Historical and Normative Foundations of Communication Research

Paradigms of Civic Communication

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Buddy, What's My Paradigm?

This transmutation of a Depression-era plaint[1] mirrors a problem of contemporary political communication scholarship. Although, until the 1990s, much of it could be said to have assumed a relatively paradigmatic form, recent developments have called that model into question without clearly substituting a replacement.

Before wrestling with this issue, however, perhaps we should consider what might be meant by a paradigm. T. S. Kuhn (1962), the most noted expounder of the concept, referred to it in broad and large-scale terms. For him, a paradigm comprised a set of scientific achievements that, for a time, provided model problems and solutions for a scientific community of researchers. It would be marked by comprehensiveness, coherence, and communal interconnectedness (i.e., across participating scholars). In our own communications field, the liberal versus neo-Marxist ideological opposites and the administrative versus critical theory approaches to research would seem to have most closely approximated Kuhn's definition of paradigms. However, Kuhn would not have accepted the validity of the theme that was set by Brenda Dervin for the 1985 conference of the International Communication Association, namely, "Paradigm Dialogues," since, in his view, rival paradigms were "incommensurable." In what follows, we are less interested in identifying or intensifying paradigmatic incommensurability than we are in proposing

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[1] Regarded as the "Anthem of America's Great Depression," the song *Brother, Can You Spare a Dime?* composed in 1931 by Harburg and Gorneywas recorded by Al Jolson, Bing Crosby, and Rudy Vallee and reached Number One in the 1932 charts. Its opening verse declared:

> Once I built a railroad, made it run
> Made it race against time
> Once I built a railroad, now it's done
> Buddy, can you spare a dime?

the need for a sharper sensitivity to significant changes in the language, practice, and mediation of citizenship that render some once-settled assumptions at the very least unsteady and perhaps obsolete. Rather than thinking of paradigmatic change as emanating from ideological antagonism, this article's approach is to observe how changing historical conditions generate grounds for intellectual reassessment.

We focus upon two aspects of historical change that have occurred since the consolidation between the 1960s and the present day of media and communications studies as a field in its own right. The first relates to the mode of civic communication, which once seemed locked into an established pyramid inhabited by politicians, journalists, and citizens but has now become more expansive, fragmented, and porous. We shall argue that, while the tripartite model still prevails in some contexts—especially relating to official and elite-driven political communication—it is inadequate in a range of contexts that cannot be explained in terms of the vertical linearity of the old paradigm. The second aspect relates to the object of civic communication—the idea of citizenship. Although this remains at the core of political life, it has not only been strained and challenged by profound cultural shifts that have given rise to blurred boundaries between terms that once seemed self-evident, but the term has also lost its formerly more secure anchorage in the essentials of public efficacy and trust. The foundation of a civic communication paradigm upon an apparent universality and certainty of meanings is no longer possible, prompting moves toward paradigmatic redefinition.

In short, two related paradigms are in simultaneous disrepair—one concerning the organization of political communication, the other its presumed normative purpose and end result. This article's next two sections consider these two significant areas of boundary divergence and slippage. The next section presents the need for new research priorities to be taken up if (a) ongoing historical changes are to be more fully understood, and (b) better sense is to be made of public communication as a form of civic enablement. In the final section, we return to the normative implications and challenges of civic communication to consider how the scholarly community might contribute to their advance.

Politicians – Media – Audience

For over half a century, the study of the political communication process has been shaped by a few dominant forces, principally party machines and television news organizations. As Swanson (1999) put it,

> From the 1960s forward . . . political communication has been created by practitioners and explained by scholars essentially as the product of a well-understood dynamic between political actors and parties on the one hand, and mainstream news media on the other hand, with both soliciting the attention and consideration of the public. (p. 205)

This dynamic allowed a limited set of voices into the national political dialogue, "accredited witnesses" as Hall, Critcher, Jefferson, Clarke, and Roberts (1978) called them. While effective in serving as a linear transmission channel from elite political sources via the interpretive filtering of journalists to mass audiences, this arrangement tended to produce rather circumscribed depictions of political reality and of the main issues at stake faced by governments at given times. A relatively small core of

newsmakers and newsgatherers, many drawn from similar social backgrounds, tended to produce a considerable degree of cross-media "consonance" (Noelle-Neumann & Mathes, 1978), with both news agendas and conceptions of the news audience stemming from limited profiles of social values and entrenched ways of understanding the world at large. Consequently, as Lichtenberg (1990) noted, "It is not surprising that a great range of opinion and analysis outside the narrow mainstream rarely sees the light of the mass media" (p. 103). Although there were many conflicts of aim and effort among the participants in this process, its built-in constraints typically yielded convergent themes and materials.

