THE CRITICAL LINKAGE BETWEEN ONLINE AND OFFLINE MEDIA

AN APPROACH TO RESEARCHING THE CONDITIONS OF ISSUE SPILL-OVER

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Abstract

In this article we argue that it is pressing to study the "hybrid media system" at the intersection of online and offline communication and its potential for agenda building. The topic is relevant because it is argued that the internet offers new opportunities of public influence for challengers without access to political decision making. Except for single case studies, little is known about the conditions under which these actors succeed. Informed by the research on agenda building we tackle with the mechanisms of online-offline media agenda building and the conditions under which challengers succeed to produce issue spill-over into conventional mass media. We develop a theoretical framework for investigating the linkage between online communication and traditional mass media and discuss how our model translates into empirical research. We conclude that the nature of online networks is critical for spill-over, but also the issue itself and the structure of the political system.

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Introduction

The democratisation potential of the internet is reflected simultaneously in open access, the availability of previously inaccessible information and the interactivity and co-presence of horizontal and vertical communication (e.g. Bentivegna 2002). These qualities enable all kinds of actors to initiate communication and therefore act as potential agenda setters and frame-builders. Since everyone with at least access to a mobile phone can, in principle, use these opportunities to address the public, the internet has fuelled the hope that previously marginalised actors and arguments would also gain public visibility and this would enhance inclusiveness of public debate (Gerhards and Schäfer 2010). This proposition helps explain the uprisings of the Arab Spring, the Indignados in Spain, and the Occupy protests in the U.S., which generated considerable media attention (Bennett and Segerberg 2012). However, the question remains whether and under what conditions beyond these very specific settings political demands and policy positions can move from challengers equipped mainly with digital (interactive and social) media onto main-stream press agendas that open the gates to political elites (Bennett 1990). Thus, it is pressing to critically reflect and study whether challengers can really make a difference if they use the internet to bring up new issues and arguments and what it takes to introduce them into traditional media.

In this article we focus on the interplay between online and offline communication and tackle with a phenomenon that Andrew Chadwick (2011) relates to as "hybrid media system." We ask how the internet influences the agenda of traditional media and under what conditions online communication allows for the inclusion of challengers' issues and arguments into public debate as represented by the conventional press. We develop a theoretical framework for investigating the linkage between challengers' online communication and traditional mass media and discuss how our model translates into empirical research. Our reflection is motivated by the argument, that only if we understand the interaction between "old" media and "new" media and the specific conditions of online agenda-building we can assess whether the internet really impacts on the general public debate and eventually becomes politically consequential. While our research question is justified by the normative standard of inclusiveness of public debate as championed in democratic theory, our discussion of the concrete research is informed by the literature on media agenda-building. Our core assumption is that the nature of actor networks is critical for spill-over, but also the issue itself and the structure of the political system. In the first section of this article, we revisit the state of this field and reflect on new directions that need to be developed in researching the potentials of online media agenda-building. In the second section we argue that the assessment of issue networks in online communication and spill-over effects into traditional media requires an encompassing empirical approach and novel tools of inquiry. Hereby, we first develop hypotheses that spell out our expectation regarding the conditional nature of such spill-over effects. Second, we suggest ways of bringing together data from the analysis of online and offline communication. We argue that a structural hyperlink network analysis should be combined with classical content analysis of online and offline communication. As easy as it sounds, there are rather tricky methodological questions involved.

Online Communication's Potential for Agenda-Building

Agenda-building research[1] and the sociology of the public sphere maintains that the media agenda is the outcome of a competition between political, societal, and media actors (Funkhouser 1973; Mathes and Pfetsch 1991). Since the conventional press (even in online editions) tends to offer limited, and, in recent years, shrinking space for so-called "hard news," the agenda-building competition has increased in the offline world.

