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Transnational Connections

## On the Dichotomies of Political Communication

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The generation of knowledge in any discipline is sustained only by the intellectual efforts of its scholars. This is particularly true and exciting in the field of political communication, which is marked by social, political, and technological developments on many fronts and in markedly different cultures and regions. Exemplifying this confluence of developments is the Arab uprisings in spring 2011— events that have motivated scholars to examine, for instance, the use and impact of social media, media coverage of the protests, and state-press relations. A Gestalt view of the Arab Spring or any similar cluster of events would suggest that with continued research, an overarching theory or coherent set of conclusions would be forthcoming. Of course, cautious optimism is warranted as progress toward this goal is hampered by the same diversity of intellectual efforts that pushes the field.

In this essay, we focus on how differences in perspective, thoughts, and practices have defined political communication research. Beginning with the broad dichotomy—political communication as a phenomenon vs. political communication as a discipline—we speak to some key differences in political communication research in and outside the United States.

### Political Communication as a Phenomenon

The phenomena that capture the attention of political communication scholars can be categorized typically as process, product, or more likely, a combination of the two. And how they are classified often depends on macro-level, systemic differences. For instance, the political systems and media institutions in the U.S. vs. other countries contribute to distinctly different political communication processes and products.

As a presidential democracy, the United States sees most of its political action initiated or influenced by a powerful presidency. In most Western countries, however, Parliament and parliamentary dynamics are at the center of political and public debate, and in general, governments are much more accountable to Parliament than the presidency in the U.S. Historically, American political parties have been weaker institutions compared to European traditional parties that arose from the deep social and cultural cleavages of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

In addition, the American electoral system is based on primaries that allow candidates to stage campaigns that hopefully will garner strong and favorable media coverage. Within this system, many citizens tend to participate vicariously, while others are motivated by media messages and information of all stripes. Most importantly, voter turnout in the United States is considerably lower than turnout in most established liberal democracies. The historical and cultural reasons that influence turnout differ markedly from those that explain voting patterns and political participation in other (European) countries.

At the same time, news media industries in the United States are noted for their greater independence from political influence, for operating as watchdogs, and for the preponderance of commercial broadcasting. Media systems elsewhere are more closely linked to their country's political systems (Hallin & Mancini, 2004); they display more sacerdotal, non-hostile attitudes toward leaders and ruling parties. At least in the European tradition, these media systems comprise not only public, but also public service, outlets. The market-centered economy of the United States also is home to strong regulatory authorities, as evidenced by how antitrust regulations have shaped the telecommunications industry. In contrast, the European telecommunications sector has included strong monopolies that have been torn down by EU authorities only in the past two decades.

Last but not least, the American entertainment industry (film, television, recorded music, computer games, and the like) undoubtedly is the most powerful in the world. This power manifests itself not only in terms of revenue and the sheer number of audience members, but also in its ability to influence indigenous cultures and to shape the tastes and consumption behaviors of millions (Norris & Inglehart, 2009).

The features of the U.S. political and communication industries have had a significant impact on political and media environments worldwide, with technology and global communication facilitating their export, imitation, and adoption. Termed "Americanization," this process can be observed clearly in the political communication domain. For instance, election campaigns in both mature democracies and societies in transition increasingly have deployed advanced marketing techniques, just as campaign discourse, government communications, and the news media's approach to politics all have undergone wide commercialization (Swanson & Mancini, 1996).

The mediatization and personalization of political communication also can be observed in several Western democracies vis-à-vis political party-based traditions. Today, ideology-centered discourse is a global phenomenon that has its roots in the American context. But political discourse also has grown increasingly responsive and sensitive to media logics, triggering adaptation on the part of political leaders and politicians to the exigencies of the media industry. Consequently, politics has become popularized:

Politicians emphasize persona and visuals as they discuss issues of substance, while the media cover political events and players in ways that maximize audiences. This shift toward the genres of infotainment and politainment reflects how politics has evolved into celebrity politics, a phenomenon seen clearly in the United States and elsewhere.

### **Political Communication as a Discipline**

To a large extent, political communication as a science follows the blueprint of political communication as a phenomenon. In fact, the basic academic and disciplinary statutes of political communication have been entrenched in U.S.-based scholarship for decades, long before the rest of the world took to communication research and theory. The vast majority of the discipline's scholars and students have been educated in American universities. Not surprisingly, most of the relevant literature was disseminated easily through books and journals written and edited in the United States, and by massive translations of the key texts into foreign languages.

Clearly, not all theories built and evidence gathered in the U.S. media-political milieu are exportable. For example, Schudson's (1998) idea of monitorial citizens, or people who scan their information environments for events that require responses, is much less applicable in the European context, where citizens traditionally are more politicized. Similarly, Tulis' (1988) theory of the rhetorical presidency is not geared toward explaining what happens in nonpresidential systems.

Nevertheless, other insightful contributions of American scholars have been widely replicated abroad, such as those related to agenda-setting, framing, and priming effects, to mention a few. One can speculate that the international "success" of these phenomena—as measured by their prevalence of study outside the United States—might be due to their emphasis on content and effects rather than on production. Agenda-setting, at its heart concerned with the quantity of media coverage of an issue, focuses on the perceived importance of that issue as a consequence of that coverage. Though there is a growing body of scholarship related to the entities that shape the media's agenda, agenda-setting *effects* are independent of the type of political system under which the media operate. Similarly, studies of priming, often deemed extensions of agenda-setting, investigate the processes by which individuals make evaluations or judgments. Researchers who study priming are not explicitly interested in the larger institutional context in which the message was constructed. And while framing as an area of inquiry encompasses the construction and effects of specific media content, the latter emphasizes individual-level processes that make one more or less receptive to adopting the views presented in the media (see Scheufele and Tewksbury, 2007 for a review).

