

Toward an Integrated Model:  
The Influence of Presumed Media Influence in News Production

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**Abstract**

Journalists are a group of actors whose perceptions of media influence could have important implications on process of social communication (Lee & Chan, 2009). However, the studies in communication research on journalists' perceptions of media influence have remained relatively little. This study takes a different perspective by applying the influence of presumed media influence (IPMI) to news production research. By reviewing the evolution of IPMI model and main tendencies of news production research, the current study attempts to propose an integrated model which addresses the underlying process of news production by taking journalists' perception into consideration. This work has the potential to broaden the scope of previous IPMI studies and to offer a deeper understanding of news production process. Last but not least, implications and future research agenda are also discussed and proposed.

*Keywords:* influence of presumed influence, perception, news production

The concept of influence has received relatively most academic concerns in the field of journalism and communication research. Some researchers focused on whether and how the beliefs and behaviors of general public would be influenced or even changed by mass media, which drove the development of communication effects research. (Curran & Seaton, 2003; Schudson, 2002). In the field of communication research, the direct influence of mass media on general public has been most concerned. However, recent theoretical evolutions in communication effects research have made a shift to indirect effects, regarded as another strong and crucial kind of effects. The body of this research approach is quite fruitful, such as the third-person effect raised by Davison (1983) has received most scholarly attention.

The breakthrough of research on mass media's indirect influence is the one named "the influence of presumed (media) influence" (IPMI). IPMI refers to the fact that people may tend to react according to their perceptions of the influence of a media message on others (Gunther & Storey, 2003). This approach has been applied not only to general audience reactions to media content but also to certain groups like politicians, physician and other experts who play an active role in public affairs (Cohen, Tsfati & Sheaffer, 2008; Huh & Langteau, 2007; Siong & Hao, 2009) as well as adolescents who are often regarded as susceptible to media content (Gunther, Bolt, Borzekowki, Liebhart & Dillard, 2006; Jiang & Chia, 2009). A recent research studied the group of people that were potential news sources and how their perceptions of media impact shaped their willingness to participate in the news gathering process (Tsfati, Cohen & Gunther, 2011). Nevertheless, the studies in communication research on journalists' perceptions of media influence have remained relatively little. The piece of work done by Tsfati, Cohen and Gunther inspires us to extend

this IPMI model into newsroom research.

Obviously, journalists are a group of actors whose perceptions of media influence could have important implications on process of social communication (Lee & Chan, 2009). Journalists are the main force in building social realities and symbolic environment. Their work of framing and agenda setting is considered as impacting the way of how “reality” is displayed to the public rather than merely reflecting it (McCombs & Reynolds, 2008; Tewksbury & Scheufele, 2008). Furthermore, journalists themselves may regard their professional work as meaningful and influential in making the public informed by providing their information about current events and knowledge about their life. In addition, journalists also acknowledge that their discourse especially political ones will have an influence on the public’s attitudinal and behavioral reinforcement or even change, such as voting (Cohen & Tsfati, 2008). Moreover, the phenomenon of censorship and self-censorship in newsroom also offers a speculation about how journalists’ perception of media influence of certain issues in terms of social and moral disorder may affect the process of news production (Davison, 1983; Gans, 1979/2004, p57).

Given these considerations, the current study takes a different perspective by applying the influence of presumed media influence to news production research, which may potentially enrich this field of studies. This approach has two main advantages. First, it has the potential to expand the scope of the IPMI model. As Gunther and Storey (2003) noted, the specific model examined the assumption that people will accommodate their beliefs and actions in accordance with their perceptions of the influence of mass media on a certain group of people. So extending this model into news production research may help us figure

out the specific theoretical process of how journalists accommodate to audience under the influence of presumed influence, which will provide greater validation for the model. A second advantage is that it will to some degree provide a deeper and more complete understanding of the role played by journalists during the news production process. The tradition of news gathering research has been mainly concerned with group behavior, or the effects of “social structures” on individuals, regardless the fact that “newsmen have tended to work on their own to a large extent” (Epstein, 1973/1974: xiii). This study taking journalists’ individual perceptions into consideration may shed lights on previous news production research.