Classical research on agenda-building maintains that there are three types of actors involved in driving an issue and frame its meaning (Kriesi 2004). First, actors in political decision-making processes, such as governments and parliaments, apply top-down strategies and are usually successful issue and frame promoters. Second, it is the media themselves that raise their voices and filter source information according to perceived power balances in government and society (Bennett 1990). Wolfsfeld (2011) maintains that the media selection bias produces a "cumulative inequality" (p.16) insofar as those who depend most strongly on media have the most difficult barriers to its access (Pfetsch 2004). The third group of actors are *challengers* defined as marginalised actors at the periphery of civil society who do not have an institutionalised access to political power (Kriesi 2004, 189ff). In many instances, they draw public attention and mobilise support for their interpretation of a problem by using bottom-up strategies to push for media recognition and political support.

Studies on media agenda-building also show that these processes are conditional: they do not only depend on the driving actors, but also on issues and media outlets (Kriesi 2004). For instance, issue-specific conflict configurations in a country determine the type of discourse coalitions that tackle an issue and promote its public appearance (Adam 2007). Finally, agenda-building also depend on the stance of *media outlets*. Studies of political parallelism suggest that agenda-building processes vary with respect to the political colour of issue promoters and their ties into the media system (Lüter 2004).

In recent times, online communication has opened up new avenues for agenda-building. With the rise of various online channels from blogs, to information rich NGO networks, to dense crowd sourced Twitter streams, there are now new media inputs that may get the attention of conventional media and thereby kick off media agenda-setting processes.[2] Therefore the question arises whether with the advent of the internet, the established patterns of agenda-building change. A change potential arises for challengers as the internet offers those actors, so far underprivileged by the media, new possibilities. Online communication has become an important channel for them to get their messages out not just to their supporters but also to the general public[3] (van de Donk et al. 2004; Baringhorst et al. 2009). The qualities of online communication that promote agenda- building in particular are its decentralised architecture as well as the capacity and space for new communicators, coalitions, and issue centred communication (Neuberger 2009). It is above all these networks that increase peripheral actors' opportunity for greater visibility both on- and offline (Koopmans and Zimmermann 2003). Eventually, the sometimes "subterranean" (Wright 2004, 80) channels of communication affect traditional participatory aspects of the political process, in particular when online

networks successfully manage to communicate their ideas, counter-expertise, and frames from their desktops to offline media (Bennett 2004).

Yet, it is not only on the side of actors, but also on the dynamics of agenda-building that we expect change to occur. Following Zhou and Moy (2007; see also Rucht 2004a, 2004b), online communication still needs to trigger debates in traditional mass media to unfold its full potential. It is traditional mass media that reaches more general publics (and echoes back to elites). Consequently, if we seek to understand agenda-building dynamics in recent times, we need to look at the interplay between online and offline communication.

In the interaction of online and offline media, several types of spill-over are likely to occur: *Direct spill-over* is likely to happen when messages from the discourse of challenger networks are selected by journalists of traditional media. As Baringhorst (2008) points out, this flow of communication is a viable strategy for challengers and in their eyes represents an enormous increase of access to the public. A second type of spill-over occurs when online outlets of the traditional media (e.g., *Spiegel-online*) or specialised online media (such as *Huffington Post*) get involved with challengers' discourse coalitions and their online issue networks, and subsequently feature their issues and frames. If these issues and frames are then taken up by the offline editions, we can speak of a *double spill-over* in the sense of the two-step flow of communication paradigm in media effects research. Eventually a third type of spill-over appears when an issue directly spills over from online media onto the agenda of political decision-makers like parties or governments.

Studies that systematically analyse the linkage between online and offline media are rare. The bulk of this research focuses on how traditional mass media sets the issues and frames for online channels and subsequently find that the old media are important agenda-setters for online blogs and other platforms as well.[4] Nonetheless, from a democratic theory perspective, spill-over in the other direction is more interesting, because we may understand under which conditions online communication actually influences public debate.

