0.80)	3.57 (0.77)
Facebook and other social network sites	2.97 (0.97)	2.95 (0.87)	3.09 (0.94)	3.29 (0.91)	2.90 (0.92)	3.05 (0.87)
Twitter	2.29 (0.75)	2.35 (0.85)	2.96 (0.97)	3.26 (1.05)	2.66 (0.82)	2.99 (0.96)

Notes: All items were measured on a 5-level scale (1 = *no influence* to 5 = *very large influence*); $n_{t1/t2} = 186$–194/144–149.

Intensity of Online Activities. In both surveys, the members of the German Bundestag were asked how intensely they or their staff[4] use Facebook and other social network sites ($M_{t1/t2} = 3.20/3.60$; $SD_{t1/t2} = 1.46/1.30$) and Twitter ($M_{t1/t2} = 2.25/2.42$; $SD_{t1/t2} = 1.57/1.54$) to spread information about their political work. The data indicate that Facebook and Twitter were used more frequently at the time of the second survey than at the time of the first survey.

Covariates. In addition, several covariates were measured. Besides age, sex, and educational level, the members of the German Bundestag were asked in both surveys to assess the suitability of the Internet in general ($M_{t1/t2} = 4.14/4.11$; $SD_{t1/t2} = 0.84/0.91$), of Facebook or other social network sites ($M_{t1/t2} = 2.85/2.86$; $SD_{t1/t2} = 1.04/1.05$), and of Twitter ($M_{t1/t2} = 2.23/2.52$; $SD_{t1/t2} = 1.05/1.12$) to obtain political information using the following range: $1 = not\ suitable\ at\ all$ to $5 = very\ suitable$. Furthermore, the politicians were asked to estimate how many people in Germany use the Internet ($M_{t1/t2} = 3.73/3.67$; $SD_{t1/t2} = 0.93/0.87$), Facebook or other social network sites ($M_{t1/t2} = 2.83/2.93$; $SD_{t1/t2} = 0.94/0.99$), and Twitter ($M_{t1/t2} = 2.11/2.47$; $SD_{t1/t2} = 0.84/0.95$) to obtain information about politics ($1 = very\ few\ people$ to $5 = very\ many\ people$). Moreover, each politician's party affiliation was recorded.

In 2013, the parliamentarians' general proneness to use the Internet (*"The Internet should not be missing in my everyday life"*; $1 = do\ not\ agree\ at\ all$ to $5 = agree\ very\ strongly$; $M = 4.32$; $SD = 0.85$), and their estimation of whether they are able to control online communication were measured (*"The good thing about online communication is that I have everything under control"*; $1 = do\ not\ agree\ at\ all$ to $5 = agree\ very\ strongly$; $M = 3.18$; $SD = 1.11$). Finally, in 2013, the skills that parliamentarians thought that they ($M = 3.77$; $SD = 0.96$) and their staff ($M = 4.56$; $SD = 0.59$) possessed for the practical use of the Internet were measured ($1 = very\ bad\ skills$ to $5 = very\ good\ skills$).

Results

H1a, *H1b*, and *H1c* claim that politicians make more extensive use of online media to spread information about their political work if they believe online media has a strong influence on the public, journalists, and other politicians. In order to test these assumptions, two hierarchical regression analyses were calculated for both surveys.[5]

The first regression analyses tested whether the perceived influence of Facebook and other social network sites impact the intensity of parliamentarians' use of these venues for political purposes. First, the following control variables were introduced: age, sex, level of education, perceived range of the Internet, perceived suitability of the Internet for obtaining political information, and party affiliation (reference category: Christian Democratic Union/Christian Social Union). In 2013, general proneness to using the Internet, ability to control online communication, and the politician's and their staff's Internet skills were added to the control variables. Second, the presumed political influences of the Internet on

the public, on journalists, and on other politicians were taken into account. Third, the interaction effect between the presumed influences and age as well as the interaction effect between presumed influences and perceived suitability were included.[6] The results are shown in Table 3.