One reason behind this general American leadership is to be found in the longer tradition of studies in our field, in the scope of the American community of researchers, and in the typical larger availability of funding for research (from Lazarsfeld's era to the present). Research in the United States typically has focused more on the efforts in academia than in other institutions, but this as well is changing with a "privatization" of research in favor of private firms and foundations. Examples of this trend are particularly noticeable in the new media environment, in which firms such as Microsoft, Google, Twitter, and Facebook have the capability to create—but more important, have access to—data that are

not publicly available. This alone provides researchers affiliated with these firms an advantage in understanding broader social phenomena that go beyond traditional product-based research and development. Simultaneously, U.S. government-funded research at universities is declining, while other countries are investing more. According to Atkinson and Stewart (2011), between 2000 and 2008, the United States ranked 18th in growth of government-funded university research, with countries like China, South Korea, and the United Kingdom clearly outperforming the United States.

Where differences exist, one could characterize the political communication literature in the United States<sup>1</sup> as being more empirical and data-driven, while elsewhere, theoretical concerns and critiques have been more prevalent. Yet we have to keep in mind that these emphases are changing fast at both ends of the spectrum, with increasing theoretical concerns in the United States, and heightened sensitivity to empirical observations in other regions. The Amsterdam School of Communication Research, the Department of Communication at the University of Haifa, and the Communications Department of the Universidad Católica de Chile, to name but a few, are good examples of this. Perhaps Rogers (1985) was prescient when, in describing the empirical and critical schools of communication (not merely political communication), he noted the potential of Latin American scholars to synthesize elements of both schools under one umbrella.

Counter-intuitively, within their hypotheses-oriented empirical tradition, U.S.-based researchers have made more room for inductive approaches and a pragmatist logic that privileges observation. In other regions of the world, more deductive approaches, stemming from grand theories, and their application to specific cases, have prevailed.

While this dichotomization may elide nuances and exceptions to the rule—for example, the conducting of quantitative and administrative research in Germany—these perspectives do have implications. For one, data-driven, more inductive approaches have made researchers under the U.S. sphere of influence more focused on explicating the past. The field has witnessed the deployment of increasingly sophisticated statistical analytical techniques that explain, for example, previous electoral or civic behavior. These explanations may be based on rigorous empirical tests, but may not always be effective in predicting outcomes as contexts vary. On the other hand, political communication scholars elsewhere seem more attuned to consider and forecast the future based on a more holistic understanding of the relationship between communication and the polity. This approach may not be grounded in empirics, but it tends to be more theoretically provocative.

These divergent regional emphases, and the centripetal forces working against them, provide a fantastic opportunity for researchers to learn from each other and advance the field overall. This reciprocal need, and the opportunities that arise from it, can be seen, for example, in how public opinion theory is slowly but surely integrating the hundreds of empirical studies on third-person effects, hostile media phenomena and projective biases. Similarly, adopting a different epistemology and/or analytic technique can illuminate and shatter long-standing myths, as Traugott (1985) accomplished in his analysis of the

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<sup>1</sup> Here we consider research conducted not only in the United States, but also research that is conducted increasingly elsewhere by scholars trained in the U.S. and working under this more empirical approach.

1848 insurrection in Paris. By showing that the opposing groups central to the insurrection were nearly identical in class origin, he offered evidence refuting critical discourse on the bourgeoisie-proletariat battle (Marx, 1964).

The strengthening of the field that could result from this convergence might let us navigate from explicating (in data-driven models) and envisioning (in theory-driven models) to actual predictive models that can better serve the communities we study. Of course, we advocate predictive models that take into account contextual differences, and thus the importance of going beyond regional approaches. The biggest challenge in the 21st century—not only for political communication, but also for research in general—entails dealing with methodological and, most importantly, philosophical issues surrounding research and its relation to the polity.

In the end, while political communication scholarship is still based overwhelmingly in the United States, the international contributions to the discipline are remarkable. The rise and reach of non-U.S.-based research makes us question when the field will begin to actively abandon ethnocentric perspectives and shape a discipline that is comparative (and indeed, transnational) in its scopes and methods. Strong support for this internationalization comes from the unprecedented opportunities facilitated by modern technologies. Once a luxury, networking has become a commodity as scholars worldwide can access journal articles from their laptops and tablets. Professional associations, international conferences, symposia, and academic programs now bring together political communication scholars from all academic traditions. Indeed, the key journals in our discipline, including *Political Communication* and *Journal of Communication*, publish articles that focus on various aspects of the field—press freedom, media privatization, mobile phone diffusion, political socialization—alongside studies of media content and media effects.

Despite their collective breadth, these studies do not span far epistemologically. One could call for the deployment of reception theories that draw from American and European perspectives, rely on critical and administrative traditions, and are grounded in psychological, sociological, and humanistic fields of inquiry. To create a global community of political communication researchers who can draw their inspiration from a vast array of theories and methods is no easy feat, but the marketplace of political communication ideas makes this cross-fertilization possible.

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