The research about spill-overs can be distinguished according to the types of actors involved.[5] First, some studies focus on the role of *individual actors*, i.e., 'netizen' activity in blogs, or social networks for triggering spill-overs into traditional media (Matzat 2005; Fuchs 2007). The work of Zhou and Moy (2007) demonstrates that online discourse has an agenda and frame building effect on media reporting. This effect appears above all in latent stages of an issue career and provokes changes in political communication modes (Zhou and Moy 2007). Thus spill-over is directly linked to political change. In the case of post-Mao China, online fora have challenged the authority and the political agenda of the government (Yu, 2006; Zhou and Moy 2007). Similarly, in the case of Korea, Lee (2005) shows that online fora provoked an online counter public sphere, but more importantly they fed into offline protest movements. Finally, a study on Israel (Vaisman 2009) does not support the view that Web 2.0 affects traditional mass media. Namely Hebrew left-wing blogs are ignored by the media and bloggers respond to the exclusion by seeking direct access to politicians.

A second strand of research refers to *collective actors* in the movement sector and their involvement in spill-over processes. The few studies available demonstrate that challengers use online communication as an important instrument within their

action repertoire (Richards and Heard 2005; Baringhorst et al. 2007; Gillan 2009; Lester and Hutchins 2009; Bennett and Segerberg 2011). Research becomes sparse when we seek to understand the link between challengers' online campaigns and the traditional mass media. In their study of an environmental campaign in the UK, Lester and Hutchins (Lester and Hutchins 2009) find that the spill-over from online communication to traditional media was a successful purposely planned political strategy.

Agenda-building – even if it runs through online communication – remains context-sensitive. However, until this point, the studies available have seldom taken the conditional nature of agenda-building into account. Moreover, numerous of these studies have focused on non-democratic regimes. Consequently, the first research desiderate relates to context factors that impact on the dynamics between online and offline communication. One can assume that the context factors identified in traditional agenda-building research also prove to be crucial for online-offline dynamics. In the next section, we therefore develop hypotheses on how context factors on the country level, the issue level, on the level of single media outlets affect spill-over processes.

A second challenge for research relates to the nature of online communication, which precedes spill-over into traditional media. Thus far, studies concentrated on the effects of single blogs, forums or websites (Drezner and Farrell 2008; Farrell and Drezner 2008; Oegema et al. 2008; Sweetser et al. 2008). We suspect that the impact of the internet is underestimated here, because online campaigns and the like are always embedded in further reaching spatial communication structures (see for the same conclusion Zimmermann 2007). Our idea is to consider the interlinked structure online networks, no matter whether they relate to classical *web 1.0* applications or blogs, video-portals, fora, etc. in the *web 2.0*.[6] Most likely, such online networks grow up around a given issue, form coalitions, or promote frames and therefore act as true agents of potential spill-over effects. For research this means that one needs to develop adequate tools and methods, which allow examining the online communication of challengers and the resulting issue network.

Pathways to the Study of Online Communication's Potential for Agenda-Building

In order to draw conclusions from our reasoning for future empirical research, we proceed by discussing the conditions under which online-offline spill-over might be likely to occur. We have chosen to format our ideas as hypotheses that tackle with the nature of the hybrid media system (Chadwick 2011) and macro level factors that may influence the issue dynamic.

Types of Online Networks, Frame Strengths and Issue Sponsors

The first variable that we expect to influence the probability of issue spill-over is the *type of online network.* Provided that public sphere consists of multiple issue publics that may compete, overlap, or co-exist independently (e.g. Peters 1999; Rogers 2002), various challengers are active in promoting their ideas. In order to make a strong point, we can assume that they also work in getting linked with other challengers, in order to build up an advocacy coalition (Sabatier 1998). In the online world coalitions become visible in the hyperlink structure. Thus, one can

assume that coalition-building in the internet is a strategy for challengers if they are to infuse their issues into a wider debate.

One of the mechanisms for influencing public debate is framing. In the public sphere, frames are patterns of perception, interpretation, selection, emphasis and exclusion through which actors organise discourse and define what the debate is actually about (Gamson 1989; Entman 1993). The communicative practices between challengers' can thus be seen as a "politics of signification" (Snow 2004, 384) through which they contest dominant interpretations of reality.[7] We expect that those challenger coalitions that succeed in developing strong issues and dominant frames in the online world have the highest chance of triggering spill-over into the traditional mass media. The dynamics of online agenda-building is linked to three factors: First, the coalition of issue and frame promoters involve actors who are strongly connected and put the issue high on their agenda. Second, within the coalition, a master frame brings together the different groups that are involved. *Frame strength,* from this perspective, means that a challengers' coalition pushes forward a clearly identifiable and consistent message. Third, strong or prominent *frame-sponsors* (Carragee and Roefs 2004) need to be part of the coalition in order to accelerate the issue. Prominent challengers are likely to become established sources of journalists which paves an avenue for issues into the traditional press.

