Images of Media Power: 
The Third-Person Effect and the Shaping of Political Attitudes

Bengt Johansson

We live in a society where the mass media plays an important role on almost every level. In political communication media theorists argue that the influence of the mass media has increased over time. This process can be characterized as the medialization of politics and this picture of modern politics views the mass media as extremely powerful. To a large extent the mass media seem to set up the political agenda, influences people’s pictures of politics and forces the politicians to play along with the media logic (Thompson 1995, Asp & Esaiasson 1997, Mancini & Swanson 1997). This picture is also nourished by the news media. Research show that media explanations dominate when journalists explain opinion changes and the outcome of elections (Schudson 1995, Johansson 2001). Michael Schudson writes about the “attribution error” among the news media, when it explains elections and president’s popularity. Journalists seek action-based rather than situation-based explanations of phenomena they want to understand. An example of this tendency is the media-image of Ronald Reagan as the Great Communicator with the public as an explanation to his legislative victories, even if there is weak support for such an explanation (Schudson 1995 133ff).

It’s easy to believe the picture of powerful mass media also dominates among the citizens. But is this the case? Do people have this idea of powerful mass media in politics? If we look closer to the question of media power on people’s attitudes, a long tradition of opinion research has shown how media impact is conditioned by a number of factors. These can be related to individual’s social- and demographic background and other sources of information, such as personal experience or interpersonal communication. Therefore belief in powerful media shouldn’t be taken for granted. Other questions in this context are if people believe their own political attitudes are shaped the same way as others and if people believe media is more important for other people’s political attitudes than for their own. This last remark connects to the concept of the third-person effect, which assumes that people tend to believe other people are more affected by potentially persuasive communication than themselves, which is the theoretical approach of this paper.

The Third-Person effect

The first time the concept of third-person effect is seen in media research was 1983. In his article ”The Third-Person Effect in Communication” W Phillips Davison writes about his own experiences and some smaller experiments. They all showed that people tend to believe media has a strong impact on other people’s beliefs and actions. At the same time people are convinced other people are more influenced by media than themselves (Davison 1983).

Research indicates ”abundant support” for third-person perception (Salwen 1998). At least two studies indicated that more than 90 percent of the respondents perceived greater impact on others than on themselves. In Perloff’s literature review from 1996, he concludes that 15 out of 16 studies support the third-person effect (Perloff 1996). Studies performed after Perloff’s overview supports these conclusions (Johansson 2000). The third-person effect involves two general hypotheses, which need to be discussed. The first one is the perceptual,
already mentioned. The other is the behavioral component predicting that the third-person perception will have consequences for people’s actions. The hypothesis predicting people’s beliefs in media power having behavioral implications is important. Without this connection the third-person effect will only be "an interesting perceptual phenomena" (Davison 1983). The behavioral component is not so frequently analyzed and enjoys less support. It also needs to be mentioned that there is no research on actual behavior. There is however a number of studies designed on how people combine the third-person effect and attitudes towards restriction and censorship: pornography (Gunther 1995), television-violence/pornography (Rojas, Shah & Faber 1996, Hoffner et al 1999, Salwen & Dupange 1999), rap-lyrics (McLeod, Eveland & Nathanson 1997), advertising (Salwen 1998, Shah, Faber & Youn 1999). The results are mixed but the general tendency supports the third-person effect as a behavioral component.

An important issue is if the third-person effect is caused by an overestimation of effects of others. It could also be a caused by an underestimation of effects on oneself. A number of studies have tried to answer this question. The results show the discrepancy between perceived effect on self and others depend on peoples tendency to believe others are more vulnerable to media messages than they are themselves (Cohen et al 1988, Lasorsa 1989, Perloff et al 1992, Gunther 1991, Price et al 1997). However, there is also research showing that the self-other discrepancy depends on an underestimation of effects on oneself (Cohen et al 1988, Gunther & Thorson 1992).

Another important task is to specify the conditions for third-person effects. The third-person effect implies one believes others are more influenced by media messages than one-self, but this is not a universal response to social influence. The perception tendency can be related to all components of a traditional communication-model: sender, channel, message and receiver. Several third-person effect studies suggest that the press or news media as opposed to the media, are different (Brosius & Engel 1996, Eveland et al 1999, Driscoll & Salwen 1997). Results show that individuals evaluate news as different from other genres. Brosius and Engel found the least third-person effect with television news. They argued the ostensibly truthful nature of news makes it more desirable (or less desirable) to believe than other genres. Whoever pays attention to the news and learns from it is considered well informed, and thus well educated. That is why the third-person effect is generally small there (Brosius & Engel 1996). Media credibility also seems to exert third-person effect. Gunther found the gap between perception of media effects on self and others being larger when story was attributed to a biased source (The National Enquirer), than to a more objective and credible one (The New York Times) (Gunther 1991).