First, contrary to expectations, the presumed political influences of Facebook and other social networks on the various groups of people had no impact on how intensively the parliamentarians communicate through those channels—neither in 2012 nor in 2013 (see Table 3, block 2). In addition to the perceived suitability of Facebook to obtain political information ($\beta_{t1} = 0.39$; $p < 0.001$; $\beta_{t2} = 0.26$; $p < 0.01$), only age ($\beta = -0.38$; $p < 0.001$) and the party affiliation (Social Democrats and Greens used Facebook more intensely than members of the Christian Democratic Union/Christian Social Union; $\beta = 0.19/0.16$; $p < 0.05$) in the 2012 study, and the proneness to using the Internet ($\beta = 0.21$; $p < 0.05$) in the 2013 study had a significant effect on the intensity of the parliamentarians' use of Facebook (for the effects of the control variables, see Table 3, block 1). Thus, *H1a*, *H1b*, and *H1c* were rejected.

Second, the intensity of the politicians' use of Twitter for spreading information about their political work served as a dependent variable. In addition to the control variables, the presumed influences of this microblogging service on the various groups of people and the interaction terms were introduced as independent variables (see Table 4, block 2). Once again, contrary to *H1a*, *H1b*, and *H1c*, Twitter's perceived political influence had no effect on the intensity of its use. There is one exception: in 2013, the presumed influence of Twitter on other politicians had a significant effect ($\beta = 0.25$; $p < 0.05$). Age ($\beta_{t1} = -0.38$; $p < 0.001$; $\beta_{t2} = -0.19$; $p < 0.05$) and the perceived suitability of Twitter for political information ($\beta_{t1} = 0.32$; $\beta_{t2} = 0.49$; $p < 0.001$) were also found to have significant effects on the intensity of communication via Twitter. Moreover, in 2012, members of Alliance 90/The Greens used Twitter more intensely than members of the Christian Democratic Union/Christian Social Union ($\beta = 0.22$; $p < 0.01$; for the effects of the control variables, see Table 4, block 1).

Thus, everything considered, *H1a*, *H1b*, and *H1c* could not be confirmed. The intensity of the parliamentarians' use of online media for providing information does not depend on the effect they believe those online media have on the public, journalists, and other politicians.[7]

H2 postulates that presumed influences of online media will more positively affect the online communication behavior of older politicians than the online communication behavior of younger politicians. However, no such interaction effect could be detected in the above described regression analyses; the respective multiplication terms are not significant.

Finally, *H3* assumes that presumed influences of online media will more positively affect politicians' online communication, if they perceive online media as unsuitable for political information, than if they perceive online media as suitable sources of political information. Regarding the use of Twitter (see Table 4, block 3) as a dependent variable, the multiplication terms between the presumed

Table 3. Hierarchical Regressions—Influences on the Intensity of the Use of Facebook

	Block 1		Block 2		Block 3	
	Control Variables		Perceived Influences		Interaction Effects	
	β (2012)	β (2013)	β (2012)	β (2013)	β (2012)	β (2013)
Age	−0.38***	−0.13	−0.39***	−0.12	−0.41***	−0.11
Sex (0=male; 1=female)	−0.06	0.10	−0.06	0.10	−0.06	0.10
Years of education	0.06	0.02	0.05	0.03	0.08	0.04
Perceived reach of Facebook	−0.08	0.11	−0.06	0.09	−0.04	0.09
Perceived suitability of Facebook to get political information	0.39***	0.26**	0.39***	0.25*	0.39***	0.28**
Party affiliation						
Social Democratic Party	0.19*	−0.03	0.18*	−0.03	0.19*	−0.04
Free Democratic Party	0.09	0.14	0.08	0.15	0.06	0.16
Alliance 90/The Greens	0.16*	−0.02	0.17*	−0.00	0.15	−0.02
Left Party	0.03	0.15	0.02	0.15	0.02	0.15
General proneness to use the Internet	—	0.21*	—	0.21*	—	0.23*
Ability to control communication	—	0.12*	—	0.11	—	0.12
Own Internet skills	—	0.02	—	0.03	—	0.01
Staff's Internet skills	—	−0.01	—	0.00	—	−0.01
Perceived political influence of Facebook on the public	—	—	−0.07	0.03	−0.08	0.02
Perceived political influence of Facebook on journalists	—	—	0.02	0.04	0.01	0.03
Perceived political influence of Facebook on politicians	—	—	0.03	0.01	0.02	0.03
Perceived influence on the public*age	—	—	—	—	0.01	0.05
Perceived influence on journalists*age	—	—	—	—	−0.00	0.17
Perceived influence on politicians*age	—	—	—	—	0.01	−0.02
Perceived influence on the public*suitability	—	—	—	—	−0.21*	0.01
Perceived influence on journalists*suitability	—	—	—	—	0.19	−0.07
Perceived influence on politicians*suitability	—	—	—	—	0.00	0.05
R^2	0.39***	0.35***	0.39***	0.36***	0.43***	0.39***
R^2 change	—	—	0.00	0.01	0.04	0.03

