Abstract

Today’s online communication has the potential to challenge traditional mass media-elite linkages. In this paper, we propose that the internet offers those without institutionalized access to political decision making new opportunities to be heard in political debate; thus enhancing the democratization potential of online communication. Little, however, is known about the specific conditions under which challengers succeed in influencing the agenda of traditional mass media. In our paper, we present a combined theoretical framework and research methodology that allows us to examine the conditions of challenger spill-overs from online communications and into traditional mass media. We suppose that media agenda building is dependent not only on the strength of discourse coalitions in the online world: but also on media-, country-, and issue-specific settings.
1. Introduction

Mass communication research operates on the premise that the selection of issues in the media is determined by professional standards of journalism, which are guided by the objective to reach a particular audience. Limited carrier capacity and the logic of news factors such as social status, political office, or prominence, are all common reasons why elite actors and their issues enjoy privileged media access. This selection bias appears to be an emblematic feature of the traditional mass media. The consequence is that mainstream media reality has been restricted in its representation of standing actors with all supposed consequences for public debate. Mass media’s selection bias produces a “cumulative inequality” (Wolfsfeld, 1997) and those who depend most strongly on it to gain political influence have the most difficult barriers to its entry and access.

Since the public sphere has been dominated by (traditional) mass media, the most pertinent problems of contemporary democracy relates to the inclusiveness of public debate. In recent years, online communication has fuelled the hope of an increase in the inclusiveness of public communications. The foundation of online communication’s democratization potential is reflected simultaneously in open access, a seemingly unlimited carrier capacity, the availability of information that in the not too distant past only journalists could access, and the interactivity and co-presence of horizontal and vertical communication (e.g., Bentivegna, 2002). Online communication not only complements but it also threatens the gate-keeping role of traditional mass media (Neuberger, 2009: 39).

These qualities enable all kinds of actors to initiate communication and therefore act as potential agenda setters and frame-builders. For instance, established political actors easily profit from the framework of the internet when they raise their voice without consideration for the filter of media selection (Baringhorst, 2008; Calhoun, 1998; Rethemeyer, 2007). However, online communication also opens up new opportunities for challengers such as civil society actors and activists who do not necessarily fit the professional standards and rules of media selection. Because, for the most part, they are deprived of direct access to institutional political decision making and command less resources than established actors, online communication capabilities are particularly important for them (Castells, 2005; van de Donk, Loader, Nixon, & Rucht, 2004) in their efforts to gain a voice in traditional media (Pfetsch, 2004; Wolfsfeld, 1997). Since everyone can, in principle, use these opportunities to address the public, the internet has fuelled hopes that previously marginalized actors and arguments
would also gain public visibility (Gerhards & Schäfer, 2010) and this would enhance inclusiveness, as well as the deliberative democratic quality of public debate. Nonetheless, there are some vital indications with respect to the democratic promises of the internet. Some studies argue that the online presence of actors is also influenced by their prominence in traditional media. Consequently, the internet also shows signs of being subject to similar power structures as offline media (Gerhards & Schäfer, 2010; Rucht, 2004b; Rucht, Yang, & Zimmermann, 2008; Zimmermann & Koopmans, 2010).

Through a discussion of the potential to challenge traditional mass media-elite linkages, this paper attempts to contribute to the debate on the democratic potential of online communication. Specifically, we ask under what conditions online communication allows for the inclusion of a challenger’s issues and arguments into public debate as represented by traditional mass media. We confront the question of how challengers’ online communication influences the agenda of traditional media and how we can differentiate between those processes. While the normative standards of our argument refer to democratic theory, the analytical framework of our study relates to research on agenda building of media. Thus, in the first section, we revisit the state of the art in this field and reflect on desiderates that need to be approached in the research on the potentials of online media agenda building. In particular, we are interested in discussing the conditions under which challengers and outsiders might be influential in producing issue and frame spill-overs from online media onto the traditional media agenda. The objective of this review is to develop hypotheses and reflect on methods that would allow us to study the conditions of online-offline spill-overs. Since it is considered to outline conceptual ideas and tools on how to investigate the democratic potential and the changing nature of public debate under new conditions of online channels, the foundation of this paper is theoretical in nature. We argue that only if we know the specific conditions of online agenda building we can fully understand whether the internet lives up to its democratic potential and thereby allows for inclusion of challengers’ issues and arguments into mainstream public debate.