The direction between the self-other discrepancy can also depend on the message. Research has also shown a reversed third-person effect, which indicates that people exert greater communication effects on themselves than on others when it is perceived to be beneficial to the self. According to Duck, Terry and Hogg (1995):

“People may be motivated to acknowledge the personal impact of messages that advocate beneficial and intelligent outcomes, enhancing self-esteem through the belief that they are more responsive than others to such messages” (p.306).

In the literature we also find recipient factors affecting the self-other perception. The importance of involvement has been related to third-person effects by Vallone et al (1985), Perloff (1989), Mutz (1989), Cohen & Davis (1991), Perloff et al (1992), Driscoll & Salwen (1997), Price et al (1997). Results show that third-person effects increase with ego-involvement and ego-involved individuals tend to believe the worst scenario. Effects of news
unfavorable to "self-interests" are overestimated and could be found in different contexts such as: the Palestine-Israeli conflict, the O.J. Simpson trial and news about Newt Gingrich (Vallone et al. 1985, Driscoll & Salwen 1997, Price et al. 1997).

Education and other related variables, such as self-perceived knowledge and self-perceived expertise have shown to be a predictor of third-person effects (Driscoll & Salwen 1997, Glynn & Ostman 1988, Gunther 1995, Lasorsa 1989, Mutz 1989, Rucinski & Salmon 1990, Salwen & Driscoll 1995, 1997, Tiedge et al 1991, Willnat 1996). The explanation brought forth is that there’s a view among higher educated people to see themselves as experts, which reduce estimates of personal vulnerability (Perloff 1996).

This explanation relates to self-enhancing bias, which seem to be an important explanation for third-person effects. There are different kinds of these self-flattering tendencies such as unrealistic optimism, illusory superiority and self-serving attributions. Education seem to produce illusory superiority which describes the tendency to define our relative position (and ourselves) in ways that makes us look better (more fortunate) than others (Gunther & Mundy 1993, Duck & Mullin 1995, Henriksen & Flora 1999).

Age has in some studies been an important recipient factor (Tiedge et al 1991). This may reflect an accessibility of social attitudes and confidence in one’s ability to resist influence attempts (Perloff 1996). Tiedge et al test different hypotheses on the relationship between age and the third-person effect. The first is that people gets more convinced they have developed alternative sources of information and perspective over time with which they can evaluate media effects and therefore tend to perceive lower effect on the self. Another hypothesis is that older people believe younger people are more vulnerable to media effects than themselves and believe the effects on others are greater. These tendencies can go in the same direction but not necessarily. Tiedge et al found a positive relationship between age and the third-person effect, and found that older respondents perceived small media-effects on their own beliefs and behaviors (Tiedge et al 1991).

As a summary one can point a major support for the perceptual tendency and a moderate support for the behavioral. Research also indicates that the phenomena are conditioned by a number of factors related to the sender, channel, message and receivers. Perloff concludes in his overview what is behind the third-person effect.

The effect may be due to the operation of media schemas, inaccessibility of knowledge about media effects on the self, and a need to assume that the self is unaffected by communications in order to preserve self-esteem or control over the social environment (Perloff 1993:178)

**Hypotheses and Research Question**

A limitation of third-person effect research is that it only has been related to the impact of mass media. Interesting is therefore to see how the tendency to believe other people are more vulnerable is related to non-mediated sources of information. Can the tendency be found individuals perception of the influence of personal experience and interpersonal communication, or is it only related to attitudes towards the mass media? This study focus on the perceived role of mass media and other non-mediated information sources in the shaping of political attitudes. The study investigated seven hypotheses related to the third-person perceptual component and one research question.
The first hypothesis tested the perceptual third-person component.

**H1**
Respondents will judge mediated information-sources to exert greater influence on other people compared to them selves.

