



## Shifting Contours in Political Communication Research

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In the parlance of Thomas Kuhn, the field of political communication is at a critical moment, somewhere beyond normal science, but not quite a revolution. Profound and ongoing changes in the media environment and in the macro social and political worlds have roiled the dominant assumptions of the field (Bennett & Iyengar, 2008) and opened new theoretical grounds for very promising and potentially influential research.

### The Larger Context

Large-scale changes in the political economy of the world have altered international and domestic politics and thereby the grounds for political communication scholarship. Reflecting the field's core interest in several disciplines, political communication scholars have taken note of changes resulting from a global political economy, itself caused by the spread of market capitalism and a high-speed information infrastructure that permits centralized control over dispersed corporate functions (Sassen, 2001). The rise of highly targeted audiences, a process that began in the 1980s (Turow, 1997), has paralleled—and been made possible by—the expansion of digital bandwidth. This has fragmented a once near-unitary mass media audience into a range of sociodemographic market-driven categories.

Concomitant with this fragmentation is the emergence of partisan media that attract like-minded audiences and wield political influence even as political parties continue their decline. In the U.S., Fox

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News employs potential GOP presidential candidates as commentators and provides the Tea Party movement with frequent and favorable coverage. Meanwhile, MSNBC attracts its own partisan audience by mocking the GOP, the Tea Party, and Fox. Segmentation thus leads to increased partisanship and polarization that make compromise more difficult (e.g., Leege et al., 2002).

Today, the one-to-many model of communication of yore is no longer. Instead, it has been replaced by a range of models best captured by a network metaphor that views the unitary mass media audience model—now much reduced and made up of an older audience—as only one in a hierarchy that includes specialized content providers and audiences across a range of sizes, specialized “lifestyle” interests, and partisan preferences.

These forces have provided political communication scholars with the impetus to revisit long-held conceptions of citizenship and identity as well as the processes by which the media exert influence over individuals, groups, and other systems (see Barnhurst, 2011). This essay highlights a few noteworthy theoretical and methodological trends that have significant implications for the study of political communication both within and across nations and cultures.

### **Moving Beyond the U.S.-non-U.S. Divide**

Most studies of citizenship traditionally have focused on the individual as the unit of analysis, with scholars examining, for example, the extent to which American citizens vote, contact their elected officials, or engage in campaign-related acts of participation (Verba, Scholzman, & Brady, 1995). These individual acts of participation may be directed at the larger political system per se, or they may revolve around community concerns, with acts of civic engagement including working with neighbors to solve a problem, attending a town-hall meeting, and belonging to volunteer associations (Putnam, 1995). Studies in political and civic engagement typically examine the conditions under which citizens will take part in a given behavior, and how media use enhances or detracts from such behaviors. With the exponential growth of media technologies, scholars have taken to studying the effects of general Internet use (e.g., how exposure to web-based campaign news relates to voting, Bimber, 2001) as well as the effects of turning to specific sites (e.g., how use of social networking sites influences social capital and other forms of civic engagement, Pasek, More, & Romer, 2009).

These bodies of research, while highly empirical, are grounded in strong normative concerns and an assumption that a healthy nation-state comprises knowledgeable, active, and engaged citizens. It is important to note that this scholarly attention has focused on individuals in *democratic* nation-states, that is, systems where citizen participation is not viewed as a threat to the governing body. This emphasis is reflected in the glaring absence of similar research in authoritarian states; the field knows relatively little about how citizens in these states respond to specific televised messages or their attitudes regarding certain political and social issues. Indeed, the research infrastructure to conduct scholarly investigations in these areas is weak and precludes the possibility of better understanding the macro- and micro-level political communication processes in these systems.

While the behavior of individual citizens has been studied primarily in democratic contexts, elite behavior and elites' increasing reliance on media-based presentations are well-documented across the entire range of regime types, both authoritarian and democratic. This research suggests that while elites regularly exploit the media for purposes of self-preservation, the increasing global reach of media represents a threat to authoritarian regimes. In China, for instance, economic development has brought about rapid modernization of all forms of communication, from "old" media such as television, to the Internet, cell phones, and satellite communications. Today, the Chinese media system includes private and quasi-private media organizations in a competitive environment where programming decisions reflect not only the political goals of the Communist Party of China, but also the economic logic of increased audience size and advertising revenue. The Chinese case suggests that a media system can evolve in a democratic direction while operating under an authoritarian political regime.