The methodological challenges that appear when researching online communication content and combining this information with offline communication in a systematic way is also addressed in this paper. Regarding selection, sampling, and analysis, we require an encompassing empirical approach to assess issue networks in online communication that produce spill-over effects into traditional media. Methodologically, we propose to study issue networks that consist of a large number of webpages (including blogs, fora, etc.) and the actors behind them. To identify such networks, we recommend an online-specific search tool, the issue-crawler (Rogers, 2002). In order to bring together the analysis of online and offline communi-
cation, we suggest combining a structural hyperlink network analysis with classical media content analysis of online communication and then systematically linking these with data derived from an offline media content analysis.

2. Online communication’s potential for agenda-building – state of the art

2.1 Research on media agenda-building

The question of how online communication influences traditional media refers to the agenda-building approach. In communication studies, it has been established since the early studies of the 1970s that the media agenda is the result of interactive processes between actors of the political system and the media system (Funkhouser, 1973; Lang & Lang, 1981; Mathes & Pfetsch, 1991). Furthermore, the sociology of the public sphere maintains that the media agenda is not necessarily a true reflection of societal problems, but rather reflects the effort of different political actors and pressure groups to become visible in public. The media are thus an integral part of the political opportunity structure (Gamson & Meyer, 1996: 287) and their agenda can thus be considered as the outcome of a competition between actors and their issues for public attention. Since with the rise of a new issue, another issue usually has to go down, media's limited capacity (Hilgartner & Bosk, 1988) accelerates this competition (McCombs & Zhu, 1995; Zhu, 1992), or may even reshape the issue (Brosius & Kepplinger, 1995). Early studies also point out that the career of an issue, i.e., the salience it achieves on the agenda, may be perceived as a consequence of a process in which political entrepreneurs actively promote an issue onto the media agenda in order to put it on the agenda of political decision making (Luhmann, 1975; Pfetsch, 1986). In this process, social conditions have to be perceived as problems and framed accordingly in order to become an object of discussion (Downs, 1991). Taken together, the limited capacities of agendas and the volatility of issues force issue- and frame-sponsors (Carragee & Roefs, 2004) into a constant struggle to engineer the media agenda.

If we take this mechanism for granted, we need to devote our attention to the actors who both drive the issue and frame its meaning. According to Kriesi (Kriesi, 2004), we can distinguish three types of actors who seek to set the media agenda. Due to their central position, actors in political decision-making processes, such as governments and parliaments, apply top down strategies and are usually successful issue and frame promoters. For the opposing group, Kriesi (Kriesi, 2004: 189f.) coined the term challengers. They are defined as marginalized actors who do not have an institutionalized access to political power. In addition to their

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1 The term agenda-building is used as synonymous with the term media agenda-setting, which is often used in the media effects tradition of communication research (Rogers & Dearing, 1988).
remote position in the political system, challengers stand out by their communicative goals and action repertoires (Tilly, 1999). In particular, they draw public attention and mobilize support for their interpretation of a problem by using bottom up strategies to push for media recognition and political support. In civil society, challengers are generally found at the periphery of the political system. The third category of actors includes members of the media per se. Since their access to the resource of public attention has already been granted, they are in a privileged situation (Neidhardt, 1994). For the most part, both online and offline media implement strategies of issue selection and framing. They also choose actors with whom to side in the promotion of any given issue or frame; thus, they are not only platforms but they also become actors, which take a side in conflicts (Rucht, 2004a). Due to the processes of inter-media agenda-setting, some media outlets are more influential than others in their own agenda- and frame-setting capacities (Mathes & Pfetsch, 1991).

Actors pursue two goals with their strategies of media agenda-building (Neidhardt, 1994): to draw or to avoid public and political attention regarding their specific issue; and, if an issue is set on the agenda, to promote convincing frames with respect to the underlying problem, its origins, and solutions (Entman, 1993, 2004; Gerhards, 1992). The media to which the strategies are addressed have several options (Wolfsfeld, 1997). They may either obey the top down strategies of the decision makers or react to the bottom up strategies of the challengers. A third option for the media is to act as “semi-honest brokers” (Wolfsfeld, 1997: 69), which give voice to the authorities as well as the challengers. However, we know from empirical studies that the traditional mass media are oriented towards the political establishment and display a bias in favor of the political decision makers. This elite focus is not only proven with respect to processes of indexing in American and German foreign war coverage (Bennett, 1990; Maurer, Vogelsang, Weiß, & Weiß, 2008), but also with respect to media voices in European politics (Adam, 2007b; Gerhards, Offerhaus, & Roose, 2009; Koopmans & Pfetsch, 2006). Wolfsfeld (Wolfsfeld, 1997) maintains that the media’s role as advocates of the powerless is rather the exception than the norm.