According to the literature, people tend to believe they are more influenced by social messages if it is perceived to be beneficial to the self or when it makes statements that give rise to the perception that it is smart to be influenced by the message. Previous research found weak third-person effects or even reversed third-person effects when messages are beneficial to the self or if the media channel or genre is considered to be credible. We should therefore find strong reversed third-person effects when people judge the influence of personal experience for the shaping of political attitudes. To be influenced by personal experience is probably seen by most people as a more desirable way to attitude formation compared to the mass media. To learn from personal experience indicates that you are in control of your thoughts and actions. A reversed third-person effect hypothesis predicts:

**H2**
Respondents will judge personal experience to exert greater influence on themselves than on other people.

Research has shown that credibility judgement of the communicator also affects the third-person perception. Perceived source-bias is shown to increase third-person effects. The third hypothesis predicted the following:

**H3**
Third-person effects will be positively correlated for information sources with less credibility, such as political advertising.

There are also differences in how television and newspapers is judged. Television is generally seen as a more powerful media than newspapers and television also has lower credibility than television. This leads to the fourth hypothesis:

**H4**
Third-person effects are stronger related to television than to newspapers.

Ego-involvement (and/or strong attitudes about the issue) is in research shown to correspond with perception of a source as negatively biased. This perception will in turn increase the discrepancy between perception of media effects on self and others. The hypothesis will therefore predict:

**H5**
Involvement will be a positive predictor of third-person perception

Education is also a strong predictor of the third-person perception. Education should here be seen as a measure of expertise or self-perceived expertise. Education is thought to provide people with confidence in their superior knowledge and therefore they are less vulnerable than other people are:

**H6**
Education will be a positive predictor of third-person perception.
Age also seem to be correlated to third-person effects even if research show mixed results. With growing age people might judge themselves to be less influenced by the media and therefore the discrepancy will increase between the perception of effects on self and others:

**H7**
Age will be positively related to third-person perception.

Gender has been related to the third-person perception and shown to might predict significant self-other discrepancy (Howitt et al 1998, Henriksen & Flora 1999, David & Johnson 1998). Why these differences between men and women occur has not yet been theorized. A research question were therefore formulated:

**RQ**
How is gender related to third-person effects?

**Method**

The survey *National SOM* (Society, Opinion, Mass media) is carried out every autumn in the form of a questionnaire mailed to 2,800 randomly selected individuals in Sweden between 15 and 85 years. The central questions addressed in the survey are attitudes about mass media, politics and public services. The survey is a result of an interdisciplinary collaboration between the Institute for Journalism and Mass Communication, the Department of Political Science and the School of Public Administration at Göteborg University.

The *National SOM 2001* was carried out in November – December 2001 and 69 percent of the respondents answered the questionnaire. To control the quality of the sample demographics are compared between the Swedish population (using official statistics) and the respondents. These comparisons show small differences between the sample and the population: women tend to answer more than men, young people (15-29) and very old (80-85) are not so likely to answer as others. We also find that people in big cites are less likely to answer the questionnaire. These differences are on the whole rather small (3-5 percent) and the conclusion must be that the sample is a good reflection of the Swedish population (Nilsson 2002).

**Measures**

*Effects of mediated and non-mediated factors.* Respondents were asked two sets of questions about their perceptions of the importance of personal experience, interpersonal communication, television, press and political advertising for the formation of political attitudes. In the first set the respondents judged how important these information-sources were for their own political attitudes. In the second the respondents judged the perceived importance of the information-sources on other people in general. The respondents answered the questions using a scale of 4 (very important) to 1 (very unimportant).

To measure third-person perception a ”perceptual bias” transformation variable was created by computing the difference between each individual’s other-scale and self-scale. Perceptual bias ranged from 3 (4 on others minus 1 on self) to – 3 (1 on self minus 4 on others). Positive values indicated more effect on others than on oneself, or third-person perceptual bias. Negative values indicated more effect on oneself than on perceived others, or first-person perceptual bias. This is also called reversed third-person effect. A zero value indicated no
perceptual bias. In the regression models these variables were computed to one third-person effect variable and one reversed third-person effect variable ranging from 0 to 3.

*Education* was measured by a question, which included a number of different types of education levels. These were computed into three categories: Low education (elementary school), middle high education (high school) and high education (college/university).

*Political interest* can be seen as an indicator of involvement. It was measured by a question on interest in politics ranging from 1 (very limited interest) to 4 (very strong interest).

*Age* - the age-variable was computed into four categories (15-29, 30-49, 50-64 and 65-85).

The *Gender*-variable was based on the respondent own replies, which were completed with sample-data if necessary. Male=1, Female=2.

**Results**

The results indicated strong support for the third-person effect (H1). Even if a majority believed that other people weren’t more influenced by television, newspapers and political advertising the third-person effect was significant for each item (p < .001). The results also showed that the third-person effect could be related to interpersonal communication and personal experience. The third-person effect related to personal experience was however weaker, but nevertheless significant. The results indicated that the third-person effect isn’t just a media effect perception, as it also seemed to have implications for perception of the importance of other sources of information.