Notes: *$p < 0.05$, **$p < 0.01$, ***$p < 0.001$; $n_{t1/t2} = 146/122$.

Table 4. Hierarchical Regression—Influences on the Intensity of the Use of Twitter

	Block 1 Control Variables		Block 2 Perceived Influences		Block 3 Interaction Effects	
	β (2012)	β (2013)	β (2012)	β (2013)	β (2012)	β (2013)
Age	−0.38***	−0.19*	−0.37***	−0.19*	−0.39***	−0.16
Sex (0 = male; 1 = female)	−0.12	−0.08	−0.13	−0.08	−0.13	−0.08
Years of education	−0.00	−0.01	0.00	−0.01	−0.04	−0.02
Perceived reach of Twitter	0.10	0.11	0.13	0.10	0.09	0.08
Perceived suitability of Twitter to get political information	0.32***	0.49***	0.33***	0.48***	0.32***	0.43***
Party affiliation						
Social Democratic Party	0.09	0.14	0.07	0.13	0.10	0.13
Free Democratic Party	−0.05	0.15	−0.07	0.13	−0.03	0.14
Alliance 90/The Greens	0.22*	0.12	0.21**	0.06	0.24**	0.05
Left Party	−0.05	0.02	−0.07	−0.04	−0.04	−0.05
General proneness to use the Internet	—	0.10	—	0.10	—	0.10
Ability to control communication	—	0.02	—	0.01	—	−0.02
Own Internet skills	—	0.07	—	0.06	—	0.08
Staff's Internet skills	—	−0.09	—	−0.07	—	−0.07
Perceived political influence of Twitter on the public	—	—	−0.07	−0.07	−0.05	−0.09
Perceived political influence of Twitter on journalists	—	—	−0.08	−0.15	−0.03	−0.15
Perceived political influence of Twitter on politicians	—	—	0.10	0.25*	0.07	0.31*
Perceived influence on the public*age	—	—	—	—	−0.05	0.04
Perceived influence on journalists*age	—	—	—	—	0.04	0.08
Perceived influence on politicians*age	—	—	—	—	−0.19	−0.15
Perceived influence on the public*suitability	—	—	—	—	−0.12	−0.01
Perceived influence on journalists*suitability	—	—	—	—	0.01	0.16
Perceived influence on politicians*suitability	—	—	—	—	0.07	0.07
R^2	0.39***	0.48***	0.40***	0.50***	0.43***	0.54***
R^2 change	—	—	0.01	0.02	0.03	0.04

Notes: $^*p < 0.05$, $^{**}p < 0.01$, $^{***}p < 0.001$; $n_{t1/t2} = 138/117$.

influences on the public, journalists, and other politicians, on the one hand, and the perceived suitability, on the other hand, are not significant. Regarding the use of Facebook as a dependent variable (see Table 3, block 3), only the interaction between the presumed influence of Facebook on the public and its perceived suitability is significant ($\beta = -0.21$; $p < 0.05$). However, a more detailed analysis reveals that parliamentarians' presumed influence of Facebook on the public decreases their use of Facebook if they perceive it as suitable for political information, while there is no significant relation between presumed influence and the intensity of Facebook use for parliamentarians who perceive Facebook as being unsuitable for political information. This is not in line with the expectations.