The role of the audience in this perspective is predominantly reactive. In communication terms, though it might consume a lot, it would contribute little back. It was assumed that many audience members would receive, in varying frequency, political news and party messages of different kinds and with different prior orientations; they would then decide, more or less actively (there was academic dispute over this), what to make of them.

A wealth of productive theorizing, analysis, and research has been devoted to this dynamic, its component elements, its variation across polities, its evolution over time, and its consequences for media content and audience reception. Among other writings, this has included Bennett and Manheim's (2001) analysis of "strategic communication"; sundry studies of political marketing by Kavanagh (1995), Scammell (1995) and Wring, (2005); Swanson and Mancini's (1996) examination of innovations in electoral campaigning in 11 democracies; Schulz and Mazzoleni's (1999) concept of "mediatization"; Bennett's (1990) indexing hypothesis; Zaller's (2001) "Theory of Political Communication" (dealing with journalists' responses to politicians' news management efforts); agenda setting theory and research from McCombs and Shaw (1972) onward; examinations of struggles for agenda control (e.g., Semetko, Blumler, Gurevitch, & Weaver, 1991); Gurevitch and Blumler's (1977) concept of a political communication system, elaborated and utilized thereafter in much cross-national, comparative research (as in Hallin & Mancini, 2004, 2012; Pfetsch & Esser, 2012); and Cook's (1998) treatment of the media as a political institution themselves.

In his 1999 essay, however, Swanson questioned whether it would continue to "be possible in the future to understand the environment that shapes political communication in terms of a relatively stable dynamic between 'the media' and 'political actors and institutions'" (p. 205). Might we be witnessing today something like a paradigm shift, whereby (in Kuhn's conceptualization) something challenges the existing and established set of rules in which the new reduces the old to a specific case? For Kuhn, writing about the natural sciences, the source of such a change was typically intellectual: a different and increasingly convincing way of thinking about physical phenomena. But when discussing the evolution of the social sciences, Handa (1986) considered that it was change on the ground-changing social conditions—rather than in the mind—that would precipitate a paradigm shift.

And since the 1990s, much of the generative ground from which political communication emanates does seem to have changed appreciably. Whereas the "old" system pivoted on a relatively small number of outlets (particularly, in limited-channel television) at which the big political and journalistic battalions could regularly direct their fire, now the channels through which political communications can flow are far more numerous and multifarious. This means that the targets for communicators to aim at are

less concentratedly massed and that their audiences are more fragmented. Similarly, "both sides of the traditional communicating equation are becoming problematic, fragmented into multiple and contending alternative forms and rapidly spawning innovations of structure and function" (to quote Swanson, 1999, once again). And with the arrival, diffusion, and elaborated expansion of the Internet, there has appeared a transformed role for what was once merely "the audience" for political communications. From constituting chiefly a body of receivers, it has become a communicating force—rather a set of forces in its own right—with numerous channels for fast, convenient, interactive, and geographically extensive expression to which those who used to rule the communications roost more or less unchallenged must now closely attend.

Because so much that is different has entered political communication setups, it has become commonplace for authors and journals to proclaim the arrival of a quite new era, heralding a "new information environment" and a "new media regime," for example, (Williams & Delli Carpini, 2011); a "third age of political communication" (Blumler & Kavanagh, 1999); and communication in a "postmodern democracy" (Brants & Voltmer, 2011),