The second hypothesis (H2) predicted a stronger reversed third-person effect related to personal experience. This hypothesis was also supported by the results. The strongest reversed third-person effect was related to personal experience. Reversed third-person effects were overall much weaker for other information-sources and related to political advertising there were hardly any reversed third-person effects found at all. Respondent’s view on the importance of personal experience wasn’t totally reversed to other sources of information, even if the third-person effect was weaker and the reversed effect was stronger. There were still a significant third-person perception connected to the influence of personal experience.
When the third-person effect was related to different mediated information-sources the results supported the third hypothesis (H3). The third-person effect was stronger for political advertising, which probably is seen as more biased compared to television and newspapers. There was however no significant difference between the third-person perception for television and newspapers. H4 is therefore rejected by the results. People do not believe other peoples political attitudes are more influenced by television than newspapers compared to themselves.

When the third-person perception was related to different predictors such as political interest (involvement), education, age and gender, the hypotheses got mixed support.

Education is in the literature a strong predictor of third-person effects. This was also the case here. The fifth hypothesis (H5) was therefore supported by the results with one exception. There was no relationship between education and the third-person effects for newspapers. The explanation might be newspapers perceived higher credibility, which weakens third-person perceptions.

However, the relationship goes in different directions depending on information-source. The third-person effect gets stronger with higher education for interpersonal communication, television, and political advertising. When it comes to personal experience the relationship was the opposite. Here the results showed that people with lower education seemed to believe others were more influenced by their own experience than themselves.
Table 1. Regressions Predicting Estimated Effects on Self, Others, Third-Person Effect and Reversed Third-Person Effect.

### Personal experience

<table>
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<tr>
<td>R</td>
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### Interpersonal communication

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<td>R</td>
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### TV

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### Political Advertising

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<td>0.21</td>
<td>0.24</td>
<td>0.16</td>
<td>0.04</td>
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Comments: The measures in the regression-models are beta-coefficients. A common problem in multiple-regression analyses is different number of categories of the independent variables. To solve this problem the independent variables were computed to variables ranging from 0 to 1. An example of this transformation: Age-variable with four categories will have the values (0, 0.33, 0.67, 1). The beta-coefficients estimate the effect on the dependent variable of moving from the lowest value to the highest value on the independent variables.

Are these relationships due to the fact that respondents minimize effects on the self or maximize effects on others? The results showed that people with higher education seemed to believe interpersonal communication and television had greater effects on others. The first-person effect showed no significant perceived differences between education levels. The differences were instead found in perceived effects on others. These tendencies were not however valid for political advertising. Here the third-person effect was instead perceived smaller effects on the self.
The hypothesis predicting involvement to cause third-person effects (H5) got weak support by the results. Only for perceived influence of personal experience we find third-person effects, which shows that individuals with limited interest in politics assume others political attitudes are formed by personal experience to a greater extent than for themselves. Behind this perception the results showed that people with strong political interest perceive greater effect of personal experience both on the self and others. The greater self-other discrepancy for individuals with limited political interest depends on that they underestimated effects on the self. A reversed third-person effect was found related to the role of newspapers. Respondents with strong interest in politics seemed to believe newspaper being more important for the shaping of their own political attitudes than for others.

Age has been seen as a predictor of the third-person effect in previous research. The theory proposes people with growing age might judge themselves to be less influenced by the media. This hypothesis got no support by the results (H7). There was however a third-person effect related to age, but it went in the opposite direction. For television, newspapers and political advertising younger people tended to believe these information-sources influenced others more than themselves. Both the self and others-perception was related to age. Younger believed themselves and others to be more influenced by all information-sources compared to older people. When it comes to mediated sources younger seemed to make a larger discrepancy between oneself and others. The results did not support the findings of Tiedge et al (1991), where growing age was positively related to third-person perception.

The results also showed a rather weak relationship between gender and the third-person perception (RQ). There are however some significant results worth mentioning. Men believe they are more influenced by personal experience and that other people are more influenced by television. This indicate that men compared to women has a view on attitude formation where their own picture of politics is more dependent on personal experience and that others more depend on mass media.

