

Short Term Scientific Mission: Report

Host Institution: University of Amsterdam, Amsterdam School of Communication Research

Host: Prof. Dr. Claes de Vreese

Short Term Scientific Mission

From 4th of June until 12th of June I completed a short term scientific mission at the University of Amsterdam. The main goals of this visit were building a scientific network, exchanging ideas about my dissertation project with other international scholars and plan future collaborations.

Feedback on my Dissertation Project

I had the opportunity to discuss my dissertation project and my future studies within two meetings with Prof. Dr. Claes de Vreese and three meetings with Dr. Linda Bos. More specifically, Claes de Vreese and Linda Bos provided feedback on the survey-experiment I plan for my second study of my dissertation project. We discussed the experimental conditions and the questionnaire as well as how I could measure various moderators and mediators in this study. Since Linda Bos and Claes de Vreese both have a huge expertise in the field of populist communication research they could provide me valuable feedback and I learned a lot from their comments and thoughts. Moreover, we also discussed whether there were ways to include similar scales in studies in Austria and the Netherlands to measure similarities and differences between the two countries.

Design of a Comparative Study

Furthermore, I had two meetings with Michael Hameleers, a PhD-candidate whose dissertation also deals with populist communication research. Besides discussing our work and exchanging ideas we elaborated on potential comparative studies in the field of populist communication that can be conducted in Austria and the Netherlands. One way to do comparative research we figured out was to include the same scales on populist attitudes to compare populist attitudes in both countries. If this is not possible, we could use a sequence of data collection. The aim is to find a valid and reliable scale for multiple dimensions of populist attitudes. We also brainstormed on further possibilities for other comparative projects. Another possibility would be doing a similar experimental study that aims at assessing the media effects of populist content in different countries. In doing so we would use the same manipulations and measure the same moderators, mediators and dependent variables to assess similarities and differences in susceptibility to populist messages in different countries. Despite of its relevance there is not much comparative research on populist communication in Europe.

Together with Dr. Linda Bos we had the idea to conduct a comparative study on the effects of populist messages on social media. Since both, the top candidate of the Austrian Freedom Party, Heinz-Christian Strache, and the top candidate of the Dutch Freedom Party, Geert Wilders, excessively use social media to communicate with their electorate, studying these messages' effects is of crucial importance.

Such a study would have various advantages: First of all comparative research on populist communication in Europe is urgently needed. Second, the study would integrate several dimensions of populist communication such as blame shifting or anti-immigrant messages. Finally, a new channel that has barely been studied in the context of populism research will be taken into account: Social media.

Further steps: To realize such a study, there will be a further meeting to discuss these ideas on 25th of June in Vienna. Ideally the study should be launched in autumn 2015.

Mediation Analysis Workshop

I had the opportunity to take part in a mediation analysis workshop held by Prof. Dr. Kosuke Imai on 10th of June. Since mediation analysis is a central part of my dissertation I could benefit a lot from this workshop. In this workshop Prof. Imai explained the concept of sequential ignorability, gave an introduction into the statistical software “mediation” and presented new research designs, which can be used to test mediation such as a “split-sample experiment”, a crossover design, or observational studies.

Meetings

On Friday, 5th of June, I had a meeting with **Dr. Penny Sheets**. Penny Sheets is an assistant professor and political communication researcher at the political communication program group at ASCoR. She has a lot of experience in research on implicit attitudes, which is also a central part in my dissertation. In the third study of my dissertation project I will conduct a laboratory experiment to measure the effects of right-wing populist campaign posters on people’s implicit attitudes. Implicit attitudes are based on automatic associations that can be strengthened by media messages. The media often associates immigrants with negative concepts such as “criminal”. Such implicit associations can usually not be verbally expressed but are based on gut feelings. Since they can predict spontaneous reactions and social behavior it is of crucial importance to investigate whether they can be influenced by media content, such as political campaign posters.

In the meeting with Penny Sheets we discussed our experiences with the implicit association test and other implicit measurement procedures. Penny Sheets has conducted implicit measurements in several studies. Moreover, her doctoral thesis has dealt with the implicit association test. Penny Sheets provided valuable feedback on my planned laboratory experiment. We also discussed some methodological issues of the implicit association test. In sum, Penny Sheets had some very helpful advices for my work.

On Tuesday, 9th of June, I met with **Dr. Margot van der Goot**. Margot van der Goot has a huge expertise in qualitative research methods. Since I had conducted focus group discussions within my dissertation project just before I started my STSM in Amsterdam I was very pleased to get feedback from Margot van der Goot. I conducted focus group research on the question how right-wing populist campaign posters that disseminate anti-immigrant messages can influence people’s attitudes toward immigrants. Moreover, I studied the effects of these posters on people who have an immigrant background themselves. During my stay at ASCoR I was currently in the stage of data analysis. Therefore, discussing possible ways to analyze my focus group discussions with Dr. van der Goot was of great help. She also gave me useful advices on how to publish this research. Furthermore, she explained the Grounded Theory Approach to me in detail and shared her previous experiences with focus group discussions with me.

Also on Tuesday, 9th of June, I got together with **Anne Kroon, MA**. Anne Kroon is a PhD candidate at the corporate communication program group at ASCoR. In her research she addresses the question how frames of older employees in news coverage influence people’s judgments of older employees. In this context she also conducted research on implicit attitudes. She shared her experiences with me and we also discussed methodological issues of the implicit association test (IAT).

On Thursday, 11th of June, I met with **Dr. Bert Bakker**, who is a postdoctoral researcher at the political communication program group at ASCoR. His work addresses the relationship between personality and support for populist parties. In particular he studies how personality traits such as the Big 5 influence the preference for populist parties. Moreover, since Dr. Bakker is an expert in political psychology we also discussed psychological measurement procedures such as implicit measurement but also physiological measurement procedures and how these could be applied within studies on the effects of populist political communication.

On Friday, 12th of June I had a Skype meeting with **Dr. Sanne Kruikemeier**, who is an assistant professor at the political communication program group at ASCoR. Since Dr. Kruikemeier was in Chile during my stay she offered me a Skype meeting to discuss some of my questions. Dr. Kruikemeier is an expert in research on political communication on social network sites. Besides my work on my dissertation I'm also very interested in how communicating via social networks can influence trust in politicians. Dr. Kruikemeier has dealt with forms of personalization and privatization in her doctoral thesis. Thus, we shared some very interesting ideas on how personalization and privatization could influence people's political attitudes toward politicians. She also provided me some useful literature on this issue.

Beside these official meetings I had several informal meetings. Since I worked at the department every day I got to know many other PhD candidates but also faculties.

In sum, my time at ASCoR was a great experience. I learned a lot and I had the opportunity to make many new contacts, which will be very important for my further scientific career in academia. I really appreciate the opportunity to have been able to spend a short time period at such a great department and receive feedback from leading experts in populist communication research.