But what in paradigmatic terms might all this add up to? Not all features of the "old" regime have been dismantled yet; some, at least, show staying power. In particular, the production of a good deal of civic communication is still shaped by a two-fold struggle for supremacy over political news—between rival parties to get their messages across and between politicians and journalists for agenda control (Blumler & Coleman,   2010). The politician's task in the new dispensation has become more complex, as one must heed many more news outlets operating at all times of the day and night, as well as try to build an effective online presence, even though one's strategies, priorities, and calculations may remain essentially the same. In scholarship, too, some of the "old" paradigm, centering on what Swanson (1997 called "the political-media complex," is certainly alive and well! An example is the concept of "mediatization," which was originally propounded by Schulz and Mazzoleni (1999) to characterize the processes, whereby political actors take account of perceived imperatives of journalistic news production when fashioning their own messages. This continues to be pursued both analytically and empirically in a number of directions; for example, identifying different phases through which mediatization may succcessively proceed and postulating different susceptibilities to mediatization by political actors in different societies or political and media systems. In fact, this concept is so embedded in the field that at the time of this writing, special issues of two different journals were being devoted to mediatization, and a substantial edited volume of original writings on it was being prepared for publication. Similarly, the comparative (cross-national) analysis of political communication systems—most of which situates political and media institutional relationships at its core—is rocketing vibrantly ahead, with alternative conceptualizations ventured, various dimensions of difference (and similarity) across systems postulated, different countries positioned in alternative frameworks (initially, mainly Western ones but subsequently well beyond North America and Western Europe), and hypotheses formulated and empirically tested about how macrolevel political communication system characteristics might affect meso-level and microlevel phenomena. In fact, this approach is flourishing so actively that, in a recent year, more comparative articles were submitted to a major political communication journal than were articles of any other kind.

However, are there any alternative potential paradigms lurking amidst the buds of post-1990 developments? It is very difficult to say at this stage, partly because a variegated multiplicity is such a hallmark of the present system, with more channels, more audience segments, more communicating actors, the availability of more Internet-based facilities, and more directions of communication travel. Altogether, the present-day political communication process is more complex than was its predecessor, more riddled with crosscurrents, and confronts many of its actors with more choice and greater uncertainty.

What, then, could stand out from all this variety as paradigmatically formative? It is true that some attempts have been made to give overall shape to the emerging order. One of these rests on the notion of "hybridization," according to which news flows originating in one part of the communication field may elicit amending or supplementing responses from other quarters and sources, which in turn modify the original stories' accounts or thrusts (Chadwick, 2011,). Empirically, however, this analysis has so far been explored in only a few, and arguably atypical, cases. Another relatively holistic offering may be discerned in Bennett and Iyengar's (2008) thesis that a new era of minimal communication effects is surfacing due to media and audience fragmentation, an increased likelihood that people's initial viewpoints will be reinforced by selective exposure to congenial communications, and an increasing polarization of communication and political blocs. However, there is something ethnocentric about this interpretation; for example, in its emphasis upon the dominance of public opinion by an intense partisanship of closely aligned media and electoral sectors, raising doubts over its applicability beyond U.S. borders. For their part, some Internet scholars may sense a paradigmatic potential in its increasing impact in politics— perhaps in the lift it has given to the theory and practice of "deliberative democracy" (Bach & Stark, 2004; Fishkin, 2009; Price & Cappella, 2002), or its role in strengthening democratization in societies that have shed authoritarian rule or in the part it is playing in the emergence, sustenance, and viability of populist movements striving to challenge ruling elites. Highly significant as all these uses evidently are, they fall short, at present at least, of the comprehensiveness criterion of a fully fledged paradigm.

Politics – Democracy

In the mid-20th century, it seemed straightforward to speak about citizenship as a universally shared and practically achievable notion, at least in the liberal-democratic West. A language of political citizenship was in common currency; the norms of civic order were rarely contested; the civically relevant and irrelevant were clearly distinguishable, inhabiting media zones that rarely overlapped; and political alienation was a minority condition To be sure, there were lively debates among communication scholars about whether the mass media served or distracted from the values of democratic citizenship, but few commentators or practitioners were in doubt about what such values were.

Now much has changed. For one thing, many citizens have lost any sense of grip upon the political process. According to the latest in a multinational series of Democratic Audits (Wilks-Heeg et al., 2012), "representative democracy [in many countries] is catastrophically in decline." Disillusionment with and disengagement from politics is now widespread, with the paradoxical consequence that corporate power and inequality have correspondingly been on the increase.