## **The Evolution of the IPMI**

### **The Third-person Effect**

As the IPMI originates from the third-person effect, it is essential to go through the latter one so as to have a basic understanding of the theoretical background. The third-person effect, which was first proposed by W. Phillips Davison (1983), assumed that people might intend to overestimate the influence of mass media on other people. In *The Third-Person Effect in Communication* (Davison, 1983), Davison suggested that this hypothesis might help to explain various aspects of social phenomenon, among which censorship offered the most interesting field for speculation.

Quite a number of communication scholars have exerted the third-person effect into their research, which makes the third-person effect ranks first in the most widely used theory in the new century (Bryant & Miron, 2008). Scholars addressed this academic concern in a

wide range of media and social contexts from various perspectives. Some of them studied the psychological mechanisms which led to a gap between self and other's perceived media effects to provide explanations for the third-person effect (Brosius & Engel, 1996; Gunther & Mundy, 1993; Perloff, 1989). Others found factors such as perceived issue involvement, self-perceived knowledge and self-efficacy might predict the third-person effect hypothesis as well (Lee & Tamborini, 2005; Salwen & Dupagne, 2001; White, 1997). The characteristics of media message were also widely studied, of which one important finding was that people tended to perceive greater third-person effect on others with regard to anti-social messages than pro-social ones (Eveland & McLeod, 1999). What's more, socially desirable media content may produce a contrary effect, referring to a first-person effect (Gunther & Thorson, 1992).

### **Criticisms**

During this period, early studies of the third-person effect were however criticized by some scholars. The criticisms focused on the lack of a) clarity of behavioral component and b) the potential beneficial consequences. Even Davison (1996) himself admitted that his early elaboration of third-person effect emphasized too much on the one-fold psychological explanation; instead, it was complicated mechanisms subjected to individual, situational and communicational differences.

Scholars have claimed that the extant research papers on the third-person effect have not offered equal attention on both the perceptual components and the behavioral ones. The inconsistent conceptualization and operationalization of behavioral components have led to

the weak explanatory power (Sun, Shen & Pan, 2008). To solve this problem, the writers addressed three basic elements to explicate behavioral consequences: the agent (who acts to the perceived message effects), the course (in what way), and the target (toward whom or what). With regard to news production research, it can be elaborated into the way in which journalists (agent) make news decisions (the course) based upon their presumptions of the influence of media or media coverage on general public (target).

The more inclusive model called the influence of presumed influence has addressed the other criticism. The new model describes a situation in which people will adjust their attitudes and behaviors according to their perceptions of media influence (either negative or positive) on other people (Gunther & Storey, 2003), which may avoid the limitations brought by overlooking the beneficial part under the third-person effect approach and extends a broader research domain. Concerning the field of news production, the new model may go beyond the traditions of censorship research, rather, a much broader academic horizon on how journalists' presumed media influence will impact the news production process is worth studying.

### **Recent Studies on IPMI Model**

Before integrating the IPMI model into news production research, it is necessary to grasp the tendencies of current IPMI studies. To date, this paradigm has applied to a wide range including politics (Cohen & Tsifti, 2008, 2009), health communication (Gunther et al., 2006; Gunther & Storey, 2003; Huh & Langteau, 2007; Wei, Lo & Lu, 2008), fashion and advertising (Chia, 2010; Cho, Choi & Mastin, 2008; Jiang & Chia, 2009; Park, 2005; Siong

& Hao, 2009) as well as minority alienation (Tsfati, 2007).