Media Outlets at the Receiving End

Not only the supply side of the issue, but also the openness on the receiving end are likely to influence spill-over processes. Depending on their ideologies media outlets are open to different actors. On the side of the challengers, we can distinguish actors with traditional left-wing concerns, such as the protection of the environment or the support for less privileged groups (e.g., women, migrants, and workers) from those sponsoring right-wing ideology (e.g., nationalism and populism). Provided that political parallelism does play a role in media systems (Hallin and Mancini 2004, 28), leftist challengers have a better opportunity of fostering agenda-building processes through media with a left alignment; whereas the contrary holds true for conservative/nationalistic challengers (Lüter 2004). Depending on the political leaning of the media outlet, we can expect different challenger coalitions to be successful (Kepplinger 1989).

Political System as Opportunity Structure of Issue Spill-Over

Scholars who study the openness of political structures toward challengers distinguish between countries that are either corporatist or pluralist (Lijphart 1999). Corporatist systems are characterised by few, but large interest groups, that often form national organisations, which regularly are consulted by the political system and which are involved in so-called binding 'tripartite pacts' between political systems, unions, employer organisations, etc. Such corporatist systems rely on an "ideology of social partnership" (Katzenstein 1985, 32, 157). Today corporatism is not only analysed in its traditional realm of labour-policy, but also in relationship to new post-industrial issues such as health or environment (Wiarda 1997). In such corporatist systems 'peak challengers' have regular and well established access to the political process. Consequently, they rely on inside lobbying strategies (for the term see Kollman 1998) in the form of interpersonal contacts and direct consultation.

Pluralist systems are characterised (Lijphart 1999) by a multitude of small NGOs, without or at least with only weak peak organisations and no or little tripartite consultation and agreement. In such systems, challengers do not have easy access to decision making processes, but need to fight for access. To do so, challengers more strongly need to rely on outside lobbying strategies, i.e., get the media and the citizens involved (Kollman 1998). We therefore expect that the opportunity structure of pluralist democracies is more conducive for challengers' online communication to trigger spill-over processes than those in corporatist countries.

Issue Characteristics

Following the idea of issue publics, we argue that the online-offline dynamics is also influenced by the characteristics of the concern itself. Only those issue fields where challengers are active and where debates can be connected to larger conflicts in society have a spill-over potential. For instance, a spill-over of larger ideas or more general political topics happened when dense networks of occupy protesters in the US triggered a national media discussion about inequality. At the same time, technical issues and issues that cannot be framed with respect to policy questions are unlikely to spill-over.

Figure 1: Model of the Nature of Online-Offline Dynamics
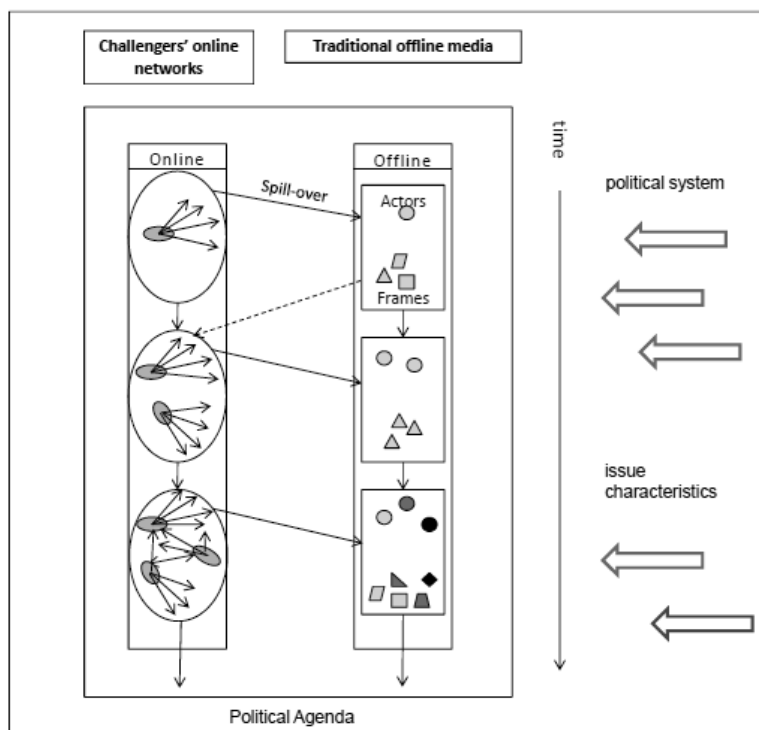
If spill-over does occur, we may expect either one of two alternative patterns: On the one hand, challengers might influence the perspectives and frames under which a certain problem is discussed. If they are successful, they either break a