For another thing, not only the extent to which the media contribute to a civic culture but also the notion of democratic citizenship as a homogeneous condition has been challenged by expansive and pluralistic reformulations. Such definitional change reflects a growing (and appropriate) cultural sensitivity to matters of gender, ethnic, class, age, and subcultural inclusion. These resonate with the paradigmatic social shifts that Giddens, Beck (1994) and others refer to as "reflexive modernization." The mid-20th century media's appeal to an imagined homogeneous citizenry, largely reflecting or aspiring toward its own elite values, has increasingly been perceived as constraining and condescending. A contemporary awareness that citizens are not inherently male, white, middle class, middle-aged, straight, and speakers of standard diction leaves the civic norms of the early television age looking remarkably alien and anachronistic.

There is more at stake than a more inclusive conception of citizenship. On the one hand, the civic relationship continues to rest upon the idea that members of local, national, and even global communities, though inevitably strangers to one another most of the time, need to coexist on the basis of cultural codes, mores, and performances that are mutually intelligible, respectful, and consequential. On the other hand, the ways in which citizenship is practiced, experienced, and mediated are being configured in manners that strain the traditional language of political communication. We are far from suggesting that civic discourse bears no resemblance to what it was 50 or 100 years ago, but political communication scholars would do well to explore the extent to which once-settled semantic boundaries have become unsteady.

To speak of political democracy suggests that there is a natural affinity between the two terms: that in a democracy the will of the people is typically manifested through politics and that when democratic action occurs it is inherently political. Such a conceptual coupling no longer seems self-evident. A blurry boundary separates political from democratic action, even when the former appears to be legitimized in the name of the latter. In contemporary parlance, to say that someone is "acting politically" is quite different from describing them as "acting democratically"—and the rationale for that semantic distinction tells a story of a growing lack of confidence in the civilizing scope of politics. For example, major advances in the direction of tolerance and equality that have taken place in the private sphere of the family and the pedagogical spaces of the classroom are widely perceived to be examples of democratic change but are rarely attributed to political action.

The political governance of citizenship has come to be devalued for three reasons. First, it is bound up with institutional and bureaucratic arrangements that have become increasingly questioned, distrusted, and even dismissed at times. From elected legislatures and political parties to legal codes and regulatory bodies, there is a widespread belief that principles of cultural order are determined by an unrepresentative, self-perpetuating elite, who arrive at decisions regarding the common good without due consideration of the experiences and sensibilities of lay citizens. A common belief that "politicians are all the same" and "governments can't be trusted" feeds an antipolitical sentiment, associating the political with dishonesty and manipulation and linking genuine change with spaces and practices beyond the political sphere. The much-charted decline of deference and trust toward political authority often takes the form of a collective split personality, with the public, on the one hand, demanding that elected politicians resist the games of "politics" and lead boldly, while, on the other hand, insisting upon the force of public

mandates as the sole basis for popular democracy. Second, politics is commonly associated with yah-boo partisanship, devoid of the more deliberative features through which normatively democratic politics are supposed to make sense of the world. Political partisanship starts as a form of quasi-consumerism, whereby policies are devised to appease centrist values and media preferences, and translates into a negative majoritarianism: good for "throwing the rotters out" but rarely able to sustain enthusiasm for victorious political parties or leaders. The language of politics degenerates into a discourse of hostile critique, more often than not tied to personalized attacks upon the deficiencies of fallible figureheads. The long-term effect of sustained mutual negativity is rarely a victory for one party or faction but an overall degradation of the political domain. Politics comes to be associated with small-minded nit-picking and uncritical defensiveness. Third, citizens have come to realize what political scientists have long known: that "rational choice" decision making all too often defies the will of the majority, giving them at best the "least worst" rather than the most desired outcome. Arrow (1951) and Riker's (1986) apparent theoretical proof that the very nature of opinion structuration and preference aggregation makes it futile to claim that any electoral outcome truly reflects the public's will leaves citizens as inevitably disappointed participants in the political game. The traditional belief that voting constitutes a high point of citizens' engagement is no longer widely accepted. An overwhelming majority of previous generations would cast their votes at election time as a matter of duty. Today, cross-national declines in electoral turnout suggest that many citizens have given up on the efficacy of their votes and feel bound by no duty to vote as a civic obligation. Indeed, the very notion of civic duty, which once served as a durable political cement, is an atrophying sentiment (though for some individuals it seems to have migrated to a number of other nonpartisan spheres of social commitment).