There is much to be said for testing the robustness of a theory by applying it to other geographic regions; as Salmon and Kline (1985) noted, good theories should be able to cross national boundaries. Hence the spate of tests of the spiral of silence theory (Noelle-Neumann, 1993) outside Germany; numerous studies conducted in North America, Europe, and Asia that build on the seminal North Carolina (U.S.) study of agenda-setting (McCombs & Shaw, 1972); and a similar proliferation of third-person effect studies (Davison, 1983), in which scholars try to ascertain whether media consumers outside the U.S. really perceive the media as having the greatest effect on others rather than on themselves. By identifying mediating variables, contextual cues, and conditions under which effects may be stronger or weaker, these studies have allowed us to refine the theories at play. While these theories do not shed much light on the democratic processes in a given nation-state, they do further our understanding of how citizens come to make sense of their own social and political world and, perhaps, how they might come to engage with the larger political world.

### **Expanding the Boundaries of Citizenship**

Individual studies of citizenship very well might be grounded in country- or culture-specific questions, but collectively they contribute to a transnational perspective that goes beyond regime type or geographical space.

A key aspect of this perspective concerns how individuals practice citizenship and engagement. "Practice" implies behavioral manifestations of citizenship, but a richer repertoire can be found in Delli Carpini's (2004) notion of *democratic engagement*, which encompasses political and civic attitudes and cognitions as well as behaviors. Such engagement is characterized by adherence to democratic norms and values, a sense of trust in the political system, and some level of efficacy and political interest. Democratically engaged citizens hold overarching views about their political and social lives as well as stable and informed opinions about specific issues. And citizens' attitudes and thoughts, such as political interest, interact with their media use to shape their political behaviors (e.g., Xenos & Moy, 2007).

The venues in which citizenship can be practiced run the gamut. Conventional acts of political participation, such as voting, can take place in a voting booth or, for those residing in vote-by-mail states,

in the comfort of one's living room. At the other end of the spectrum, political talk can be intensely private, taking place inside the home; it can be with like-minded friends, neighbors or co-workers; and it can occur with heterogeneous others that one might encounter in a chat room. The nature and outcomes of these conversations are of great interest to scholars of deliberation who wish to understand the extent to which citizens learn from each other, impose their views on others, and use logic and reasoning versus emotional appeals. These two general manifestations of citizenship exemplify a larger distinction in the political communication literature—vertical communication that conveys information to the political system and elites, and horizontal acts among peers and other citizens. This distinction, however, has eroded with the proliferation of media technologies, which have empowered citizens to become not only receivers of information, but also producers of this content. Citizens now blog, provide comments and feedback on news stories, “friend” candidates, and track politicians’ and elites’ daily activities on Twitter. These newer media may fuel access to political information and generate political interest, but whether this increased sense of engagement and efficacy leads to deeper democracy remains to be seen.

These studies of media effects assume the presence of national and local mass media, and that citizenship is practiced within that same nation or locality. Unfortunately, this perspective ignores the concept of transnationalism, a term used to describe phenomena like social movements, nongovernmental organizations, and diasporas. In fact, a key aspect of transnationalism concerns that set of “sustained ties of persons, networks and organizations across the borders of multiple nation-states, ranging from weakly to strongly institutionalized forms” (Faist, 2000, p. 189). Given how the communication processes within these networks have relied increasingly on digital media technology, it stands to reason that the field should adopt a cosmopolitan approach to the study of political communication (Rojecki, 2011).

Beck and Sznaider (2006) trenchantly observed, “National organization as a structuring principle of societal and political action can no longer serve as the orienting reference point for the social scientific observer” (p. 4). We agree wholeheartedly. Media messages, structures, and cultures—internal and external to one's immediate lifespaces—shape social and political identities that in turn influence the social and political actions that are taken (or not). Does the resident of Bilbao consider herself a citizen of the Basque country, of Spain, of the European Union, or some other community? If citizens' various social and political identities naturally interact with their media use, our concern should be to ask: to what extent, and how?

Ultimately, political communication scholars should address the issue of how political voice functions. Some of the rudimentary questions on this front involve asking who can speak, who is heard, and to what extent political voices are critical. The philosophical differences between Plato and Aristotle continue to this day, whether the population in question is a local community fighting urban sprawl or a country rife with economic and political woes. This larger set of questions is not specific to any country or regime type, and allows one to understand the myriad of emerging citizenship practices.