The consequence/reaction of the IPMI was examined frequently. These consequences to presumed influence on others can be categorized into two general types: prevention and accommodation (Gunther, et al., 2006). The former one has been investigated frequently in terms of censorship (Cohen & Weimann, 2008). The latter, for example, in the context of voting decisions, people's strategic voting intention was related to their perceptions regarding the IPMI (Cohen & Tsfati, 2009). Besides, a sense of alienation of out-group members who perceived that media coverage had an impact on affected their perceived image was found in Tsfati's (2007) study.

Next, whether and to what extent such moderators as exposure to media message, demographics, perceived self-knowledge, etc. would influence one's presumed media effects on others were also probed (Gunther et al., 2006; Huh & Langteau, 2007; Wei et al., 2008). For instance, the results of one study on DTC prescription drug advertising revealed that the higher self-knowledge one perceived the stronger perceived DTC advertising influence on general public one would hold (Huh & Langteau, 2007).

Furthermore, mediating variables, the dubbed most challenging aspect in IPMI research, were also explored. According to Gunther et al. (2006), that what type of presumed media influence on others would have an influence on individuals was determined by mediating variables. In their study, they found that peer norms served as a mediating variable between media message concerning to smoking-relate content and the smoking adoption. In Park's (2005) work, he included perceived prevalence as a mediator between media use and presumed influence on others.

It is worth noting that one of the few studies examined that how journalists perceive media influence on citizens along with the inference of such perceptions on professional orientations (Lee & Chan, 2009). The outcome of the study show that perceived media influence was related to emphasis on media's professional roles, recognition of the need to be cautious when criticizing others or advocating specific standpoints, as well as critical evaluation of the media's ethical performance. This research also indicated the potential relation between presumed media influence and journalistic professionalism, which guided our attempts to extend the IPMI model into news production research so far.

### **Extending the IPMI Model into News Production Research**

#### **Previous Perspectives of News Production Research**

Gatekeeping theory first developed by Kurt Lewin (1947) is one predominant approach to study how mass media news gets produced within the field of mass communication research. Lewin first formulated the "gatekeepers" in these terms: Their functions consist of either letting the goods through their "gate" and pushing them on through the channel to the next gatekeeper, or stopping the goods at that point in the channel (Fishman, 1977, p. 6). Later, White (1964) adapted Lewin's theory to news organizations and found that personal biases played the biggest role in news selectivity. However, this perspective was criticized that it obscured the newsmaking process and underestimated the complexity of it (Fishman, 1977, p. 12; Berkowitz, 1997, p. 9).

Other researchers took the organizational or institutional perspective to find explanations underlying individual behaviors. The pioneering study of "Social Control in the

Newsroom” done by Warren Breed in 1955 set the tone for most organizational research on news production that followed and he described the newsroom as a social system free of conflict, operating under consensually shared norms embodied in the news policy of management (Fishman, 1977, p. 19). Subsequent organizational studies stayed within this theoretical perspective and applied it to their own framework (e.g. Epstein; 1973/1974; Gans, 1979/2004). Nevertheless, this perspective overlooked the fact that “part of the [newsmaking] work process itself is the formulation of ‘raw reality’ into issues of relevance to a news policy” (Fishman, 1977, p. 32). Fishman (1977, p. 34) furthered his argument that both gatekeeping theory and organizational analysis “were more theories of news control than theories of news production”.

Third, the culturological or anthropological scholars approached the news production research by taking the society as a cultural symbol system rather than “the details of organizational and occupational routines” (Berkowitz, 1997, p. 10). The idea of “News is constructed” proposed by Gaye Tuchman (1978) cast light on the process of news production to a great extent. What’s more important, it magnified the role of making news rather than reporting news played by journalists (Lee, 2009).

### **Journalists’ Perceptions in News Production**

Perception is regarded as what journalists’ work is most about (Donsbach, 2004). In previous journalism research, journalists’ perception of media power, media competition, perception of audience, news source were repeatedly investigated (Garrison, 2000, 2003; Tsfati & Livio, 2008; Zhu, Weaver, Lo, Chen & Wu, 1997), and some studies linked these

perception to news making process, for example, news decision (Lee & Chan, 2009; Powers & Fico, 1994; Seo & Lim, 2010).

