

THE INFLUENCE OF THE REACTANCE THEORY ON THE FORMATION OF OPINIONS BY CONSUMERS OF MEDIA PRODUCTS

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Abstract: In times of digital and political correctness movement, freedom of speech has become one of the most discussed topics in Germany. When individuals feel their freedom of speech restricted, reactance effects can be observed. Such effects can range from the ignoring of other people's views to boomerang effects, leading people to show behaviour which is diametrically opposed to the behaviour intended by the message in question. This article analyses the characteristics of reactance, its consequences on the formation of opinions and on options for the design of different forms of media, contributing to a reduction or prevention of consumer reactance.

Keywords: reactance, boomerang-effect, sleeper-effect, mass media, cognitive dissonance.

Introduction

Individual freedom rights are not only considered to be fundamental for the definition of human dignity but are also codified in Germany's constitution, the Grundgesetz. Such freedom rights include the freedom of speech which, according to Article 5, paragraph 1 of the Grundgesetz, is the right to freely express and disseminate one's opinion orally, in writing or visually and to inform oneself from publicly available sources without any restriction [1].

The establishment of the right to express one's opinion as an individual freedom right codified at the level of the German constitution enables the individual to inalienably exercise such right. When individuals feel restricted in the exercise of such right or that they are denied such right, defensive or protest reactions of the individual will be triggered with the aim of restoring freedom. Such behavior is analysed as part of the reactance theory by J.W. Brehm [2].

Reactance is oftentimes observed not only in single situations in the private environment but increasingly also in connection with media forms and mass media, which aim at opinion influencing. The latter can either have an economic background in the shape of profit maximisation as a consequence of a revenue increase resulting from advertising activities, but in recent times an increase in opinion influencing attempts in relation to hot topics such as political correctness, the visibility of queer lifestyles or the climate crisis can also be observed.

In such cases consumers of media products can develop a feeling of being morally influenced, which then results in reactance, which in reality can increasingly be noticed. Why and how this occurs will be described in Section two.

Research methodology

To conduct the research there were multiple articles and journals analyzed, which will be listed in the list of references at the end of this article.

Results

Fundamental to the emergence of reactance is a so-called cognitive dissonance which is a state in which only certain parts of a human's consciousness are consistent with each other [3]. An individual will attempt to reduce the remaining discrepancy by adapting or modifying their opinions. When an individual is confronted with a standpoint which is not in line with the individual's previously formed opinion, a cognitive dissonance between the new standpoint and the view memorized as the individual's own opinion will originate. These views do neither correspond nor match. In this situation the individual has two possible options to react to the new standpoint. If the new standpoint is considered understandable and if the person representing such standpoint is regarded as competent, with the own opinion simultaneously not being seen as particularly founded or less understandable, the individual will show conformist behavior and the new standpoint is adopted. If, however, the individual considers their own view very important and the individual is very committed to the topic, the individual will consider themselves more competent than the person representing the new standpoint. In such case the cognitive dissonance will be reduced as a consequence of the reinforcement of the individual's own opinion and the ignoring of the new standpoint. Reactance will arise as well as a tendency to persist which will further support or even radicalize the individual's own opinion.

Crucial for the emergence of reactance is not only an actual reduction of the freedom of speech or opinion but also an expected future or even only perceived reduction thereof. The result is a certain kind of skepticism towards any form of actual or supposed influence, resistance will emerge in order to preserve personal autonomy [4]. Social influencing can generally result in two possible reactions. The first reaction option is a display of conformist behavior by adapting to and taking on the new conditions [5]. If conformist behavior is achieved an influencing of the opinions and actions of the consumers becomes possible and the aim of the distributor of the new information is achieved. The second option is – according to the authors – the exact opposite, i.e. a non-conformist behavior. Such behavior is the result of a reduction of freedom,

which occurs as a consequence of a perceived manipulation of and limitation to the actually available options for actions due to the information given [6]. If the freedom of an individual is actually or supposedly reduced as a consequence of a manipulation of the number of options for actions available, such individual will react thereto by developing the desire to choose the option which is no longer available in order to regain its freedom to act. Such behavior is being displayed in particular in cases of massive and permanent manipulation and is an expression of psychological reactance. Thus humans often tend to act diametrically opposed to the behavior intended to be triggered by the message which they consider manipulative or freedom-reducing, in order to regain their own perceived freedom to act or freedom of speech.