dominant master frame and introduce an alternative perspective or in the case of frame parity (Entman 2004), they tip the balance in favour of one coalition. This pattern of frame spill-over is likely to occur if an issue has already surfaced on the traditional media and policy agenda. On the other hand, for latent issues that are neither publicly discussed nor prominently featured on the political agenda, challengers should be interested in pushing for a general issue spill-over by the help of online networks.

Methods for Use in the Study of Online-Offline Spill-Over

In order to observe the dynamics of agenda-building as sketched out in Figure 1, one needs to compare online issue networks with the debates on the same issues in traditional mass media.[8] Only if over time, a change in online challenger coalitions regarding issue salience, frame strength, and actor composition/connectedness is followed by a noticeable gain in prominence in the traditional mass media, one may speak of an effect. In order to identify spill-over effects, research is confronted with two challenges. First, one has to find appropriate ways to describe and measure the interlinked communication of challenger websites and the resulting networks. Second, one has to find a method to systematically compare online and offline communication while controlling for the direction of the influence. This second challenge raises causality questions.

In the analysis of the effects of online communication on traditional media, it is unlikely that spill-over derives from any one specific blog or one singular page or site on the internet. Instead, an observable impact is more likely to result from the interlinked online communication of various actors. To study such interlinked communication, we suggest using online-specific research tools.

Figure 2 depicts our ideas on the sequence of methods that may be used to re-construct issue networks: In a first step, research needs to define the seed URLs of challenger web pages, from which to start further investigating the internet. This step is critical because it determines the quality of the search results. Depending on the research question, one might choose different source seeds: the most important ones in the field, those with a specific policy position, etc. As this step is crucial, we propose utilising several research methods. For example, among the methods for choosing starting points are triangulated *Google* searches for various policy oriented issue organisations, based on a thesaurus developed to catalogue descriptions of the issues under study. To finally select the challenger starting points for a network crawl, one could also combine the top sites produced by multiple searches with expert interviews and a literature review. In a second step, one needs to put the selected pages as seed URLs into an *issue* crawler (see e.g. the crawler software developed by Rogers (2002; http://issuecrawler.net/, http://www.govcom.org/Issue-crawler_ instructions.htm). Crawler software follows the outlink structure of each specific page. Depending on the research question, such crawler software allows for different settings (e.g. snowball setting versus co-link, how many outlink steps are studied, etc.). Yet, these crawlers follow pure hyperlink logic without taking into consideration the issue fit of the newly selected pages. We therefore suggest using a scraping tool that checks whether based on the previously developed thesaurus all pages actually deal with the issue under study. This latter step is necessary to reduce noise within the data and identifyi truly issue-specific information of online

communication. The resulting issue networks obtained from the web crawls need to be systematically analysed. Two methods are indicative: (a) network analysis helps to determine the structural features of the issue networks (e.g. Wasserman and Faust 1999), (b) content analysis of the identified pages is relevant to the study the content, i.e. which actors advocate specific positions/frames within the issue networks. The network analysis of the hyperlinks indicates the position of each single actor, its online activity (outdegree), its reputation (indegree) and its broker- age position, etc. Beyond, network analysis shows the structural features of issue networks (strength of connection, structural holes, etc.) and therefore allows to determine coalitions within an issue field. In the content analysis categories need to be developed to assess issue salience, frame strength, and type of frame-sponsor in the online world.