Tsfati and Livio (2008) found that journalists' perceptions of media influence were based on cognitive "world knowledge", and they suggest the possibility that part of journalists' professional ideology was shaped by their perceptions of media power. In line with the former finding, Lee and Chan's (2009) research revealed that journalists who perceived media had huge influence tended to put more emphasis on all kinds of media roles. Meanwhile, those journalists were also more likely to agree with the need to exercise caution when criticizing the power holders and take the neutral stance in political debates as well.

Media competition is regarded as one of the shaping power of daily news coverage. A survey revealed that a majority of journalists agreed that news dailies in a competitive media system would produce local news and editorials with higher quality, greater diversity than those in noncompetitive environment (Coulson & Lacy, 1996). However, how journalists' perception of media competition further affected news making process was not investigated in the study.

Audience considerations were also found to affect the news making process in many related studies. As one CBS producer said, "We have to act on the assumption the audience has zero knowledge about a subject." Sometimes the editors selected news pictures which could be expected to have "instant meaning" to give a simple explanation of a news story (Epstein, 1973/1974, pp. 241-242). Similarly, the so-called "protective considerations" were often made when journalists perceived audience were prone to being upset and anxious under news coverage in terms of disasters or civil disturbances (Gans, 1979/2004, pp. 242-243).

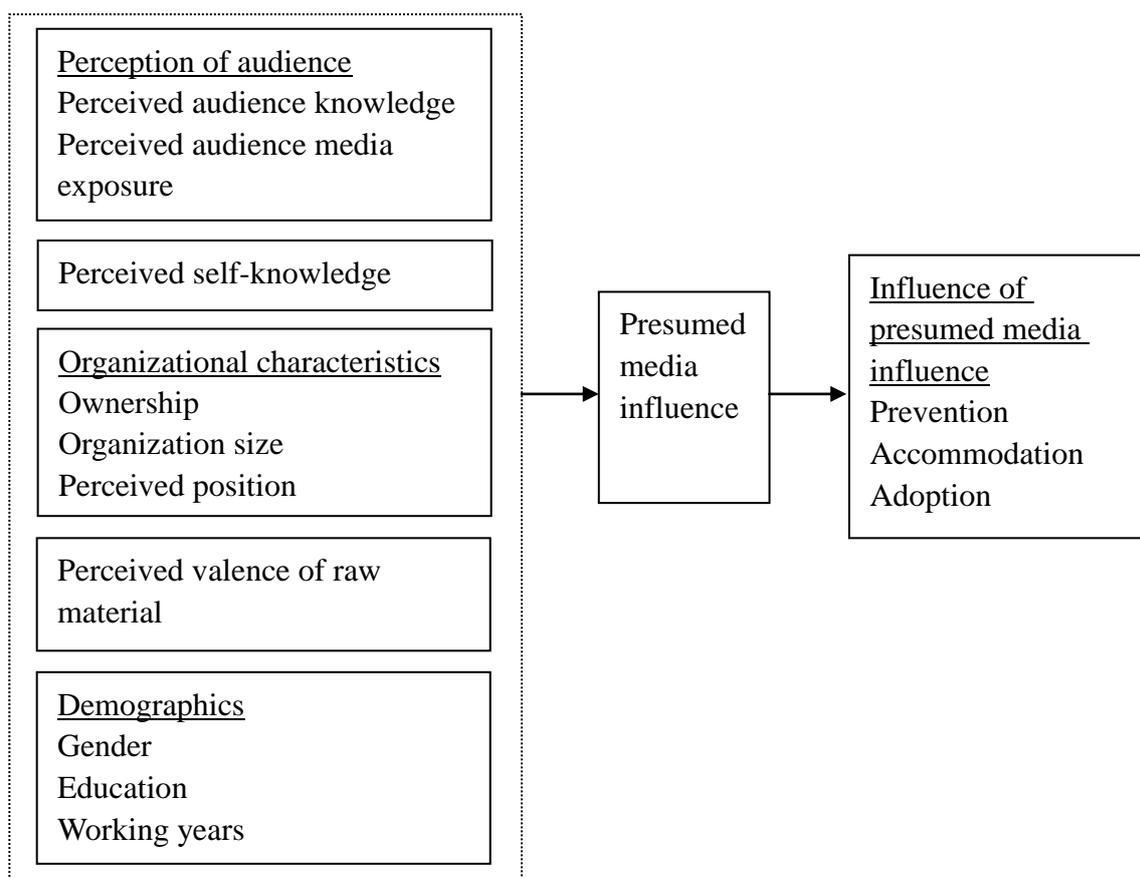
Besides, journalists' perception of news source credibility was largely studied in news decision research. Seo and Lim (2008) revealed that how journalists use the news source was significantly related to their perceptions of source credibility. Another study on news coverage of stem cell and cloning issue showed that the greater the source credibility of a cloning organization, the more importantly it was portrayed and the more positive news coverage it had (Yoon, 2005).