Discussion

The motives that underlie politicians' online communication activities are widely unknown. The present study contributes to answering this question by examining the extent to which the expected effects of online communication on other people motivate politicians to use the Internet to inform others about their work. Therefore, members of the German Bundestag were surveyed in 2012 and 2013, providing data from two surveys conducted at different times. Furthermore, compared to previous research, the present study proceeded in a more specific and differentiated way: the presumed influence of individual online services was measured, and it was not sweepingly asked whether the parliamentarians make use of online media but rather they were asked about the intensity of this use. The focus was on Facebook and Twitter as these social media tools are suitable for politicians to spread political information. And actually, they are used by many German politicians.

It was assumed that politicians who believe that online media has a strong influence on the public, journalists, or other politicians use the Internet more extensively to provide information about their work. However, that hypothesis could not be confirmed. The presumed influences of the different Web services are *not* relevant predictors of the intensity of parliamentarians' use of online media for political purposes. The only significant finding (that the perceived political influence of Twitter on other politicians leads to an increased use of Twitter) should not be overstated given the many other nonsignificant values. However, this finding might indicate that the parliamentarians perceive Twitter as an elite medium through which many politicians are connected.

Moreover, (almost) no moderator effects regarding age and perceived suitability of online media to get political information could be detected. Therefore, the assumption that politicians' perception of the influence of online media is the trigger behind their online activities could not be confirmed in the case of the members of the German Bundestag. As for the impact of the presumed influences, it was apparently secondary that changes had occurred regarding the intensity of using Facebook and Twitter between the times of the surveys. It appears that presumed influences on voters encourage traditional media relations

activities of professional politicians, such as communication with journalists (at least according to Cohen et al., 2008), but not online activities (see also Metag & Marcinkowski, 2012).

Although—or precisely because—hardly any significant effects were observed in the regression analyses, this article makes an important contribution to the research concerning politicians' online communication. The findings have theoretical consequences, as approaches that explain online public relations activities—similar to traditional public relations (e.g., Curtin, 1999)against a rational-choice background would miss the mark. According to those approaches, parliamentarians' online activities should be motivated by strategic considerations, such as the aim to achieve the intended effects on voters or other groups of people. However, the present data indicate that parliamentarians use online media regardless of whether they expect it to have a strong effect on other people. Thus, strategic motives of this kind seem to play a minor role. This interpretation is supported by the finding that the perceived reach of online media also had no significant effect on the intensity of their use. Apparently, other motives, cognitions, and factors other than the assumption of media influences on other people are decisive when it comes to the media and public relations activities of parliamentarians in an online context.

One explanation for these findings could be called *small effort explanation*. Its starting point is the effort required for the different activities. While keeping Facebook profiles and websites updated does take some time, maintaining contact with journalists requires more long-term scheduling and social engagement, and carries more risk. Politicians will only undertake those activities if they can hope for a tangible effect on voters. On the other hand, with the relatively less time-consuming and low-threshold online activities, the possible effects on voters, journalists, and other politicians appear to be of secondary importance.

A second possible explanation could be described as the *"me too" effect* (Selnow, 1998). This explanation assumes that it is virtually commonplace for many parliamentarians to communicate extensively using online channels (for a similar line of argument, see Tenscher & Will, 2010). This explanation coincides with the finding of Zittel (2009), who concluded that having their own homepage was a matter of course for many parliamentarians regardless of the benefit they expected to reap using this means of communication. This is probably particularly true for younger parliamentarians; the strong influence of age in the regression models suggests this. In this context, one important motive might be the fear of appearing less modern or less professional than other politicians who maintain websites or who have their own Twitter account. Marcinkowski and Metag (2014, p. 161) concluded: "It is less the expectation to win votes which makes candidates use social media but the hope not to lose voters (young voters in particular) by portraying themselves as being modern, open minded, and up-to-date." Accordingly, Sudulich and Wall (2009) showed that politicians' desire to keep up with their counterparts is a significant predictor of their online presence (see also Metag & Marcinkowski, 2012). According to this "me too" effect, politicians

communicate via online media simply because they do not want to lag behind other politicians.

