

Rational Media Choice

A Utility Theory Approach to Explaining Online and Offline Political Communication

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Changes in political communication behavior in the Internet era

→ Increasing time spent online, intensified information online, cyber activism, ...

Advantages of Internet for political communication

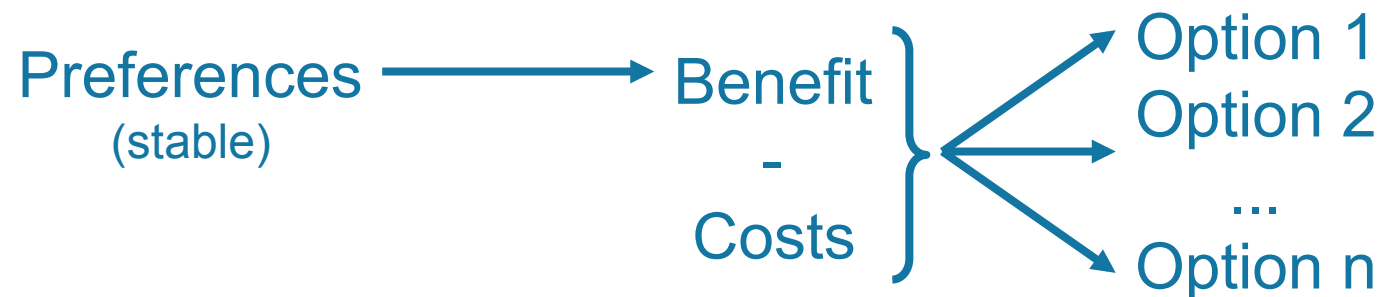
→ Cheaper, faster, integrated (and thus: more effective and efficient) communication

→ Frequent economic arguments in debate about online democracy etc. (Ward et al. 2003 u.a.)

Can Rational Choice Theory explain individual's political communication online and offline?

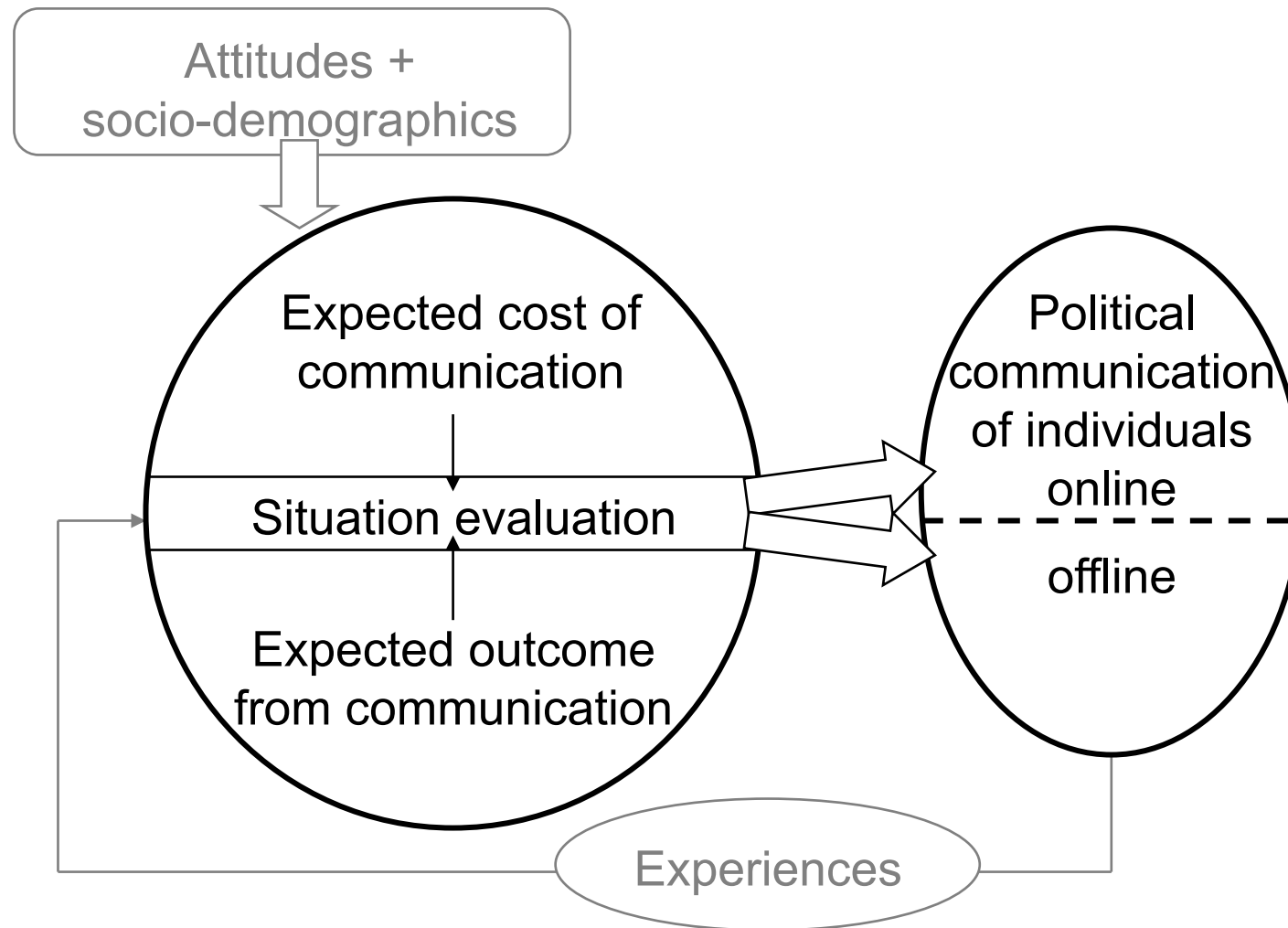
Human behavior modeled as choices between several possibilities (Becker 1976)