### **Toward an Integrated Model**

Figure 1 presents a general model that applies IPMI into news production research, which treats the IPMI as the mediator on path between journalists' perception and news decision. First of all, it assumes that there are several factors affecting the perception of media influence, including perception of audience, self-knowledge, and organization as well as perceived valence of raw materials. To start with, perception of audience consists of two components: perceived media exposure and perceived knowledge in audience. Consistent findings show that media exposure, especially to certain issues, has an impact on people in attitude and behavior (Kistler & Lee, 2010; Overby & Barth, 2009). It could be inferred that people may perceive the ones with more media exposure are more prone to be influenced by media. Here, we assume that journalists' perceived media exposure in audience may predict their perception of presumed media influence on audience. The other component, perceived audience knowledge was frequently mentioned in former news production research. As cited above, journalists were inclined to perceive that audience had low educational background and were easy to be influenced by media, thus for example, the audience were perceived to be

inclined to conduct imitative behaviors (Gans/1979, 2004, p. 243). So another assumption is proposed here that journalists’ presumed media influence on audience is concerned with their perception of audience knowledge.

Price, Tewksbury and Huang (1998) argued that perceived self-knowledge was a strong factor which would work when people evaluated media influence on both others and themselves. Another finding was that perceived self-knowledge mediated a third-person



**Figure 1 The integrated model**

effect in the way that people who perceived themselves more knowledgeable than other people tended to overvalue media influence on others to a greater extent (Lasorsa, 1989). Huh and Langteau’s (2007) finding also provided evidence supporting the expertise corollary that consumer experts who thought themselves to know DTC ads well perceived the general public were more prone to be affected by DTC advertising than ordinary consumers did. In

the case of newsrooms, some journalists may profess to be more familiar with news gathering, accordingly, it is expected that they intend to perceive greater media influence on audience than do journalist novices.

This model also merits the approach of organizational analysis by suggesting that organizational factors may affect journalists' perception of media influence on audience. Previous studies found that organizational-level factors (e.g., media ownership, media size and media position in supervision) explained more variance in the professional values (Zhu et al., 1997). So it could be reckoned that journalists in commercial media and public media may perceive media influence differently, and journalists in big media group are likely to perceive greater media influence than those in small ones. And how journalists perceive the role of their organization in the society may also account for presumed media influence. Therefore, whether these organizational factors will have an effect upon journalists' presumed influence on audience needs to be clarified.

In addition, perceived valence of raw materials takes both pro-social and anti-social (also known as desirable and undesirable) characteristics into considerations. Numerous research outcomes proved the negative-influence corollary that people tended to perceive greater impact on other than on themselves when the message was anti-social. Whereas Eveland and McLeod (1999) found that people tended to perceive greater third-person effect on others with regard to anti-social messages than pro-social ones. Hence, the characteristics of raw materials for news production could also have the potential to affect journalists' perception of presumed media influence on audience.