The extent to which this antipolitical turn has been exacerbated by the mass media remains a matter of debate. It is certainly the case that, in moving from a receptive and less critical coverage of politics to the current situation in which media commentators have become political actors in their own right, there has been a growing tendency for political journalism to focus upon policy failures, politicians' character defects, game-oriented accounts of winners and losers, and an almost perverse celebration of the limited scope for change. The extent to which the mass media fuel the frustration of voters is a matter for conjecture, but the long-term effect of some political journalists seeing themselves as a permanent opposition may be a public weariness over all-round claim-making. Partisan bias, most evident in the U.S. broadcast media, encourages a mood of populist anger, often supplemented by a nihilistic belief that real change is either impossible or can only emerge beyond the framework of the institutional order.

The idea of democracy, in its mid-20th century usage, referred to a normative commitment to adhere to the will of the majority—at least, at the level of selecting representatives—and a set of procedural arrangements, such as universal franchise, freedom of speech and assembly, the rule of law, and an untrammeled media system. Such definitional certainty has been destabilized by a number of factors. First, critics have long questioned the extent to which the will of citizens can be gleaned from a simple aggregation of individual preferences. Aside from the rational choice dilemmas already discussed, there is the sense in which democratic decision entails not only the counting of heads but also an open, reflective and thorough exchange of viewpoints, involving at least the possibility that participants will learn something new and/or change their positions. Electoral democracy as we know it tends to lack such deliberative opportunities, focusing almost entirely upon the volatility of public opinion rather than on any

attempt to arrive at shared public values. When Western democracy could be contrasted with single-party dictatorships (such as the perversely termed "People's Democracies" of post-war Eastern Europe), its normative deficiencies and parsimonious opportunities for genuine citizen involvement tended to be overlooked. But with the conclusion of the Cold War in the late 20th Century, the civic claims of democracy were exposed to more detailed empirical scrutiny and found wanting. Governments and elected representatives were not so accountable to citizens as they should be; freedom of speech and opinion was too often constrained by a narrowly selective priming and framing of public issues; and the products of the much-celebrated free media were excessively skewed toward elitist values. It was not that democracy was found to be a sham, but that its responsiveness to citizens and commitment to the best civic values could be so much more. Second, there was a growing consciousness that the working and effects of power exceeded the political policy agendas of parties and governments. Forms of coercion, domination, manipulation, and seduction were seen to operate across culture, from the domestic sphere of the family to the pervasive imagery of advertising to schoolrooms and lecture halls and football grounds. Democracy became a cultural project, often operating well beyond the forms and symbols of conventional politics. Democratization, once considered an appropriate treatment for "backward" states, came to be applied to such diverse spaces as language, education, entertainment, media, and religion. As democratic action came to be decoupled from institutional politics, new forms of horizontal and networked collective action emerged, raising important questions about what citizenship means if it is not primarily defined in terms of ties to a nation state. Third, and relatedly, nation states were forced to reposition themselves in response to the spatio-temporal compression engendered by globalization. This has posed questions about what it means to be a democratic citizen in a state that has far less power than states used to have and in a world in which most of the most powerful transnational and corporate institutions are relatively unaccountable to the sovereignty of the people. One space within globalized society has stood out as offering a potential opportunity for the kind of networked collective action demanded by such a scale—the Internet. Exaggerated accounts of the Internet as an inherently democratic space or as a mere replication of what has long obtained in mainstream politics have been unhelpful, but attempts to explore the vulnerable democratic potential of the Internet have given rise to a range of innovative democratic practices, often transcending national, political, and ideological boundaries.