Figure 2: Methods to Study Online-Offline Dynamics
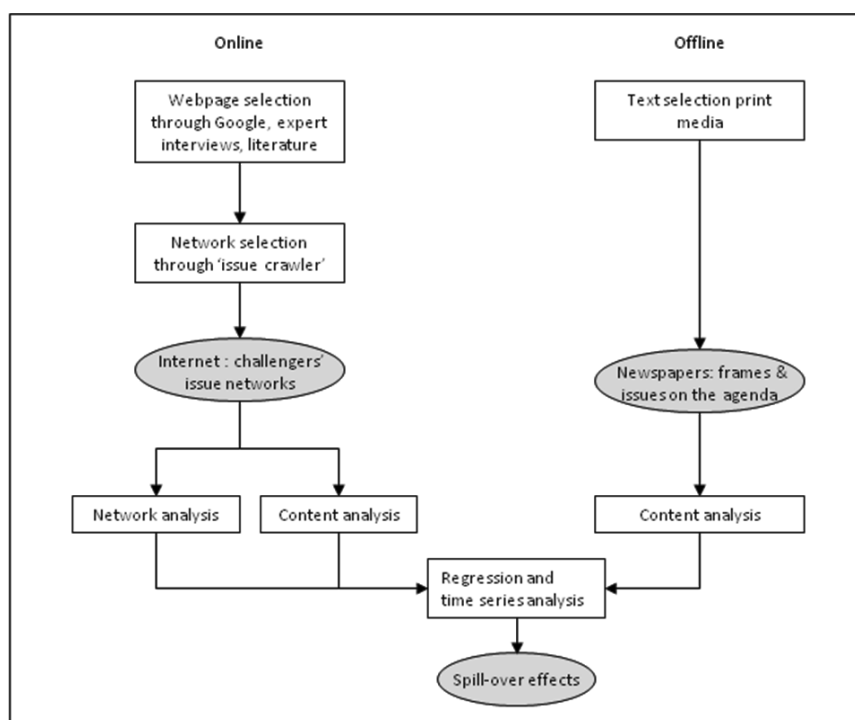
The observation that challengers or their frames are salient in traditional mass media does not necessarily mean that the internet has played a role unless one can establish a link between challengers' online communication and the issue cover- age. Thus, the representation of online issue networks needs to precede the media coverage in time. Consequently, if communication on the internet causes spill-over regarding issues, or frames, they need to be present in the online world first. In order to control for the time dimension, a time series study design needs to be applied which includes a continuous analyses of both, the traditional mass media agenda and the online issue network. Content-data online and offline has to be collected in a comparable manner. The proof of a causal link also requires to control

for other relevant factors that influence mass media (e.g. real-world events such as demonstrations, scandals, or political decision-making). These factors should be registered in the content analysis when they are reported in the mass media.

Conclusion

Starting from the position that traditional mass media provide an observable advantage to political elites and produce a "cumulative inequality" (Wolfsfeld 2011, 16) with respect to access and voices in public we argued that online communication has the potential to challenge this media-elite linkage. We suggested that previously marginalised actors, such as civil society groups and activists who are challenging the conventional issue agenda would benefit most from the potential inclusiveness of the internet. While this normative assumption seems easy to justify, it appears to be much harder to investigate the interaction of online and offline communication and to understand the conditions of how challengers get a chance to enter the public debate. From this point of view, the specific mechanisms and dynamics of their inclusion and the nature of the new "hybrid media system" (Chadwick 2011, 2) become a substantial research desiderate. Moreover, the question is pressing if we want to assess the democratic potential of the internet regarding its contribution to the inclusiveness of public debate.

Informed by the literature on agenda- building we have developed ideas on the conditions under which challengers' online communication impacts on the media and eventually the political agenda. We argue that no single challenger on its own, but the formation of effective online coalitions of challengers function as true agents of change. If these coalitions reach out and manage to forcefully promote their specific issues and frames, they are likely to trigger spill-over into the offline media. We also argued that for a full-fledged issue or frame career to become politically relevant it is crucial that the traditional media jump on the bandwagon and take up the issue.