As a third explanation, it is possible that politicians pursue online activities more extensively than traditional public relations for *intrinsic motives*, and that cost–benefit considerations fade into the background. An extensive web presence might be primarily motivated by the wish to present an unfiltered image of oneself, irrespective of the presumed effect that such activities have on voters, journalists, or other politicians. This motivation is also probable because many people derive enjoyment from presenting themselves on social networks (Chester & Bretherton, 2009). Accordingly, the desire for self-expression was found to be a significant factor for the online communication activities of members of German state parliaments (Wolling et al., 2010).

The present study has limitations. The parliamentarians' online activities and the perceived political influences have been measured in a compact way for reasons of research efficiency. Yet, in view of the numerous facets of the online world, the perceived influences and the reference groups should be measured in a more differentiated way. For example, it is possible that the politicians' online activities are not based on the presumed effects those activities have on the general public, but rather on the presumed influences those activities have on specific groups of voters. That is, the politicians could be asked how effectively they perceive Facebook to be in mobilizing their supporters. In so doing, possible micro-targeting strategies could be properly considered that could not be detected in this present study, due to the general measurement. Moreover, the politicians were only asked how suitable they believe online media is for *collecting* information about politics. This variable has the biggest influence on online activities. Thus, future studies should ask politicians how suitable they believe online media are for spreading their political messages. Also the politicians' resources (e.g., staff, budget), which may influence their online activities, should be taken into account.

Furthermore, the results are valid only for the members of one parliament in one country, and the data are based on information provided by self-reports of the respondents. The generalizability and validity of the results could possibly be increased by interviewing other politicians in other countries and by including other forms of data collection—for example, through content analyses of the online activities (e.g., Cohen et al., 2008). In addition, if substantial correlations between the perceived media influences and online activities had been found, it would also have been important to address the question of causality.

Despite those limitations, the study has produced further indications of why politicians communicate via online media. Although (or precisely because) a correlation between perceived online media influences and the intensity of online activities could not be demonstrated here, presumed media influences should be considered in future studies in a more refined way to gain deeper insights into the relationship between those perceptions and the communication behavior of politicians.

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Notes

1. Beyond the research of the third-person effect, some studies have examined how politicians perceive the influences of media in comparison to other groups such as journalists (e.g., Strömbäck, 2011; van Aelst & Walgrave, 2011; Walgrave, 2008).
2. It was only measured how suitable politicians believe online media is for obtaining political information: "In your opinion, how suitable is […] if one wants to inform oneself about current political events?"
3. Twitter can be considered a social network site as well. However, Twitter follows a slightly different logic than, for example, Facebook, as the core of Twitter is a rather one-sided form of communication consisting of short text messages. Consequently, Twitter was treated separately in these studies.
4. The activities of the politicians' staff were included because it is unlikely that many politicians maintain their Facebook or other social networking account themselves. However, this is not a serious limitation of the study because the staff follow the instructions of the politicians.
5. Owing to missing values, the number of cases is smaller in the regression analyses than in the sample.
6. Age, perceived suitability, and all variables for perceived influences were standardized to facilitate the interpretation of the results (Hayes, Glynn, & Huge, 2012).
7. Further regression analyses with data of both surveys assessed whether there are connections between presumed influence and making use of online media at a more general level. For this purpose, an additive index was established at any one time (range from 4 to 20; $M_{t1/t2} = 12.00/ 12.08$; $SD_{t1/t2} = 3.72/3.13$; Cronbach's $Alpha_{t1/t2} = 0.72/0.55$), which included not only making use of Facebook and Twitter but also the frequency of using one's own websites ($M_{t1/t2} = 4.44/4.15$; $SD_{t1/t2} = 0.64/0.80$) and weblogs ($M_{t1/t2} = 2.00/1.85$; $SD_{t1/t2} = 1.19/1.03$). This index served as dependent variable. The presumed influence of the Internet in general (descriptive results, see Table 2) served as an independent variable. Not even with this wholesale analysis (which was also problematic due to the low Cronbach's Alpha values), the presumed political influence of the Internet on the various groups had no effect on the intensity of parliamentarians' use of online channels to spread information about their work.

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