### **Methodological Avenues of Opportunity**

Researchers need to not only reconsider the conceptual lenses with which they approach their studies of political communication, but also avail themselves of the methodological opportunities afforded

by the very technologies that allow these new questions to be asked. Thankfully, the very advances in bandwidth and computing power that have fragmented the mass audience, increased the importance of transnational research, and expanded conceptions of political citizenship and behavior, have significantly advanced the abilities to study fundamental processes of political communication. To be sure, our study of an increasingly digital communication environment depends on innovative analytical techniques that do not, in and of themselves, leverage computational and technological advances. For example, new approaches to experimental designs that integrate one of the essential new contours of political communication—increased individual choice over the kinds of content one consumes—stem mainly from taking individual agency seriously in the research process. Others, such as the increasing availability of relatively low-cost online panel subjects, are indirectly related to the diffusion of Internet access, but may also be viewed more as an incremental advance on a long-established paradigm.

However, we cannot say the same of areas of computer-assisted text analysis and related approaches that “scrape” or extract useful data from digital artifacts (such as hyperlinks, attributes of texts and/or their creators), often on scales previously unimaginable. Indeed, these developments create possibilities for asking and answering questions relating to the entirety of “the grounds” themselves. The development of large-scale online research panels across the globe makes possible reasonably low-cost cross-national studies on a scale that was inconceivable five years ago. For instance, a team of researchers from 10 nations representing five continents is investigating the interplay between attributes of national media systems, the delivery of news, and citizens’ knowledge of current issues (Curran et al., 2009).

In addition, political communication scholars have been working with computerized methods of text analysis for decades, largely through tools such as Roderick Hart’s influential DIRECTION software (Hart et al., 2002), Harvard’s General Inquirer (Spilotes & Vavreck, 2002), and the Kansas Events Data System (e.g., Kille & Scully, 2003). However, over recent years, techniques in this area have undergone refinements and advances, creating a stronger foothold for political communication research. For example, recent years have seen multiple special journal issues on computerized text analysis (*Political Analysis* 16(4), and *Journal of Information Technology and Politics* 5(1)), and researchers at Northwestern University’s Kellogg School of Management have held two special conferences on the theme of *Text as Data*. Freed from the limitations of content analysis based solely on human coders, researchers are better equipped than ever for dealing with the torrents of data that characterize an increasingly voluminous and complex public sphere.

Such methods offer unique opportunities for careful analysis of unique enclaves of discourse and those significant moments when these waves of text are overpowered by larger tides of attention. For example, the “Meme Tracker” project (Leskovec et al., 2009) demonstrates new capabilities for analysis focusing on precisely the broad background conditions—created by an increasingly complex and dynamic public sphere—that currently confound much political communication research. By examining terabytes of textual data at a time and drawing from millions of sources, researchers are able to “see” something approaching the public sphere as a whole. These insights lay bare fundamental processes of the news cycle, such as the relationship between mainstream media outlets and elite bloggers. On a smaller and admittedly less computationally intensive scale, Kevin Wallsten’s analysis of viral videos demonstrates

how digital artifacts, such as will.i.am's "Yes We Can" video, can be disseminated through an interplay among mainstream media, blogs, and other key sources of political communication.

A cautionary note: This focus on using technology to study political communication processes should not be at the expense of examining other more traditional means of communication. After all, as technology evolves, so do the longstanding distinctions between mass media and interpersonal communication, and between specific media outlets such as television and newspapers.

### **Looking Today at Tomorrow**

Political communication scholars today do not suffer from a shortage of issues to study. If anything, advancements in technology, the balkanization of the media landscape, and political and social developments all contribute to a sharp increase in studies that rely on the interaction between politics and networked information technologies.

However, the paucity of theory in the field is an ongoing concern for those who are critical of studies that prize data analysis over theoretical insight. These critics argue that a narrow emphasis on attempting to explain what happened comes at the expense of trying to predict what will happen. Using native and hybrid concepts such as agenda-setting, indexing, and framing, the field has amassed an impressive set of research findings. Yet as Donsbach (2006) has put it, the field is focused on "too much petty number-crunching and too little really important research questions, that is, research with state-of-the-art methodology and with validity but with little relevance and significance" (p. 447).

There are, nevertheless, hopeful signs of increased international collaboration that, of necessity, will require concepts that permit greater cross-national comparison and lead to theoretical breakthroughs (Hallin & Mancini, 2004). Researchers have designed collaborative international projects aimed at producing datasets that allow for comparing the interacting effects of media systems, political systems, and public knowledge (e.g., Curran et al., 2009). While it is too early and would be presumptuous to settle on a fixed path for the future direction of the field, the increased frequency of collaboration among international scholars and the heightened profile of political communication research in other disciplines promise organic growth as well as breakthrough crossover models.

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