Media agenda-building is not a uniform process; it differs between countries, issue fields, and media outlets. Kriesi (Kriesi, 2004: 200), for example, argues that the conditions of the political (for instance the type of government and governance, the type of the party system, and the structure of interest mediation) and the media (for instance the degree of political parallelism, as well as the commercial and political logic) context, decisively shape the strategies involved in the mobilization of public opinion in a given country. For instance, the institutional context in political systems impacts the political opportunity structure of protest movements.

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2 Since these actors rely less on bottom-up strategies, for purposes of this paper, we do not regard business actors as challengers.
and the visibility and openness of the public arena for political challengers like activists or NGOs (Ferree, Gamson, Gerhards, & Rucht, 2002). The conditions in the media system are relevant since they also shape the media agenda. In this case, for example, the degree of commercialization, which has been linked to different journalistic styles (Benson & Hallin, 2007), different levels of quality in the information (Curran, Lyengar, Lund, & Salovaara-Moring, 2009) and differences in the usage of sound and image bites by the journalists (Esser, 2008).

In addition to the individual conditions of both the national media and politics, the strategies behind media agenda-building (Kriesi, 2004: 200) are also closely linked to the nature of the issue. Issue-specific factors are germane to understanding variations in agenda-building within individual countries. For instance, issue-specific conflict configurations in a country determine the type of discourse coalitions that surround an issue, the networking of those concerned with the issue, and their mobilization strategies (Adam, 2007a, 2007b). Finally, agenda-building may vary between different media outlets. Here we note that agenda-building processes also vary with respect to the political color of issue promoters and their ties into the media system. Due to political parallelism in the media system, leftist challengers have a better opportunity to foster agenda-building processes through media with a left alignment; whereas the contrary holds true for conservative/nationalistic challengers (Lüter, 2004). Thus, depending on the nature of the media outlet, different sets of experts are featured (Hagen, 1992; Kepplinger, 1989).

2.2 Research on online communication and agenda-building

The introduction of new modes of communication through the internet leads us to revisit what we already know about agenda-building as explicated through the research on traditional media. The introduction of online communication to the media mix has brought up the question of whether the established patterns of agenda building remain for online communication and whether and how traditional media agenda building changes because of the internet. Compared to the press, radio, and television the qualities are very different for online communication as a supplier of issues and frames to public debate. Thus, the interaction of online and offline communication becomes a crucial consideration. Two variables are relevant to this discussion: First, online communication has become an important channel for challengers to get their messages out not just to their supporters but also to the general public (Baringhorst, Kneip, & Niesyto, 2009; van de Donk, et al., 2004). Second, for a wider political impact, we maintain that the communication of challengers in any given arena still needs to be taken up by traditional mass media (Rucht, 2004a, 2004b). After all, traditional mass media still dominates the public sphere (Habermas, 2006); they expand the scope of
attention and contention (Cobb, Ross, & Ross, 1976), and they grant challengers a platform for their issues and frames (Zhou & Moy, 2007).

The main arguments in the literature on the challenging capacity of online communication refers to the decentralized architecture as well as the capacity and space for new communicators, coalitions, and issue centered communication (Neuberger, 2009). It is above all these networks, which increase peripheral actors’ opportunity for greater visibility both on- and off-line (Koopmans & Zimmermann, 2003). Moreover, online communication also provides alternative information and thus challenges the status of traditional media; it thereby offers social movements new possibilities to mobilize and coordinate offline activities (Smith, 2000) and these movements have in turn been important in shaping the further development of the internet (de Wilde, 2003). Eventually, these sometimes “subterranean” (Wright, 2004: 80) channels of communication affect traditional participatory aspects of the political process, in particular when online networks successfully promote permanent campaigns and manage to communicate their ideas, counter-expertise, and frames, from their desktops to offline media (Bennett, 2004). Since the political debate is still carried by traditional media, online communication unfolds its full political potential through spill-over processes (e.g., Zhou & Moy, 2007). Consequently, the critical link is the interplay and dynamics between online and offline communication and the nature of the spill-over of issues and frames. From the point of view of democratic theory, two types of spill-over are particularly interesting: Direct spill-overs occur when messages from the discourse of challenger networks are selected by journalists of traditional media. As Baringhorst (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 specialized 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.