Rational choice: individuals choose the option that maximizes their outcome



- Problem of explaining political behavior with “narrow” rational choice models: “voting paradox” & “free rider effect” (Brennan/Buchanan 1984)
→ narrow RC model
- Communication studies’ “economic” tradition: Uses & Gratifications Approach (Katz et al. 1972), including expected social gratifications as causes for action
→ medium RC model
- Various extensions of the rational choice model in order to “save” it’s comprehensive appeal (Green/ Shapiro 1999)
→ broad RC model

Variable Model



Expected benefit

Narrow definition - economic benefit:

“Politics must provide a benefit above all for myself.”

Moderate definition - including social benefit:

“I like to always know what is happening in ... my city.”

“I would like to be appreciated by others.”

Broad definition - including altruism:

“It is important to me to do something for other people.”

Restrictions

Economic restrictions:

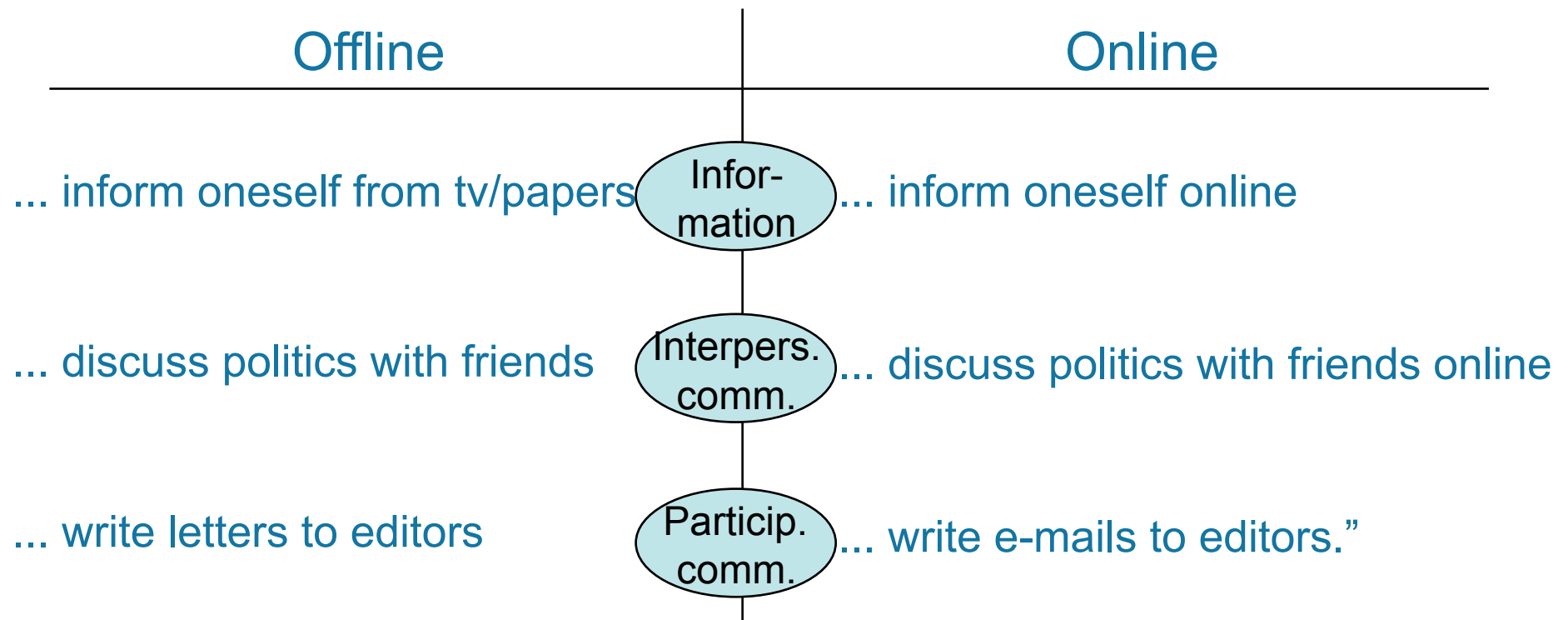
“Participating in politics should not involve excessive expenditures.”