Next, in order to examine the IPMI, the possible consequences are conceptualized into

three genres: prevention, accommodation (Gunther, et al., 2006) and adoption. The prevention influence may lead to behaviors like self-censorship, for example, journalists won't put the pornographic message in media content owing to perceiving the negative influence on the general public. The accommodation influence can be seen when journalists make adjustment in the news production process, such as taking agenda setting or framing strategies. In early 1970s when the stagflation of economy happened, journalists selected news stories about economy itself instead of the unemployment situation (Gans, 1979/2004, p. 151), the possible reason for which was that they might perceive the harmful influence if they framed the news in the latter way. The third influence called adoption is developed by this study. For example, as the Singapore government released a warning against travelling to Bangkok for unessential reasons due to the flood in Thailand, the journalists perceived that this message would have an influence of keeping people away from danger; as a result, they would adopt it by reporting this alarming message to the general public, rather than prevention or accommodation.

Other important demographics variables such as gender, education, working experience of journalists are also included in this model, which may perhaps provide us with a better understanding of how this model works.

### **Implications for Future Research**

The present model of IPMI in news production expands the scope of the original IPMI model by extending it into newsroom research domain. Furthermore, its application of psychological evidence of journalists' perceptions poses potential implications to understand

the underlying process of news production.

Since it remains unclear how the model of IPMI works in newsroom, the current analysis urges empirical studies to provide evidences. First of all, some exploratory studies should be conducted to figure out possible antecedents in addition to those discussed in the former part (i.e., demographics, perceived self-knowledge, etc.) and carefully investigate how each of them function in the model. Meanwhile, other possible consequences resulted from influence of presumed media influence in news production should also be probed. It was emphasized in past works that the process of news production was complicated (Berkowitz, 1997, p. 9; Fishman, 1977, p. 12). The whole process is composed of how news organization assign tasks to journalists, how journalists obtain information from outside, how journalists weigh different news sources, how they decide the way of storytelling, and how journalists interact with each other and ones from other organizations, all of which are influencing media content (Lee, 2009). To take these considerations, the initial three genres of influence -- prevention, accommodation and adoption -- can be operationalized into abundant strategies used by not only journalists but also editors, anchors and other kind of newsmen involved in every step of news production.

Secondly, the possible contextual factors are also crucial to examine (Perloff, 1999) in the IPMI in news production. How do different types of message (e.g., political news, economic news, entertainment, and crisis news) affect the IPMI in news production? Another concern is to apply this model to different cultural contexts. The role of media is perceived quite differently in Western and Eastern countries. For example, in United States, “the fourth power” is used to define the role of media, while in China mass media are regarded as the

mouthpiece of China Communist Party (Yang, 2008). China's media reform breeds the flourish of mass media with market orientation; however, the tension between anticipations of 'what media ought to do' and realities of 'what media do' (Guo & Li, 2011) has received much scholarly attention so far. Most notably, it is also the struggle embedded in journalists' routine of news making. The differentiation of the media role in the two cultural contexts may possibly account for the difference of IPMI.

Last but not least, future endeavors should take the prevalent Internet into consideration. On the one hand, the Internet is a medium which is far different from traditional media like newspaper, radio or television. "To the degree that the third-person effect hinges on perceived likelihood of message exposure", as Perloff (1999) noted, in the new world of fragmented media, people might not be able to perceive others would obtain a specific message, thus transforming the applicability of the current model. On the other hand, as the fast penetration of the Internet into people's life, the boundaries between journalists and audience blur. To some extent, the Internet has transformed an individual into a journalist. So the current IPMI model in news production has the potential to be applied to civic journalism and may throw theoretical light on this booming phenomenon.

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