Studies that systematically analyze the linkage between online communication 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. Nonetheless, from a democratic theory perspective, spill-overs in the other direction are more significant. They allow us to

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3 In their study of more than 90 million online articles on political issues, Leskovec et al. (Leskovec, Backstrom, & Kleinberg, 2009) find “that about 3.5% 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, Kaid, & Pfau, 2003; Oegema, Kleinnijenhuis, Anderson, & Hoof, 2008).
understand under which conditions online communication actually lives up to its democratic potential.

The research that informs our paper can be distinguished according to the types of actors involved in the communications discourse. First, there are studies that focus on the role of individual actors, i.e., ‘netizen’ activity in blogs, for/or social networks for triggering spill-overs into traditional media (Fuchs, 2007; Matzat, 2005; Mesch, 2007; Piotrowski, 2006). Of particular interest is the work by Zhou and Moy (2007), who show 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. Zhou and Moy (2007) and Peng (2005) not only find spill-over, but also subsequent changes in political communication modes. They additionally link these spill-overs 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 & Moy, 2007). Similarly, in the case of Korea, Lee (2005) shows that online fora provoked an online counter public sphere, but more importantly that it fed into offline protest movements. Finally, a study on Israel Vaisman (2009) does not support the view that blogs—namely Hebrew left-wing blogs—affect traditional mass media. Unlike most American political blogs, which subscribe to the norms of mainstream journalism, Israeli political blogs challenge mainstream journalism and consequently are largely ignored by it. Instead, blogs respond to the exclusion from coverage through bypassing the media and seeking direct access to politicians in order to generate public action.

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 (Baringhorst, Kneip, & Niesyto, 2007; Gillan, 2009; Lester & Hutchins, 2009; Richards & Heard, 2005). 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 & Hutchins, 2009) find that the spill-over from online communication to traditional media was a successful purposely planned political strategy. The communicative strategy used the traditional media’s power in political communication to provoke political change. Thus, the spill-over from online media to offline media pushed the issue onto the national political agenda.

### 2.3 Research desiderates

Quite a number of studies challenge the role of established political actors in causing spill-over processes to the offline world, primarily during campaigns (Gonzalez-Bailon, 2009; Os, Wester, & Jankowski, 2007; Stromer-Galley, 2000). Since we are interested in the challenging potential of the web, this strand of research is of minor relevance to our purpose.
Agenda-building—even if it runs through online communication—remains context-sensitive. However, until this point, studies that seek to understand the spill-over from online to offline communication have so far seldom taken the conditional nature of agenda-building into account. Moreover, numerous of these studies have focused on non-democratic regimes. Consequently, our first research desiderate relates to the systematic incorporation of context factors that allow us to understand the conditions for the issue and frame the dynamics between online and offline communication. In this case, we assume that the context factors identified by traditional agenda-building research also prove to be crucial for online-offline dynamics. We therefore need to develop the requisite hypotheses on how context factors on the country level, i.e., the structure of political and media systems (including the new media), on the issue level, as well as on the level of single media outlets, affect spill-over processes. We must additionally identify specific characteristics of online networks that make spill-over processes more likely. These research desiderates call for comparative research designs.

A second research desiderate relates to the nature of online communication, which precedes spill-over into traditional media. Thus far, research has concentrated on the spill-over potential of specific means of online communication: some studies find indicators that individualized forms of online communication cause spill-overs; while others point to collective actors as spill-over agents. We, conversely claim that the impact potential of online communication is underestimated in studies that look at only one single blog (Drezner & Farrell, 2008; Farrell & Drezner, 2008; Oegema, et al., 2008; Sweetser, Golan, & Wanta, 2008), forum, or website (see for the same conclusion Zimmermann, 2007). Online debates, campaigns, e-petitions, etc., are always embedded in further reaching spatial and historical communication structures (Koopmans, 2004). The goal for our research is therefore to study the interlinked structure of online communication. Consequently, we assume that the type of online communication that binds together such an online network is irrelevant: online networks might link classical web 1.0 applications as well as blogs, video-portals, fora, etc., which are typically summarized under the label web 2.0. We refer to all of these instances of online communication as “webpages.” We expect that such online networks, which grow up around a given issue, form coalitions, or promote frames, are therefore true agents of potential spill-over effects. In order to assess the characteristics of such interlinked communications, one needs to develop adequate tools and methods, which allow examining the online communication of challengers and the resulting network issues.