Three different conditions are differentiated, which are fundamental to the emergence of reactance [7]. The first condition is the individual's perception of a certain scope of freedom. Insofar the actually existing reduction of the scope of freedom is less relevant than the reduction subjectively perceived by the individual. Such perception can vary from individual to individual and in terms of its strength and effects on reactance. In fact, not every individual will rate its freedom equally important and consider it restricted to the same extent at the same time. The second condition also relates to the subjective level of the individual and requires the individual to judge their level of freedom as reasonably important. If this condition is not satisfied, the third and last condition will not be fulfilled, which requires the individual to consider its scope of action as either threatened or as already reduced. In principle, it is found that any statement which is to cause individuals to commit certain acts is an attempt to reduce the freedom of choice of the other side [7]. Furthermore, defensive activities against manipulating messages may serve to control negative emotions. Thus reactance does not only cause the individual's personal freedom to act to actually or from the viewpoint of the individual be restored, but the individual's level of contentedness is also subjectively influenced in a positive way [8].

The attempt to influence personal opinions or deeds with a view to avoid the emergence of certain convictions which are judged as negative by the surrounding society can cause the so-called boomerang effect [3]. Once the duration or intensity of an influence passes a certain threshold, the individual's opposition to a message is reinforced. The result is the individual being convinced of the exact opposite of the intended change of opinion.

If individuals develop the impression of being talked into something both the individual's own opposed opinion is reinforced as well as their refusal of the statement they were confronted with in order to maintain their freedom [9].

It is, however, necessary to note that recurring events gain normality and routine due to their repeated appearance. If a certain statement, which is initially perceived as freedom-restricting and manipulative, is repeated continuously with a

high frequency reactance will be reduced over time. The individual's expectation regarding their level of freedom will be muted. Humans get accustomed to the new seemingly generally accepted opinion or recommendation, as they do no longer feel that they have the possibility to choose themselves. The continuous repetition of an opinion and the related habituation effect induce an individual, even when it has been completely forced to represent such an opinion, to gradually assume it [10]. This occurs also as a consequence of an internal repetition of the arguments by the individuals in order to be able to represent them vis-à-vis third parties. This can oftentimes be observed with politicians, who after some time start to adopt statements from their speeches as part of their convictions although such statements were initially only made to attract potential groups of voters. Such a phenomenon is also referred to as the self-convincing effect [10].

This turns out to be applicable also to the COVID-19 lockdown infection protection measures and their acceptance by society. If these measures, which are universally applicable to all citizens are which are enforced by sanctions, are imposed by bodies which are generally considered competent, announced ideally with high frequency sources and justified with arguments which appear objectively verifiable and transparent, reactance occurs seldomly [11]. Thus reactance behavior can be suppressed under certain conditions. However, it becomes clear as well that such reactance suppression has a limited time-wise effect, since the willingness of the citizens to cooperate decreases over time due to the basis for the cooperation, i.e. the high infection numbers, dropping. Consequently, reactance increases since, in the personal opinion of large numbers of citizens, the basis for the severe restrictions on their personal freedom no longer justifies these restrictions.

The consequences of reactance for decisions to act are also influenced by the media. A frequent reporting by the media of opinions held by skeptics increases peoples' reactance [12]. Instead of qualifying such opinions as erroneous and using them as negative examples in the public discourse, media consumers, which have aspirations to regain their personal freedom, use such opinions to reinforce their own reactance. In the area of opinion influencing by loud-mouthed minorities, this is a known phenomenon, which can increasingly be observed in the media landscape recently.

When it comes to opinion forming and statements of opinion not only subjective factors have to be taken into consideration. Due to individuals living in human society also a collective component is relevant. Influences of the group and group phenomena come into play, which in turn can influence the opinion-forming of the individuals and the emergence of reactance. This group context is analyzed as part of social psychology, which is concerned with the thought processes, emotions and behavior in the interpersonal context [13].

Furthermore the felt pressure from the majority, which causes individuals to lose trust in their personal opinions because the majority of the individuals forming part of their social environment seemingly hold a different opinion [10]. In principle, humans are rather community-oriented than loners and thus prefer the company of a group of individuals over staying by themselves. Thus membership in a group of humans is important for the self-conception of an individual. An individual will adapt their opinion to that of the majority of the group in order not to lose trust in the correctness of their opinion again. However, a strong presence of a vocal minority can increasingly be observed in the media recently. The phenomenon of the silent majority and the vocal minority can be observed in Germany in connection with climate strikes and roadblocks by climate activists gluing their hands to the pavement [10]. In this context, it has to be noted that the opinion of these activists and the purpose of their activities to move climate change and its consequences further into the focus of the public discourse, has to be considered important in terms of societal relevance. However, it is both the activists' activities and the one-sided presentation of opinions in the media which identify this phenomenon of a noisy minority. Because the minority refuses any giving in, the solution to the conflict seems to be entirely dependent on concessions made by the majority [10]. Consequently, such minority's success is not dependent on the quality of the arguments given by the minority but rather on the extremity and vehemence, with which the activists pursue their activities. Such a behavior can be successful in terms of the majority adjusting its opinion to that of the minority. If the media continue to represent the same standpoint, which is additionally described as being uncompromising, it is well possible that people who do not have sufficient competence to judge the climate crisis themselves adopt the views of the climate activists. It, however, needs to be noted that the mass effect of the media will not always take effect. In this particular example, the activities of the climate activists cause a restriction on the personal freedom of those individuals who are trapped in blocked traffic and who are thus prevented from pursuing their daily routine. As a consequence of this both felt but also actual restriction of such individuals' freedom of action and also as a consequence of the immediate other disadvantages for these other individuals, such other individuals are less inclined to take notice of the activists' message. To the extent this is unavoidable, for example in the event of a traffic blockage or as a consequence of a permanent repetition of the activists' message reactance will set in, causing the citizens to act diametrically opposed to the activists' position. Such a defiant attitude, which usually results in a radical reinforcement of the citizens' own opinions, is neither in the interest of the activists nor of the environment. Consequently the influencing by the media and the actions of the activists may finally even have a negative effect on the climate. Furthermore, it is not primarily the majority of the silent people who should be encouraged to make more