New Research Priorities

Given the changes—paradigmatic to a degree—that we have identified in the mode and object of civic communication, it seems sensible to reflect upon new research priorities to which these might give rise. We do not suggest for a moment that long-standing research agendas in the field of political communication are now obsolete but that they might be supplemented or reconfigured with a view to eventually yielding perhaps the building blocks of a fresh paradigm. Here are six research priorities that we believe could contribute usefully to this objective:

1) The implications and consequences of communication abundance. This may be intensifying the competition among most, if not all, message makers (politicians, journalists, bloggers, etc.) to gain and hold the attention of their intended auditors. What strategies are consequently being pursued in this transformed environment by message senders, news producers, and information seekers, and how do they vary

across different communication contexts and with what consequences for political communication content? In the case of television—the dominant medium for the dissemination of civic knowledge for over half a century—intensified competition for public attention in a multichannel environment means that political news viewing can be easily missed or skimped. Channel choices and time-shifting options may lead not only to a fragmented audience but also to the emergence of issue publics comprising people who only want to be addressed on their own terms in relation to issues that matter to them. Television's role as a public sphere may be diminished by these easy opt-outs, and democracy may suffer from the absence of socially cross-cutting exchanges of experience, knowledge, and comment. Valuable research has been conducted on some aspects of communication abundance, but less attention has been paid to the emergence of new spaces of mediated publicness, often comprising an "ecology" of diverse media, possibly serving different aspects of an overall public interest. Local and comparative research into new media ecologies would benefit from traffic monitoring and interviewing at key hubs, where several different kinds of political communication meet and several different kinds of communicators take account of (or ignore) one another.

2) <u>Whither consonance?</u> Given the explosion of communication channels, the creation of online journalistic enterprises, and the advent of blogging and opinion exchanges through social media, has the much-documented tendency of the mainstream media of old to converge on similar news agendas, issue frames, authoritative opinion advocates, interpretations of actors' strategies, and fortunes and readings of public opinion changed at all appreciably in the new dispensation? If so, over what politically significant matters might such increased diversity be found and in which channels? And does such diversity (where present in communication content) also reach into the information diets of many citizens themselves with effects on their perceptions of political reality?

3) <u>Game, substance, and civic mix.</u> Political communication research has long focused on the balance between "game"- and "substantive"-oriented reporting and analysis. The former focuses, among other things, on personalized dramas, partisan races to victory, strategies of news management, and projections of crafted perceptions. Substance-oriented coverage focuses upon political values, issues, policies, and institutional processes. Something of a consensus has emerged amongst researchers that the game orientation is distracting and uncivic, while substantive reporting is virtuous but relatively scarce. In our own study of the 2010 UK election televised leader debates (Coleman, 2010), we argued that, "For democratic citizenship to be well served, a sensitive mixture of coverage was needed, one that reported and made distinctive sense of policy differences, while representing and communicating the symbolic energy of agonistic democracy." This might not only apply to election coverage. Politics more generally comprises both the instrumental and the dramatic, reason and emotion, institutions and real people, purposes and tactics, experiences and statistics. To serve democracy effectively, mediators need to provide an appropriate civic mix. This involves

thinking of citizenship less in terms of a set of well-formed rules and practices to which people should conform and more as a pragmatic balance between what engages audiences and what people need to know. Investigating that balance empirically across a range of media contexts, including similarities and differences among them, as well as their likely drivers and audience perceptions of them, could be fruitful.

4) The terms and boundaries of the political. If we are correct in suggesting that the perceived nature and borders of the political are expanding into areas once considered "cultural" or even "private," there is scope for research into how traditional political language is managing to explain these new dynamics of social power. Political communication research might have to entail a degree of "translation," attempting to make legible different modes of expression and repertoires of collective action to one another. How, for example, might bridges be built between social movements—ones that do not see themselves as being "political" or that eschew conventional politics—and the local, national, and global institutions that still remain the main allocators of value in society? As we have argued elsewhere (Coleman & Blumler, 2009), political democracy is, and is likely to remain, a highly institutionalized arrangement, dependent upon complex processes of representation and accountability. Are there practical ways in which emergent, as well as existing media of public communication could be utilized by new social movements to not only create "counter publics" or "counter-cultures" but also feed into processes of policy formation and decision making?

5) New approaches to media regulation and literacy. Of all the areas of political communication research that have had to be reconsidered and revised in recent years, those relating to regulatory policy and audience literacy (often two sides of the same coin) have been the most obviously affected. As the UK Leveson Inquiry has shown, attempts to establish principles of conduct or regulatory frameworks for one part of the contemporary media can fail when applied to others. Conceiving a cross-cutting set of policies for public service communication is incomparably more difficult in an age of global multiplatform media than it was in the age of national broadcasting within a scarce spectrum. As difficult as such policy research can be, media scholars have a major role to play in examining how different policies work or fail across different contexts and in thinking imaginatively about frameworks best suited to serving the civic good (Lunt & Livingstone, 2012, offer a useful model of such an approach). For similar reasons, the old idea of media literacy as relating mainly to the consumption of messages, texts, and images, while still relevant to most patterns of media reception, needs to be expanded to take account of the affordances and snares facing those generating their own media content, whether through social media sites or in collaboration with mainstream media providers.