3. Pathways to the study of online communication’s potential for agenda-building — hypotheses and methods
3.1. Hypotheses on the conditions for online-offline spill-overs

Under what conditions are the processes of spill-over from challengers’ online communication to traditional mass media more (or less) likely? Since the bulk of research shows that the impact runs most often from traditional mass media to online communication, we know that such processes are the exception. In order to avoid that our research endeavor resembles a search for a needle in a haystack it is all the more important to specify the conditions under which such online-offline spill-over might occur. Hence, we distinguish four types of hypotheses: (a) hypotheses on the effects of specific types of online networks; (b) hypotheses on the effects of different media outlets; (c) hypotheses on the effects of country characteristics; and (d) hypotheses on the effects of issue characteristics. The first two hypotheses directly refer to the nature of online and offline communication, whereas the latter two assume that there are macro level factors, which indirectly shape this online-offline dynamic.

(a) Hypotheses on the effects of specific types of online networks: Online networks arise around issues. This idea follows the reflection that we do not find a public sphere per se, but that such a sphere is divided into several issue publics (e.g., Peters, 1999; R. Rogers, 2002). Within the arena of such a public issue, various challengers are active in promoting their ideas and getting dynamically linked with other challengers in the internet environment. In the online world, this linkage becomes visible in the hyperlink structure of the internet. Interlinked actors may well form coalitions. In the political realm, we speak of advocacy coalitions bound together by common values and positions (Sabatier, 1998). To influence the political process, coalitions need either institutionalized access to decision-making or they need to be successful in constructing a public policy image (Baumgartner & Jones, 1993). Since challengers lack this institutionalized access to the political process, they are forced to use their coalitions to re-shape the policy image if they want to influence the political process.

Consequently, coalitions\(^5\) become particularly important for challengers if they are to infuse their issues into a wider debate. One of the mechanisms for doing this is framing. In the public sphere, frames are patterns of perception, interpretation, selection, emphasis and exclusion through which actors organize discourse (Gitlin, 1980: 7) and define what the debate is actually about (Gamson, 1989). 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. Through alternative framing, challengers focus on, articulate,

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\(^5\) 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.
and transform contentious issues. We expect that those challenger coalitions that succeed in
developing strong issues and dominant frames in the online world have the highest likelihood
of triggering spill-over into the traditional mass media. We additionally assume that the dy-
namics 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 under study
high on their agenda (Hypothesis 1a). 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
(Hypothesis 1b). Third, strong frame-sponsors (Carragee & Roefs, 2004) are involved in the
coalition. We assume that coalitions formed around prominent challengers more easily pro-
duce spill-over effects because they accelerate the issue or frame career (Hypothesis 1c).
These actors have already started to fulfill the news value of prominence; become estab-
lished sources of information; and are therefore already being used as a source by journal-
ists researching news stories. We expect two types of actors to serve as accelerators: online
media and established actors. Coalitions that include online outlets of traditional media or
specialized online media have better chances of being heard than coalitions that consist only
of challengers. Such coalitions can use online media as loud-speakers to attract the attention
of the traditional offline press. Beyond that, we also expect coalitions, which already link to
established political actors to be more likely to produce spill-overs.

(b) Hypotheses on the effects of different media outlets: It is not only the supply side, i.e. the
type of online communication, but also the openness on the receiving side that influences the
likelihood of spill-over processes. Based on their ideologies, we also know that different me-
dia outlets are open to different actors. On the side of the challengers, we can distinguish
those concerned with traditional left-wing concerns, such as the protection of the environ-
ment or the support for the less privileged (e.g., women, migrants, and workers) from those
sponsoring right-wing ideology (e.g., nationalists). Due to political parallelism in the media
system, leftist challengers have a better opportunity of fostering agenda-building processes
through media with a left alignment; whereas the contrary holds true for conserva-
tive/nationalistic challengers (Lüter, 2004). Thus Hypothesis 2a claims that depending on
the political leaning of the media outlet, we can expect different challenger coalitions to be
successful (Hagen, 1992; Kepplinger, 1989).

Mass media systems rest on the premise that different media outlets and forums appeal to
different demographic audiences and therefore different outlets are open and responsive to
actors on different political levels. On the side of the challengers, we can distinguish coal-
itions that principally include actors that are active on the local level (e.g., the local action
committee to protect a city’s environment) from those that work on the national or even international level (e.g., Greenpeace). We expect local and regional media outlets to be more open for these local groups; whereas national (and a few international) media more strongly connected to the more institutionalized challengers on the national or international level. **Hypothesis 2b** thereby claims that depending on the geographical scope of the media outlet, we expect different challenger coalitions to be successful.