climate-friendly decisions but rather the politicians who decide in the end to which extent climate targets are met and emissions are being minimized. Thus, reactance of the people is reinforced because they experience restrictions on their personal freedom without being able to regain it or to prevent future restrictions to their personal freedom.

However, not all mass media are able to entail the same reactance effects. Linear mass media such as TV, radio and newspapers have to be considered to cause heavier reactance effects than streaming services or other kinds of digital media since linear mass media do not provide the consumers with personalization possibilities. The lack of centrality of the internet and the possibility of the individual to take part in the public discourse which is provided by the online media suggest freedom of speech and equal opportunities to express one's opinion and thus eliminate reactance in these media forms [14]. Furthermore, digital media have a particular significance in this context since they represent a multitude of opinions and provide for their open discussion. Each consumer has a direct voice which can be uttered in the discourse. Regardless of how minor an issue may be the digital media offer a forum for its discussion and the involvement of the consumers is more intense compared to offline discussions or other kinds of media [15].

However, note that a comprehensive gathering of information is more difficult in digital media due to the amount of information available on the internet and that thus opinions may be based on generated realities [14]. The true content of the information used by the consumers for their opinion-forming process therefore has to be considered ambivalent for digital media. Therefore, also digital media have both advantages and disadvantages in terms of their potential to influence the opinion-forming process of the consumers using this kind of media.

The effects on the formation of opinions can be reduced and reactance to the message can be avoided, if the consumers relate the message back to a legitimate power [5]. This means that the consumer attributes a legitimate position of power and authority of opinion which has to be followed to the author of the message by which the consumer feels restricted in its personal freedom of action or speech. In such cases, the consumer accepts the restriction of personal freedom and does not counter it with reactance.

For the design of media, which is to disseminate persuasive statements it is furthermore of importance to take the so called sleeper-effect into consideration [3]. It means that the content of a message is oftentimes remembered longer by the consumer than the source of the message. Bearing in mind the advertising industry and the design of mass media this is an issue which is of paramount importance for the design of the message.

Conclusion

It has to be noted that reactance effects influence both the forming and representation of opinions. Such effects will be favored or limited by the design of the messages in the different forms of media. Messages should ideally be presented in a way so that consumers do not feel manipulated or limited in their freedom of opinion [16]. It is not primarily relevant whether a manipulation actually occurs but rather whether consumer feels manipulated or limited in their freedom of opinion. The intensity of the reactance then depends on subjective and objective factors. At a subjective level the assessment of the level of limitation of the personal freedom, the value the individual attaches to their own freedom and the importance of the opinion or act limited by the manipulation is crucial. In addition, objective factors such as the potential of the individual being able to restore their personal freedom by itself and the effect of the limitation on third parties or the entire society are relevant. Insofar it is also of relevance whether the limitation equally affects a large number of individuals as well. If an individual feels treated unfairly while others do not seem to be limited in the same way, the feeling of unfair treatment will suppress the subjective factors and reactance will be increased immediately. If the limitation is accepted as invariable and universal without any perspective of an imminent restoration of the individual's personal freedom the effects of reactance will be limited. Individuals then tend to accept their situation as given and to abide by it.

In order to limit reactance messages should be convincing but not missionizing, be furnished with a minimum amount of intensity, designed as proposals or optional suggestions and finally be formulated in a way so that the recipient assumes to have a choice whether to accept the message [17]. The communication of freedom of choice has to be considered to be of paramount importance for the avoidance of reactance [17]. Thus, the "framing" of a message, i.e. both the context as well as the content of a message is of special importance since it depends on them whether the recipient of the message feels manipulated or not.

Finally, every message which is disseminated by different forms of media should aim to cause identification and involvement instead of reactance with the recipients, which in practice, however, often turns out to be a challenge [17].

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