6) Interdisciplinary efforts. Media and communication studies in general, as well as political communication as a subfield have always been interdisciplinary. Crossovers between empirical political science, political theory, psychology, history, and cultural studies may

not have always resulted in perfect mutual legibility, but they have made our area of study methodologically pluralistic and tolerant of diverse theoretical approaches. These linkages could be valuably extended. The new area of citizenship studies (itself highly interdisciplinary) would be a particularly fruitful one for more collaboration, for it is from these researchers that some of the most insightful analyses of the contested nature of citizenship are emerging (El Hamel, 2002; Fraser, 2007; Isin, 2002; Pajnik, 2005; Sassen, 2012; Turner, 2006).

A Normative Challenge

Citizenship is a deeply normative concept. Stripped of certain values, it is reduced to a mere administrative relationship or bureaucratic identity. In its richest normative sense, to be a democratic citizen is to possess a capacity for autonomous action, individually and jointly with others, that is a product of both socialization and contingency. When performing their civic role proper, the media pass on the best values of society from generation to generation and between communities, while reporting and analyzing the contingent happenings and challenges of social existence. How the media serve or fail civic life plays a key part in determining the quality of democracy.

In the face of the changes we have outlined, is there a case for thinking in new or different ways about media norms? We note McQuail's (1992) observation that "the sheer increase in volume of media output, more kinds of media, more channels, more words, pictures, images, produced and distributed at an exponential rate" has given rise to much new normative thinking. McQuail argues that there has been a shift of focus from predominantly negative thinking about mass media to the many potential benefits of the "communication revolution." The new worry is that these benefits will be wasted, overshadowed, or unfairly distributed due either to the lack of or reduced public control or to the free play of market forces.

We share this concern and have argued that the "vulnerable potential" of digital media to enhance the interactive, dialogical, and inclusive features of democratic citizenship is in danger of being squandered (Coleman & Blumler, 2009). Ideologically based commitments to the privatization of public space and the transformation of citizens into consumers have played a regrettable part in undermining the sociability and solidarity upon which democratic culture flourishes. Civic communication is shaped by normative assumptions, often unstated, about what citizens are expected to do, how far they can be expected to think and act for themselves, and what value should be placed upon their experiences and perspectives. A society that regards citizens as if they were mainly self-interested information consumers will organize political communication along different lines from one that views them as potential deliberators about matters that affect them and those that they care about. A society organized around a notion of representation as "speaking for" will conduct public communication in different ways than one based on representation as "speaking with." A society in which citizens do not trust politicians and vice versa is likely to reduce public discussion to the relentless airing of suspicion and complaint, while a society seeking to foster participatory decision making might adopt a range of experiments designed to generate political communication in new forms, spaces, and terms. As researchers of civic communication, we should favor making these choices explicit and open to the widest possible evaluation and debate (see

Murdock's article, this Special Section, in which he argues for a more explicit engagement with the moral economy of communicative activity).

The current drive within higher education to demonstrate the "impact" of research (often conceived in a rather vulgar, instrumental fashion) could, ironically, serve as an impetus toward more active intervention by political communication scholars in the fields of public policy, journalistic normativity, and media creativity. Faced with a multifaceted assault upon the terms and spaces of citizenship, researchers have a role to play in offering robust theoretical accounts of the public interest in relation to civic communication; in devising meaningful empirical metrics—both quantitative and qualitative—to test the public value of media performance; and in collaborating across journalists and borders to bring journalists, politicians, and citizens into common conversations about the communicative needs of democracy. In short, the paradigmatic changes to which we have alluded should not merely be a cause for detached scholarly criticism of the latest stage of atrophy in the mediated public sphere. There is an impact agenda that we could and should be leading, not simply to justify our worth as academic employees, but with a view to making a normative difference.

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