(c) **Hypotheses on the effects of country characteristics**: Agenda-building processes do not take place in a vacuum. Instead, within the context of individual countries, it has been proven to influence these processes. We distinguish countries with respect to (a) their openness of political structures towards challengers, and (b) their speed/willingness to take over online communication and the newly developing communication innovations. These two variables bring together two important characteristics of the political structure and the communication landscape within a country. However, we are well aware that further variables might be needed to understand the impact of the specific contexts within a given country.

Researchers that study the openness of political structures toward challengers distinguish between countries that are either corporatist and pluralist (Lijphart, 1999). Corporatist systems are characterized by few, but large interest groups, that often form national peak organizations, which regularly are consulted by the political system and which are involved in so-called binding “tripartite pacts” between political systems, unions, employer organizations, etc. Such corporatist systems rely on an “ideology of social partnership” (Katzenstein, 1985: 32, 157). Today corporatism is not only analyzed in its traditional labor-management realm, but also in relationship to new postindustrial issues such as the 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 characterized (Lijphart, 1999) by a multitude of small NGOs, without or at least with only weak peak organizations 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 challengers in pluralist countries more strongly use online communication to trigger spill-over processes than those in corporatist countries (**Hypothesis 3a**). Specifically, spill-over between challengers is more likely in countries with less opportunity for institutionalized participation.
In addition, we distinguish countries according to their speed/willingness to take over online communication and other newly developing communication innovations. Diffusion processes can be described by an S-curve: at the beginning there are few adopters, the innovators and early adopters, whereas later in the process a given innovation will spread rapidly until it reaches the last adopter group, the laggards (for a summary Schenk, 2002: 383ff.). Out of this typology, we expect countries that can be described as innovators, respectively early adopters, regarding the take-over of innovations in online communication to have a more online-focused communication culture, which makes spill-over processes from online to offline more likely (Hypothesis 3b). In these countries, challengers invest more resources in their online communication strategies and journalists more closely monitor the web in their search for news.

Thus far, we have proposed a classical, country-comparative research setting. Nonetheless, online communication has the potential to reach significantly beyond any given national border. We also know that language regions limit the international character of online communication. If this is true, we might observe challengers’ online networks to converge within language regions. Consequently, we might expect to find similarities in online networks and the resulting patterns of spill-overs within language regions (Hypothesis 3c). From a theoretical point of view, we cannot decide whether language regions or country contexts more strongly influence online-offline spill-overs. Therefore, we suggest developing a research design that allows testing both levels, namely national audiences and language regions.

(d) Hypotheses on the effects of issue characteristics: Following the idea of issue audiences, we are well aware that online-offline dynamics might be influenced by the characteristics of the issue under study. As no one study can take into account all issue fields, it is important to systematically select issue fields for the analysis. Therefore, we claim that only those issue fields where challengers are active and where debates can be connected to larger conflicts in society have a spill-over potential (Hypothesis 4a). In this respect, we have to exclude very technical issues and issues that cannot be framed with respect to policy questions from our research agendas. Such issues do not have the potential to be moved by communication efforts. Instead, such issues are handled in consultation settings.

Beyond that, if spill-over does occur, we can distinguish between the issues according to the consequences. For issues that are well established in traditional media as well as policy agenda, challengers might influence the perspectives and frames under which certain problems are 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 favor of one coalition. In contrast, for latent issues that are neither publicly discussed nor prominently featured on the political agenda, we might expect a general spill-over of the issue per se as being induced by online networks opening up a new framing contest. **Hypothesis 4b** therefore differentiates issues according to the expected type of spill-over: for established issues successful challengers influence the framing contests; whereas, for latent issues, they put the issue as such on the agenda.

Figure 1 visualizes our research proposition in pointing out the conditional factors that impact spill-over from challengers’ online networks to traditional mass media. It clearly shows our four types of conditional factors: the two communication-related factors (type of online network and type of offline media outlet) as well as the two macro factors (the type of country and the type of issue field).

**Figure 1: The conditional nature of online-offline dynamics**
3.2. Methods for use in the study of online-offline spill-overs

To observe the dynamics of agenda-building, from challengers’ online communication to traditional mass media, we suggest comparing online issue networks with the debates on the same issues in traditional mass media. In order to identify the effects of a spill-over, we need to observe whether, over time, a change in online challenger coalitions regarding issue salience, frame strength, and actor composition/connectedness is followed by challengers, their issues, and frames, showing a noticeable gain in prominence in the traditional mass media. Hence, we may find two patterns: First, the challengers themselves become prominent as sources and actors in traditional mass media debates. Second, challenger issues and frames become prominent in traditional mass media debate while the challengers are not given credit as the source. This is the case when a challenger’s issue or position is voiced by established actors in the traditional media.