Against this background, our goals have been to point out that the online-offline linkage has become a pressing research desiderate of political communication. Studies need to explore the mechanisms of the new "hybrid media system" and the conditions of spill-over of challenger issues and frames onto the mass media agenda. What are the thresholds that challenger issues must overcome in order to enter the political debate? What are the structural prerequisites in media and the political system of this communication? Research on the internet public sphere and its political impact would make a big step forward if we could empirically assess whether online communication raises the inclusiveness and the democratic potential of contemporary political debate.

Our framing of the research question necessitates studies that contribute to political communication research in two respects: First, it is directly linked to the main trajectories of media agenda-setting, which asks how media-external actors shape issues and frames on the mass media agenda. The bulk of this research concentrates on traditional mass media. We argue that, provided the media landscape has undergone fundamental changes, these studies and findings might be outdated. Current studies cannot but include online communication as a new supplier of issues and frames, particularly with respect to non-established actors, civil society, and challengers. In more general terms, the question is how processes

of agenda-building are affected by the new channels of online communication. This extension of the agenda-building approach has become more crucial as online communication has become more and more important for challengers to connect, coordinate, and mobilise and for journalists to use the internet as a research tool. Another crucial challenge for today's media agenda-building research is to understand its conditional nature: How do different political and media structures, how do specific issue contexts, how do specific media outlets, and how do different online-specific variables alter agenda-building processes? Our proposition here is to work with comparative designs that systematically vary the factors that condition agenda- building and to systematically study characteristics of online issue networks by means of network analysis.

Second, research on political communication in the online world brings up new questions regarding the methodology of empirical research. Questions of selection, sampling, and analysis of online contents as well as the problem of how to link data on online networks with the data of traditional media content analysis opens up a completely new field of inquiry, which must be addressed through the more up-to-date search tools and data storage, retrieval, and analysis technologies. The challenges here are enormous; but communication research needs to cope with them in order to answer our own substantial research questions. Our intention was to raise these questions and problems in order to contribute further to a research agenda on political communication in the near future. While we are still far from satisfying the results and conclusions, we feel that it has been pressing to raise these questions and dig up some hypotheses about the nature and conditions of spill-over. While we have formulated ideas on the tools to be applied in concrete empirical research, we are well aware that the analysis of the online-offline dynamics and the combination of data from different sources are tricky methodological tasks.

Notes:

1. The term agenda-building is meant to be synonymous with the term media agenda-setting, which is often used in the media effects tradition of communication research (Rogers and Dearing 1988).

2. Such function has been demonstrated for the so-called alternative media which provided a linkage function between the new social movement sector and the established media (Mathes and Pfetsch 1991).

3. There are also growing examples of crowd-sourced communication that operate with relatively few formal organisations coordinating the messages, but for the current paper, we focus on more conventional challenger situations involving NGOs and social movement coalitions.

4. In their study of more than 90 million online articles on political issues, Leskovec et al. (2009) find "that about 3.5 percent of quoted phrases tend to percolate from blogs to news media, while diffusion in the other direction is much more common." Other studies corroborate the idea that offline-online agenda-setting predominates (Ku et al. 2003, Oegema et al. 2008).

5. Quite a number of studies challenge the role of established political actors in causing spill-over processes to the offline world, primarily during campaigns (Stromer-Galley 2000; Os et al. 2007; Gonzalez-Bailon 2009). Since we are interested in the challenging potential of the web, this strand of research is of minor relevance to our purpose.

6. We refer to all of these instances of online communication as 'webpages,' for empirical measurement purposes.

7. Hajer (1995) uses the term discourse coalitions, which are built by actors who support the same story-lines. Story-lines are "narratives on social reality through which elements from many

different domains are combined and that provide actors with a set of symbolic references that suggest a common understanding" (Hajer 1995, 62). In our terminology, the story lines can also be understood as frames.

8. For a similar conclusion, yet different empirical design see the study of Rucht et al. 2008.

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