Cognitive restrictions:

“What happens in politics is sometimes hard to understand.”

Utility evaluation

“If one wants to be appreciated by others, one must ...



Profile of the Study

Instrument:	standardized questionnaire telephone interviewing (CATI)
Survey time:	4 waves between 01/02 and 02/05
Population:	Germans 16 years and older
Sample:	multistage random sampling (RLD)
No. of interviews:	app. 1.600 per wave
Researchers:	Vowe, Emmer, Wolling
Funding:	DFG (German National Science Foundation)

Table 1: Predictors of usage of the political section of the daily newspaper (DV) – comparison of three RC models

	NARROW		MODERATE		BROAD	
	Beta	Beta	Beta	Beta	Beta	Beta
Benefit			.07		.08	
Costs	-.14		-.08		-.09	
Cost/benefit relationship		.11		.09		.11
<i>Control variables:</i>						
Political interest	.46	.47	.44	.44	.43	.43
Age	.24	.25	.24	.24	.24	.24
Income	.10	.10	.10	.10	.10	.10
R^2 (adj.)	.36	.36	.34	.34	.34	.34

Only significant coefficients listed

Table 2: Predictors of frequency of usage of online sources of information (DV)

	NARROW		MODERATE		BROAD	
	Beta	Beta	Beta	Beta	Beta	Beta
Benefit			.17		.17	
Costs	-.11		-.10		-.10	
Cost/benefit relationship		.09		.16		.16
<i>Control variables:</i>						
Political interest	.29	.30	.26	.25	.26	.25
Age	-.14	-.14		-.10	-.09	-.10
Income	.13	.12	.11	.11	.11	.12
R ² (adj.)	.13	.13	.13	.13	.14	.13

Only significant coefficients listed

- Cost/benefit calculations contribute significantly to explaining political communication by citizens
- A “moderate” definition of costs and benefits seem to be able to explain communication best
- Cost/benefit calculations are no better predictors for online than for offline activities

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Project website:

<http://www.politische-online-kommunikation.de>

Table 3: Predictors of frequency of offline discussions with friends about politics (DV)

	NARROW		MODERATE		BROAD	
	Beta	Beta	Beta	Beta	Beta	Beta
Benefit			.14		.18	
Costs			-.16		-.16	
Cost/benefit relationship		.09		.20		.23
Control variables:						
Political interest	.42	.42	.40	.40	.38	.37
Age			-.09	-.09	-.09	-.09
Income	.13	.13	.12	.12	.11	.11
Education	.16	.16	.12	.12	.12	.12
R ² (adj.)	.29	.29	.33	.33	.34	.34

Only significant coefficients listed

Table 4: Predictors of frequency of online discussions about politics (DV)

	NARROW		MODERATE		BROAD	
	Beta	Beta	Beta	Beta	Beta	Beta
Benefit			.14		.15	
Costs			-.17		-.17	
Cost/benefit relationship				.18		.18
Control variables:						
Political interest						
Age	-.26	-.26	-.26	-.26	-.25	-.26
Income						
Education						
R ² (adj.)	.05	.06	.09	.10	.10	.10

Only significant coefficients listed