In order to observe such spill-over effects, we must deal with two challenges. First, we have to find appropriate ways to describe and measure the interlinked communication of challenger websites and the resulting networks. We label this first parameter the “online challenge.” Second, we have 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 following, we will present tentative solutions of how both of these challenges could be handled.

(a) Coping with the online challenge: In the analysis of the effects of online communication on traditional media, it is improbable to expect spill-over to be derived from any one specific blog or one singular news service on the internet. Instead, an observable impact is more likely to result from the interlinked communication of various actors’ communication within the net. To study such interlinked communication, we draw on an online-specific tool, the issue crawler (see http://issuecrawler.net/, http://www.govcom.org/Issuecrawler_instructions.htm). Issue crawler is a software tool, developed by Richard Rogers and collaborators, which locates and visualizes issue networks on the web. Issue networks are networks of organizations, their key documents, events, key blogs, etc., around a particular issue. Consequently, it is a common issue that defines who is in the issue network.

Figure 2 shows how we extract challengers’ issue networks from the abundance of online communication available on the internet. In a first step, the researchers need to define the seed URLs, of challenger webpages, from which to start the web crawl. This step is critical because it determines the quality of the search results. For identifying the most important
challenger webpages regarding the issues under study, we propose utilizing several research methods. We suggest combining a Google search, which is based on a thesaurus description of the issues under study. To finally select the challenger websites, we combine the hitlist results with expert interviews and a literature review. In any case, we advocate taking only the challenger webpages as source seed for the web crawl. In a second step, one needs to put the selected seed URLs into the issue crawler. The issue crawler now follows the outlinks from the specified pages; yet, it only crawls those which link to a webpage that is concerned with the specified issue field. In order to include those pages that receive at least two links from the seeds, we propose using a co-link analysis when the seed URLs are crawled. This two-link requirement helps to identify networks, which are more closely interlinked when compared to using a crawl routine that captures all issue-specific outlinks of the seed URLs (‘snowball analysis’). In order to increase the depth of the networks, the issue crawler is allowed to perform this co-link procedure a maximum of three times. This means that beginning with the starting seeds, three page levels are included. Third, the output of such a crawl analysis contains a list of URLs as well as the hyperlink structure between these URLs. In these issue networks, three types of actors can be included: challengers (which are by definition included since they served as seed URLs), online media, and established political actors. The latter two are expected to accelerate the spill-over processes from challengers.

In a fourth step, one has to systematically analyze the resulting issue networks obtained from these web crawls. Hence, two methods are indicative: (a) network analysis helps to determine the structural features of the issue networks, (b) content analysis of the identified URLs is relevant to the study of the content, i.e., which actors advocate specific positions/frames within these issue networks. A network analysis of the hyperlinks allows us to determine whether a given network is strongly connected and therefore forms a coalition at all. In the content analysis, we focus on three main variables: issue salience, frame strength, and type of frame-sponsor—which have all been hypothesized to impact spill-over processes. Since it is hard to find a network constellation against which to judge issue salience in the online world, we study salience as it relates to an organization. Here we can distinguish whether our issues are discussed on the opening page of a website or whether we only find them on subsequent levels. To study frame strength, we analyze the content of central webpages within our issue network and ask whether actors advocate similar frames and positions on their webpages. Regarding the actors in the online world, we study the type of actors putting forward their demands. We are especially interested in whether the online coalitions of challengers include online media and established political actors. Both actor types are expected to accelerate spill-over processes. Beyond these content analytical descriptions of frame
sponsors, we can add network centrality measures to describe the prominence of the actors within the issue networks. Our methodological approach is summarized in figure 2.

(b) Coping with the causality challenge: The observation that challengers or their frames are salient in traditional mass media does not necessarily mean that online communication has played a role unless we establish a link between our independent variable (i.e., challengers’ online communication) and the dependent variable (issue debates in traditional mass media). Therefore, we need to specify the criteria (Stegmüller, 1983: 538ff), which help us to determine whether the issue/frame or even the actor has moved in the hypothesized direction. The first criterion refers to a meaningful theory, which establishes an influence of the independent variable(s) on the dependent variable. We have argued that online communication has become important for challengers attempting to influence the mass media agenda. Beyond this, journalists in countries throughout the world use the internet to search for new information. If we bring these two sides together, we can expect online-offline spill-over. Beyond, such spill-over has—although less frequently than the other way round—already be empirically observed.