Discussion
This study focused on how people believe other people’s political attitudes are shaped and examined how the hypothesis of third-person effect is related to non-mediated sources of information like personal experience and interpersonal communication. It also presented results on perceived impact of different media such as television, press and political advertising. The results showed general support for the third-person effect perception. Mediated information-sources and interpersonal communication were believed to influence others more compared to oneself. On the other hand personal experience was believed to be more important to oneself than to other people. If people judge how political attitudes are shaped they tend to believe their own picture of politics is more dependent on personal experience. Other people’s political attitudes are seen to be more dependent on mass media or people in their social environment. The results also supported the hypothesis predicting perceived message bias creates third-person effects. Political advertising compared to newspapers and television was perceived to have stronger effect on others compared to oneself. However, the hypothesis predicting television to be perceived to influence others more than newspapers were not supported.

The hypotheses got mixed support when the third-person perception was related to different predictors. Education showed to be an important explanation to the discrepancy between others and oneself. Respondents with higher education seemed to have a view of political
communication were their own picture of political communication was strongly dependent on personal experience. Political attitudes of other people are on the contrary seen as more dependent on mass media and interpersonal communication. The opposite view of how political attitudes are shaped can be found among people with low education. These respondents were more convinced that they, as well as other people were dependent on mass media for political information. They also thought, along with people with limited political interest that other people gets more in contact with politics and therefore to a greater extent believed that others picture of politics is shaped by personal experience.

Ego-involvement has in previous research been strongly correlated to third-person effects. In this study political interest was tested as an indicator of involvement and was believed to be a strong predictor of third-person effects. This hypothesis got weak support. Respondents with strong interest in politics assumed all information-sources except political advertising were important for their own picture of politics, as for others. However, political interest only showed to be a significant third-person effect predictor for personal experience. Related to personal experience the results both showed a third-person effect among people with limited political interest (others are more influenced by personal experience) and a reversed third-person effect among people with strong political interest (others are less influenced by personal experience).

Age was believed to be positively correlated to third-person effects. On the contrary results clearly showed that younger people instead of older made a discrepancy between judgement about impact of social messages on the self and others. One possible explanation might be that younger people generally are less interested in politics and political news. Therefore they might believe other people pay more attention to mediated politics. McLeod et al showed groups seen, as likely targets of a communication will produce larger third-person effects than generalized others (McLeod 1997:153). The same explanation might be used to understand these results.

Gender was rather weakly connected to third-person effects. The results showed women compared to men tended to perceive both themselves and others were more influenced by different kinds of information-sources. There were however only a few cases of different self-other discrepancy between the sexes. Men tended to believe other’s view of politics was lesser dependent of personal experience and more influenced by television.

This study gives more support for the third-person hypothesis. It also supports previous research, which shows that the phenomenon can be found in a political communication context (Rucinski & Salmon 1990, Cohen & Davis 1991, Griswold 1992, Duck, Hohh & Terry 1995, Willnat 1996, Salwen 1998). It also makes clear that the third-person perception is closely related to what is seen as self-enhancing tendencies. Political advertising is by most people seen a communication channel strongly threatening your own free will. Advertising makes one buy things one does not need, and propaganda might seduce people to do or think something they never would have done otherwise. Personal experience can be seen as the opposite side of the political communication. To believe one-self has a greater ability to learn from personal experiences than others is also a self-enhancing tendency. To learn from your own experiences instead from media messages or from people around will in many people’s view be seen as an ideal. It’s also interesting to see how this picture of political communication is more outspoken among people with higher education (and in some aspects also among people with strong interest in politics). These results strengthen the hypothesis that people with higher education tend to see themselves as less vulnerable to influence from
external information-sources, and that they believe they are more in control of their own opinions than other citizens.

The results show people’s images of political communication produces rather strong third-person effects, and they are more outspoken regarding political advertising. One could therefore believe that these third-person effects would produce attitudes and demands on restriction for political advertising. From what we know from previous research this will probably not be the case. Research on censorious tendencies show how individuals seem to recognize its democratic duty to tolerate even harmful messages about legitimate issues during election campaigns (Salwen & Driscoll 1997, Salwen 1998, Rucinski & Salmon 1990). However, these studies are made in USA where political advertising, and especially television advertising is a part of the political culture. In Sweden there is no tradition of political advertising on television and future research can show if the relationship between third-person effects and restriction judgements are different from one political culture to another.

This paper started with arguments that modern politics is medialized politics. A question was if this picture also dominates among the citizens. Results from this study show that the idea of powerful media for attitude formation gets support by the results, but to some extent it is also rejected. Ordinary people do believe media has the power to shape political attitudes, but they also are convinced that personal experience and interpersonal communication is important for their own, and others images of politics. So even if people credit the mass media with considerable power to shape attitudes and opinion there is no public belief in “All-powerful-media”.

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