The second criterion requires the independent variable to precede the dependent variable in time. Consequently, if online communication causes spill-over regarding issues, or frames, we must be able to observe these frames/issues first in the online world. On the contrary, spill-over from offline to online communication takes its starting point in mass media’s coverage. In order to control for the time dimension, one has to plan for a continuous study design, which includes two data sources: a continuous analysis of the traditional mass media agenda and a continuous analysis of online issue networks. Since it is not feasible to conduct issue crawls every day (a single crawl can take as long as a week) and since we expect some form of stability in the issue networks of organization webpages, we suggest to at least study issue networks once per month.

The third criterion requires that we find an empirically significant relation between the dependent and independent variable and that this relation is controlled for other relevant factors of influence. To find such a significant relation, we have to (a) collect online and offline data in a comparable manner, (b) systematically connect both types of data, and (c) control for other potential factors. As we have already elaborated on how to empirically measure the interlinked online communication: in the following, we demonstrate how to collect data on the mass media. Comparable to selecting issue-specific online networks, we select issue-specific articles/reports in the mass media. For that reason, we seek a broad sample of mass media, which includes left- and right-leaning as well as local, regional, and national outlets
(see Hypothesis 2). Since we also focus on our three core variables: actors, their frames/positions, as well as issue salience: The analysis of mass media material is closely tied to the content analysis of the webpages. To determine the nature of spill-over, we need to define a coding unit below the article level that captures actor-frame sequences like in the claims analysis approach (Koopmans & Statham, 1999; Rucht, et al., 2008).

To systematically connect both types of data, we suggest using statistical methods that allow predicting media coverage based on the preceding characteristics of online networks. Separately analyzing each point in time, we thus rely on regression analysis. However, time series analysis is a more appropriate method for studying spill-over processes over the course of time (Granger causality). Consequently, controlling for alternative factors that might also explain agenda building is a delicate task. Many potential factors could be relevant here—one of the most important being real-world events such as demonstrations, press conferences, or political decision-making. To, at the least, get a grasp of these alternative explanations; one has to register such events if they are reported in the traditional mass media. Generally, this approach of controlling has its limitations, but full control of alternative factors is hardly possible. Figure 2 summarizes the methods that we propose to use for studying online-offline dynamics.
4. Conclusion

Thus far, most researchers interested in political communication have focused on the role of traditional mass media. Providing an observable advantage to the elites, these channels of communication produce a “cumulative inequality” (Wolfsfeld, 1997: 24) giving voice to those who also have access to institutionalized processes of decision making. Online communication has the potential to challenge this media-elite linkage. Hence, we claim that previously marginalized 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. However, while the normative assumption seems to be easy to justify, it appears to be much harder to understand the conditions of how these challengers get a chance to enter the public debate. From this starting point, the specific mechanisms and dynamics of their inclusion become a substantial desiderate of research on the public sphere if we want to assess the democratic potential of online communication.
In outlining a research program that focuses on the online communication and potential impact of challenger specific communications—we assume that no single challenger on its own, but the online coalitions of those challengers are the true agents of change. If these coalitions manage to forcefully promote their specific issues and frames, they might indeed trigger spill-over into the offline media. We also assumed that for a full fledged issue or frame career, which does become politically relevant it is crucial that the traditional media jump on the proverbial bandwagon and take up the issue.

Against this background, the primary focus of this research is to investigate the online-offline linkage of political communication and to subsequently assess the conditions of potential spill-overs of challenger issues and frames onto the mass media agenda. What are the thresholds that the various 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? If we found an empirically grounded answer to these questions, we would be one step further in evaluating the inclusive potential of online communication and eventually the hopes and fears that are raised with respect to its democratic potential.

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 building, which asks how media-external actors shape the issue and frame the agenda in mass communication. The bulk of our research concentrates on traditional mass media. We argue that, provided the media landscape has undergone certain fundamental changes, these studies and findings might be outdated. Contemporary studies need to 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 mobilize (Baringhorst, et al., 2009; van de Donk, et al., 2004) and for journalists to use 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.
Second, research on political communication in the online world brings up new questions regarding the methodology of empirical media 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 we need to cope with them in order to answer our own substantial research questions. The intent of this paper 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 of these findings, we nonetheless feel that it has been a pressing need to frame these research questions and hypotheses, and to subsequently propose a toolbox with which to make a first step on the long course of action that needs to include empirical communication research dealing with online-offline dynamics.
References


